

*Stories Project. ACC 54.*  
*Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York.*

Pier Luigi Pero has been a partner of the Gian Enzo Sperone gallery since the late-1960s. Valentina Pero co-edited the book *Entrare Nell'opera: Processes and Performative Attitudes in Arte Povera* (Köln, Germany: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2019).

Transcription of an interview with Pier Luigi Pero and Valentina Pero conducted by David White, Senior Curator, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, in New York City on May 12, 2022. Reviewed and edited by the speakers July 2022.

David White [DW]: I'm David White, and here with Pier Luigi Pero, and his daughter, Valentina, to talk about [Robert] Rauschenberg. And so, may I ask to begin if you would just introduce yourself, and say a few words about your background?

Pier Luigi Pero [PLP]: Well, I have been a partner of the [Gian Enzo] Sperone gallery, we started, I think in 1967, as far as I remember. But only being partner with respect to the work of Alighiero Boetti. And then in 1969, I became partner of the whole gallery. I was a small collector, I had vague ideas about my future, and once Boetti told me, "Well, you should play the game. You cannot just look at ourselves from the outside, go on." Boetti was looking for a new gallery for himself and he put together me and Sperone. So that's how it started, the partnership with Sperone.

DW: I did not know that this. This is wonderful. And so that's the gallery in Rome at that point?

PLP: No, no. The gallery was in Turin. It started in Turin. In the early sixties. I joined in 1967 with Boetti.

DW: And so, had you been interested in art for a long time?

PLP: My background is very strange because I studied industrial management at M.I.T. [Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Mass.], which is something completely different from art. I was accepted at Yale [University, New Haven, Conn.] for a PhD but my father, who lived in Italy, became very ill. I understood that I could not be away from Italy. So, I went to Yale and explained that I could not go. I went back to Italy with the idea of a university career. While working, I started to meet artists. In the sixties, the atmosphere was very full of energy, a lot of new things happening. Slowly by slowly, I became friends with some artists, and finally I decided that I could work in the art world. Not only looking from the outside, like Boetti had told me.

DW: That's perfect. To find a job that you loved to do, so it hardly seems a job. And was that about that time that you first became aware of Rauschenberg as an artist?

PLP: Well, yes. I joined the gallery, let's say at the end of the Pop art exhibitions and at the beginning of the Arte Povera period. My time at the gallery was mainly with Arte Povera and Conceptual art, however we always looked at some American artists, like Rauschenberg, [Jasper]

Johns, and [Bruce] Nauman, as the Gods in the Olympus, and we as the mortals on earth. They were considered really important and new. Rauschenberg in particular was very, very appreciated. Amongst the many American artists, he was more European in a way. I mean, at least we felt it that way.

DW: Well, it's so interesting how often with Rauschenberg, and other American artists, the first reception for them seems to come from Europe.

PLP: Yes.

DW: And it takes a while before Americans discover this American artist that's in their—

PLP: Probably because we liked the fact that every work was different from the previous one. Let's say that Rauschenberg was always doing new things.

DW: That really does seem to be his style, to not have a style almost, and just always experimenting.

PLP: Exactly.

DW: Was he having exhibitions in Europe already at that time?

PLP: Well, he certainly did have an exhibition in Rome and one in Milano at Ariete gallery [Galleria dell'Obelisco, Rome, *Bob Rauschenberg: Scatole e Feticci Personali*, March 3–10, 1953. Traveled to Galleria d'Arte Contemporanea, Florence (as *Scatole e costruzioni contemplative di Bob Rauschenberg*), opened March 14, 1953; Galleria la Tartaruga, Rome, *Rauschenberg*, opened May 30, 1959; Galleria dell'Ariete, Milan, *Rauschenberg*, Oct. 24–Nov. 1961].

DW: He had some early ones, I guess.

PLP: Our connection with American art, at that time, was Ileana Sonnabend. So, we went often to Paris to see exhibitions at her gallery but I don't remember having seen any Rauschenberg exhibition at the time. [Galerie Ileana Sonnabend in Paris held many solo exhibitions of Rauschenberg's artworks between 1963–80.]

