ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of

Janet Begneaud

Columbia Center for Oral History Research

Columbia University

2015

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of recorded interviews with Janet Begneaud conducted by Sara Sinclair on January 14, 2015, January 15, 2015, and January 16, 2015. This interview is part of the Robert Rauschenberg Oral History Project.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that s/he is reading a transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

Transcription: Audio Transcription Center	Session #1
Interviewee: Janet Begneaud	Location: Lafayette, Louisiana
Interviewer: Sara Sinclair	Date: January 14, 2015

Q: Let me just say that I'm very happy to meet you.

Begneaud: Nice to meet you too.

Q: Nice to be here today, January 14, 2015. I'm sitting with Janet—how do you pronounce your last name?

Begneaud: Phonetically it's B-E-G-N-O.

Q: Begneaud. And I'm Sara Sinclair.

Begneaud: And then you've got the Rauschenberg part. You know how to do that.

Q: Yes, I do. So as I was saying, I'd like to really start at the beginning and in this case your parents' beginnings. So maybe you can tell me a little bit about both of them and how they came to meet.

Begneaud: Okay. Bob [Rauschenberg] and I were very fortunate, I feel like, and I feel it even more the older I get that we had the simple, loving family that we did. We were fairly poor.

Neither one of us really knew that. My dad was born in Gatesville, Texas—actually, he was born in Rosebud, Texas and I think Rosebud has disappeared. It was near Gatesville. That's where he did schooling and whatever. And he didn't finish high school. There were, let's see, five boys and a girl in the family, and farming. And if you have ever been to Gatesville, Texas to see the soil there, you know farming was a pretty poor business to be in. It was just like hard sand. Anyway, Daddy left when he was I think fourteen or something and went to get a job. He went to Navasota [Texas] or something first and a good friend of his that was only just a couple of years older and was also from Gatesville, they left together. They ended up being life-long friends after they had families and they ended up going to work for the Gulf States Utilities Company and then the Gulf States transferred them to Port Arthur. So that's how Daddy got to Port Arthur.

Mother got there—she was born in Galveston, Texas and she had a bad childhood. Her father was an alcoholic and my mother, I think because of that, she was always 'til the day she died a total teetotaler. And of course Bob was an alcoholic. He was a very sweet and wonderful alcoholic, but he was an alcoholic. It made my mother crazy, but she finally sort of got used to it—but having grown up the way Mother did with an alcoholic father— And he finally died of tuberculosis or something like that and it just was amazing to me with the lack of sanitation how none of the kids got sick. He slept on the screened-in porch. In Galveston, Texas the screened-in porch would be like being in an oven. It was so hot there, with no fans or air conditioning. Then my grandmother and five children—she went to Port Arthur. One of her uncles had a dairy there and so he had them come there and Mother kind of helped. I don't know exactly what she worked or whatever, but he was helping take care of them. So that's how Mother got to Port

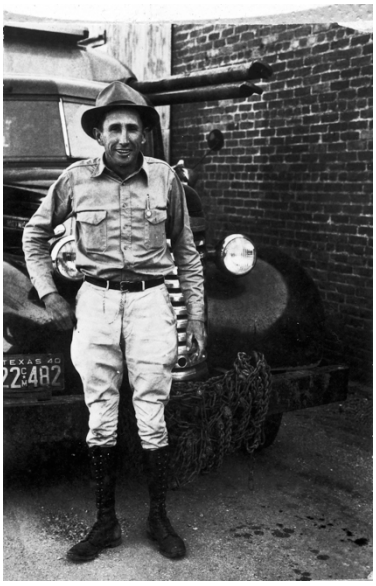
Arthur and she got a job at the telephone company. This was back in the days when they did the plug-in devices. The operator would answer the phone and, "Who do you want to speak to?" All that. Like they do on Saturday Night Live.

Anyway—and also the guy Ed Ward that my daddy was a good friend of that was with Gulf States too, he ended up being transferred to Lake Charles. Of course Port Arthur and Lake Charles being as close as it is, so they stayed in touch and as couples, they were really good friends and did vacations and stuff together. That was how everybody got to Port Arthur.

Then Gulf States also transferred Mother and Daddy to Lafayette. That's how we got to Lafayette.

Q: Right. So how did your parents meet?

Begneaud: Mother was working at the telephone company and this friend of Daddy's, Ed Ward, was dating this lady that was also a friend of my mother's. So, it was kind of a blind-ish date. And we have wonderful photographs. Bob has included some of those photographs in a lot of his work, with Daddy with almost like riding pants and those funny bathing suits that they wore and the funny cars and all that, that they took a lot of photographs of. Bob always teased Mother telling everybody that Mother was the Splash Day Queen in Galveston. She always giggled and said, "You silly thing." She loved him so much and loved his teasing. Bob was very sweet and generous to Mom 'til the day she died.



Ernest Rauschenberg, ca. 1940. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Unattributed

Robert Rauschenberg
Big and Little Bullys (Ruminations), 1999
Intaglio
45 x 57 inches (114.3 x 144.8 cm)
From an edition of 46, published by Universal Limited Art Editions, West Islip, New York
Includes images of Rauschenberg's parents, Dora and Ernest Rauschenberg, and Rauschenberg boating with his parents.

Q: So what about some of your early memories? What do you remember about growing up in Port Arthur?

Begneaud: As far as growing up in Port Arthur, my mother is very religious and Daddy ended up being, but wasn't so much then. Our friends and people we socialized with were mostly Mother's sisters—she had four sisters—and her brother, and their families. We vacationed together and our entertainment and socializing, like making homemade ice cream in the yard with one of those crank ice cream makers and the kids would all take turns getting to sit on the ice cream maker because, see, when it starts getting hard, it's hard to stay balanced. So they'd let one of us and put some towels on it and we'd take turns sitting on that. Life was simple then. Very simple.

In fact one of the memories that I have being in Port Arthur was that Mother and her sisters on Saturday night—this was a big event. We would go downtown. Now we had a Chevrolet car, without air conditioning of course, and so at least two of Mother's sisters would go that were closest in age to Mother. So there were three adults and they would sit in the front and all of the kids would be in the backseat of an un-air conditioned Chevrolet and they would ride downtown on the main street and park in front of the movie theater to watch the people go by. How simple is that? Isn't that funny? We never did go in the movie and it wasn't a big deal. It's like we didn't expect to go. This was the entertainment. We'd each get a nickel and we could go in there and buy popcorn or candy or whatever you wanted for your nickel and then come back outside. And then sometimes Mother and her sisters and the kids would walk up the street—this was at night so all the stores were closed—to window shop.

But anyway, we used to take vacations back to Galveston and I can remember we didn't stay in hotels. We stayed in little cabins that were across the street from the beach and they were little, tiny cabins. The kids would sleep on pallets. Do you know about pallets? You don't know that, do you? You'd have like a quilt and you'd double it over like that and you'd lay on the bottom part and put the other one on top of you—or the opposite, you just laid on both pieces—and you had a pillow. And that was a pallet and it was on the floor, even under a bed.

The kids would sleep on pallets on the floor and the adults would get to sleep in the beds. Of course we preferred the pallets. That was a wonderful place to be silly and giggle and pinch each other and all that. So our childhood was fine—there was not anything wrong with it. It was just

so different than what we know of now. I don't know anybody that would go on vacation and put the kids on the pallet in these little, tiny rooms. But we had a really good time doing that.

Bob was ten and a half years older than I am, so we didn't grow up as close brothers and sisters. In fact I was a real nuisance to him because I was