DW: But, of course, having won the grand prize at the Venice Biennale [International Grand Prize in Painting, 32nd Venice Biennale, 1964] . . .

PLP: Yes. I still have the Italian newspapers published during the Biennale. Do you know what the title was on the main newspaper of Turin? "They gave the prize to a bunch of garbage." That was the title. I will send you the copy of the newspaper. This was the atmosphere in which the gallery was operating. I mean, few collectors, very few, and the rest of the people very hostile. Initially the institutions were not friendly, then things changed. The Galleria d'Arte Moderna of Turin [Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea] did a Pop art exhibition. Even after that exhibition most people kept thinking that Pop art was not real art.

DW: Is it easy to send a photograph of it? In fact, it's something that we might have in our archives, but I don't know, I'd have to check with Francine Snyder [Director of Archives, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation]. But if we don't, it's certainly something that would be wonderful to have.

PLP: But in a way Rauschenberg was, considered a little bit, like *inarrivabile*.

Valentina Pero [VP]: Unreachable.

PLP: Yes unreachable. There were two very strong doors between us (Sperone gallery) and Rauschenberg. There were Leo Castelli and Ileana.

DW: I've just been reading a book by a woman named Edith Schloss called, *The Loft Generation* [*The Loft Generation: From the de Koonings to Twombly; Portraits and Sketches, 1942–2011* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2011)]. And it starts with her experiences in New York City, with Elaine and Bill de Kooning, and that group. And the final one is Cy Twombly in Rome.

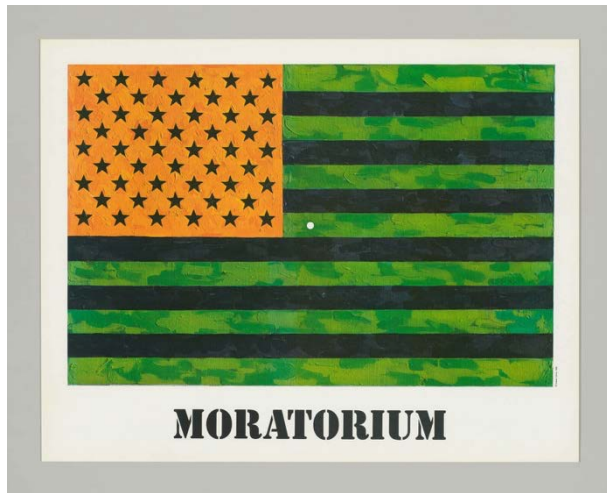
PLP: Cy Twombly, yes.

DW: But she talks about all that.

PLP: Yes. We had a very good relationship with Cy. There was an exhibition in New York, at Leo Castelli gallery uptown, called *Moratorium* [Leo Castelli gallery, 4 East Seventy-seventh Street, *Benefit Exhibition: Art for the Moratorium*, December 11–13, 1969]. It was about stopping the war in Vietnam.

DW: Oh, right.

PLP: And that was, I think, in 1969. And I still have the poster of the exhibition that was done by Jasper Johns, a green target [it is a flag]. We (Sperone and myself) went at the opening of that exhibition, and there we met Twombly. We were convinced that he had many galleries around him but anyhow we said, "We would like very much to do an exhibition of your work." And he replied, "Oh, come to Rome. We'll arrange it." As soon as we were back in Italy, we immediately went to Rome, and we arranged a fantastic exhibition. There was a big painting, a blackboard, five meters by three. And then there were two other paintings, the ones that are called Nini's paintings.



Jasper Johns  
*Moratorium*, 1969  
Offset lithograph  
Sheet: 22 1/2 × 28 11/16in. (57.2 × 72.9 cm)  
From an edition of 300

DW: Oh, exactly. I know.

PLP: Yes. It was an incredible exhibition. After that we opened the gallery in Rome. That was after, in 1972, I think. So, we met Twombly in 1969; we did the exhibition in 1970, I think. And then we opened in Rome, and then we did many other exhibitions of Twombly. We used to see him very often when we were in Rome. I mean, we saw him also outside the studio.

DW: I read someplace he was referred to as “an eagle among peacocks.” I thought that was funny.

PLP: Twombly changed a little bit when he had success. At the time he had very little success.

DW: Exactly. And in fact, I knew him from working at Castelli gallery, and he would come and always say, “Well, what are the stars up to?” Meaning Jasper and Rauschenberg.

PLP: Yes.

PLP: Castelli did something incredible once. At the Basel art fair, Castelli—in the catalogue of the fair—forgot to put the name of Twombly in the list of the artists of the gallery.

DW: Oh dear.

PLP: And this thing didn’t pass unseen. I mean, Twombly did notice it.

DW: Actually, I think one of the very first things to do with a Twombly exhibition at Castelli, they spelled his name, Cy, S-Y.

PLP: S-Y.

DW: It wasn’t off to a good start, I guess. So, then Sperone ended up in partnership with Angela Westwater?

PLP: That was a little bit after. Because we felt that we needed a space in New York to exhibit Arte Povera artists. Sperone was walking on the street in New York, and there were a lot of European places. At the time, not so many as now, but still there were many. I remember Elizabeth Arden, or some other location, for beauty. Sperone thought that we were not more stupid than those people and he said “why don’t we open a space in New York?”

PLP: And so, we found the space, and we opened it. And the first year the gallery was only the Sperone gallery, and we lost a lot of money. We understood that we needed to have an American partner who would always be present at the gallery.

DW: Sure.

PLP: In Italy, at least, in Rome, you can have a gallery without being always there. If you want to have a gallery in New York, you must be at your desk all day long. So, we understood this. We were already partners with Konrad Fischer, in Rome. In Rome, we opened the gallery together, with Konrad Fischer with whom we had many, many things in common. The same artists were showing at his place in Düsseldorf and at our place in Turin and in Rome. So, in New York at first we were alone, after one year of losses we opened the gallery with Angela Westwater and Konrad Fischer. That went on for a certain number of years. Konrad left the New York gallery with the trans-avant-garde. He didn’t like [Sandro] Chia and [Francesco] Clemente.

[short pause]

DW: So then as far as *Pantomime* [Rauschenberg’s Combine from 1961] is concerned, how did that come about, if I may ask?

PLP: That is a story outside the gallery. We (Sperone and I) were friends with Leo Castelli. Leo was selling, from time to time, some paintings to me as a collector. I had a painting by Jasper Johns. In those years, Turin was a “heavy” town, there was the beginning of terrorism and it was a season of economic crisis. Leo made me an offer for the Jasper Johns, and I thought, “who will ever buy a painting for more than seventy thousand dollars?” And I sold that painting to Leo.

A few months later, Leo showed me a transparency of [Rauschenberg’s] *Pantomime*. Since Leo was still owing me some money for the Jasper Johns sale, I said that I would like to buy *Pantomime*. As far as I remember I bought it for fifty-five thousand dollars. It was not an exchange, but it was a double sale.



Robert Rauschenberg

*Pantomime*, 1961

Combine: oil, enamel, paper, fabric, wood, metal,  
and rubber wheel on canvas with electric fans  
84 x 60 x 20 inches (213.4 x 152.4 x 50.8 cm)

Private collection

RRF 61.011

DW: So, it came directly from Leo, then?

PLP: Yes, it came directly from Leo. Of course, Sperone was completely aware of the dealing.

DW: Sure. Did you look at other Rauschenberg's at the same time? Or just that, all of a sudden, was—

PLP: No, when we were living in Turin, I had the Rauschenberg in the apartment. We had an old apartment with a very big entrance—

VP: Yes, a hall. Entrance hall.

PLP: This entrance hall was six meters by six meters, so it was very big.

VP: And all the other rooms of the house would open on that entrance.

PLP: Yes, on one wall I had *Pantomime*. On another wall I had a *Disaster* [painting] by [Andy] Warhol. On the other wall, there was the large Twombly five meters by three, the gray painting. It was something impressive. Valentina was in high school at that time, and her friends coming to the house would say, "Nice. There is a blackboard we can write on it." Of course, I said, "Absolutely not."

DW: Oh my, what a room. I love those *Disaster* paintings. And Cy as well [crosstalk]—

PLP: In there, on the fourth wall, there was a work with neon and wax by Mario Merz, a famous one called *Città irreale* (Unreal City). Now it is an iconic piece of Mario. It was incredible. When I think of that, all those paintings in the same room.

DW: No, it's . . . So then, at one point, did you meet Rauschenberg?

PLP: I met him only once. Our dealings always passed through Leo as far as exhibitions and buying. Exhibitions of this kind, we had always to talk with Leo. And also, the buying of works to resell in Italy. But first, it was Ileana. Then when Ileana opened the gallery in New York we went directly to Leo. We were friends with Leo, he was a fantastic person.

I didn't meet Rauschenberg on the occasion of the acquisition of *Pantomime*. I met him once, because there was an Italian collector who bought from us a *Hoarfrost* [(1974–76)]. The collector damaged the *Hoarfrost* because he put it under glass and the glass broke. He asked the gallery what could be done. So, the Castelli gallery arranged for me an appointment with Rauschenberg and Rauschenberg restored the work. He had been very, very kind. I met Rauschenberg only on that occasion and at his exhibitions at the Guggenheim and at the Metropolitan.

DW: I know he was always disappointed if *Hoarfrosts* ended up behind glass or plexiglass.

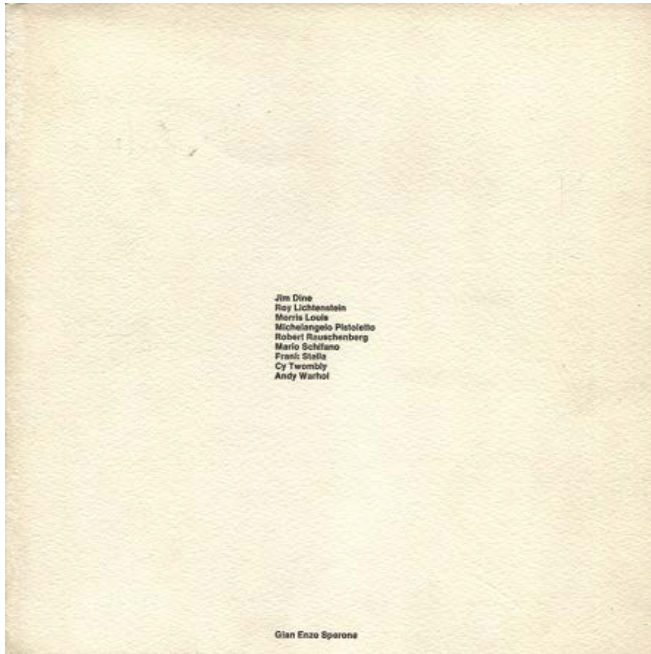
PLP: Yes, I know.

DW: Because part of it was the movement with the air. So it . . .

PLP: I don't know if you know this catalogue, there are a few works of Rauschenberg [*Jim Dine, Roy Lichtenstein, Morris Louis, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Robert Rauschenberg, Mario Schifano, Frank Stella, Cy Twombly, Andy Warhol* (Turin: Gian Enzo Sperone, 1975).]

VP: I think I sent it to you by email—

DW: But I wasn't sure what catalogue that is, so I think that's wonderful that you had . . .



*Jim Dine, Roy Lichtenstein, Morris Louis, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Robert Rauschenberg, Mario Schifano, Frank Stella, Cy Twombly, Andy Warhol. Turin: Gian Enzo Sperone, 1975. Cover.*

PLP: The story of this catalogue is that we (Sperone and I) were in desperate need to sell some artworks. In Italy in 1972, we had big sales. The gallery was booming. We wanted to invest in the gallery and took out a loan from a bank. We bought many paintings in order to build up an inventory for the gallery.

You know, in Italy, we always were buying works; we didn't have them on consignment. In those early years there were so few collectors that our only way of surviving was to keep the works until collectors would buy them. We could not have a painting for two months, or three months, or even a year. We had to buy the artworks. In 1973 we bought works in order to have an inventory proportionate to the sales that we had in 1972.

The year after, 1973, there was the oil crisis. In U.S. you didn't really feel it, but in Europe the price of oil jumped up because there was a war between the Arabs and Israel. The result was a recession and that the collectors disappeared. The gallery couldn't sell anything. So, we invented this catalogue, putting all the paintings we had and also some paintings that were not for sale like *Pantomime*. There was no exhibition. The idea was to send the catalogue to collectors in order to try to sell something.

DW: That's wonderful.

PLP: So, it was not an exhibition. We never did this exhibition. It was just a catalogue.

DW: That's wonderful information. That's very helpful. That's fascinating.

PLP: It was one year—very hard for many things—but in particular for a gallery, because after all, who wants art? During an economic crisis, who wants art?



DW: It must have been interesting for you to see the *Hoarfrost* at the Mnuchin Gallery then [Untitled (*Hoarfrost*), 1974 was included in *Robert Rauschenberg: Exceptional Works, 1971–1999*, May 3–June 11, 2022].



Robert Rauschenberg  
*Untitled (Hoarfrost)*, 1974  
Solvent transfer on fabric and paper bags  
80 1/2 x 42 1/2 x 2 inches (204.6 x 108 x 5 cm)  
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation  
RRF Registration# 74.015

PLP: Yes.

VP: Also, Barbara Castelli did an exhibition on *Hoarfrost* a few years ago, I think. [Perhaps: Leo Castelli, New York, *Robert Rauschenberg: A Visual Lexicon*, Oct. 9–Dec. 20, 2014.] Do you remember?

PLP: At the Mnuchin gallery there were some *Hoarfrosts* and some *Cardboards*. I liked very much the *Hoarfrost* and the *Cardboards*, and we had some in the catalogue we were talking about earlier.

DW: That *Castelli / Small Turtle Bowl (Cardboard)*, 1971. That's a very impressive looking piece there. I would love it if you would just say . . . Just before we started recording, you mentioned what you found impressive about Rauschenberg, his [crosstalk]—

PLP: Yes. It is his intellectual generosity, to continuously experiment, without using the fame he had, but always to put himself at trial with new works. This is, I think, why Europeans like Rauschenberg so much.

DW: That's nice to [crosstalk]—

PLP: Yes. And some paintings are better than others, but anyhow, what is fantastic is this idea of never being still. Always, up to the last paintings, he always experimented with new things. And that is a kind of generosity, because it implies to give something to the world.

DW: That's why I found the Mnuchin show so interesting, to have such a variety of things installed. And the more you look, you see how in fact they connect to one another and relate to one another, even if at first glance you don't see the connection.

PLP: Yes, for instance, we notice that the surface of which the works are made, are always different. There is aluminum, there is canvas. He's always trying something different . . . galvanized [steel] and polyamine.

DW: No, it's very . . . I think this is absolutely wonderful.

VP: And we briefly met Rauschenberg when there was his exhibition at the Guggenheim [Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, *Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective*, Sept. 19, 1997–Jan. 7, 1998, Guggenheim Museum SoHo, New York, Sept. 19, 1997–Jan. 4, 1998, and Guggenheim Museum at Ace Gallery, New York, Sept. 19–Nov. 9, 1997. Traveled.]

PLP: Yes. At the Guggenheim [*Pantomime* was installed at the Guggenheim Museum SoHo]. And there was . . .

VP: There was the problem of the fans working. Rauschenberg wanted the fans to work.

PLP: The fans, yes that was a problem. But we understood that Rauschenberg was perfectly right. The air is part of the work. The air is one of the components of the Combine. He was absolutely right. But it was dangerous to have heavy old fans working attached to such a fragile canvas

VP: But I remember the Guggenheim exhibition, he was very active at that time. That was in the, I think, early nineties or something like that.

DW: 1997 actually. Yeah.

VP: Ninety-seven okay. So late in the nineties. And there were insurance problems with the museum because the night before the opening Rauschenberg had told the museum that the fans of *Pantomime* had to work. And so suddenly there was a panic situation just one day before the opening.

PLP: Yes. And just nearby there was the *Mud Muse* [1968–71].

DW: The bubbling, the *Mud Muse*.

VP: Yes. At the end the decision was to have the fans working for a brief time during the opening and to make a video.

DW: No, I think, but it got resolved well, with the fact . . . Because wasn't it filmed very briefly and then . . .

VP: Yes, exactly. But Rauschenberg was right on the fact that air is part of the Combine. And even at the exhibition at the Met [Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, *Robert Rauschenberg: Combines*, Dec. 20, 2005–April 2, 2006. Organized by Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, in collaboration with Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Traveled.]. At the opening at the Met, I remember that Rauschenberg was in a wheelchair, and he was much older and fragile than he was at the Guggenheim.

DW: Sure.

VP: But still passing by *Pantomime*, he made the gesture of rotating his hands up in the air, signifying that air is still part of the Combine even if the fans were off.

DW: Or the way the paint is handled. It's just . . . Or when there's a light bulb in the painting, the light bulb is on.

VP: Exactly.

PLP: But it's a great painting. I'm very happy about it. And it's now on loan, a very long-term loan, at the Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein, [Vaduz].

VP: Yes.

PLP: And they don't always show it, but I arranged that some coherent parts of the works we have, all the American Pop art and the Arte Povera works, are on long term at this museum.

DW: To which museum is it?

VP: Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein in Vaduz.

PLP: It was a combination of factors. We were looking for a museum interested in having the collection on long-term loan when the Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein had just been opened. And there was a whole floor with the collection of the Prince of Liechtenstein. (The prince has the biggest collection in the world of Rubens.) And the prince decided to take away his collection, and bring it to his palace in Vienna. So, the museum had a lot of space and it was very happy to receive loans.

DW: Sure.

PLP: We had a very good relationship with Dr. Friedemann Malsch, the director of the museum.

PLP: Sometimes museums want to do the same exhibitions that are trendy at the moment. Dr. Malsch was not this kind of director. He was looking at art.

DW: Perfect.

VP: Dr. Friedemann Malsch, who retired last year was also very keen on Arte Povera and was very interested in having the works we had at the museum. So, it was a great relationship.

DW: It sounds ideal.

VP: Yes. And now there is Dr. Letizia Ragaglia, who has also a great curricula. She just started a few months ago. So there has been a change, but changes are good. Also, the architecture of the museum is very good for Arte Povera artworks.

PLP: Yes.

VP: The museum also can lend our works to exhibitions. So, they lent to the Rauschenberg retrospective [Tate Modern, London, *Robert Rauschenberg*, Dec. 1, 2016–April 2, 2017. Traveled to Museum of Modern Art, New York (as *Robert Rauschenberg: Among Friends*), May 21–September 17, 2017; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (as *Robert Rauschenberg: Erasing the Rules*), Nov. 18, 2017–March 25, 2018.] and to the Combines exhibition.

DW: Perfect. That's nice.

PLP: Yes. Taking away from us the work of doing loan forms.

VP: Yes.

DW: Sure, sure.

PLP: The agreement is that they ask me if we accept the loan. Before deciding a loan, we ask the artists and their archives if they agree to be part of the exhibition. The museum always has the last word in the loans decision, but there has never been any problem.

DW: Perfect.

VP: Yes, so the museum does the condition reports, checks the works when they come back.

DW: That sounds wonderful.

VP: It's very good. It's great. Yes.

DW: Thank you very, very much. It's been really a treat.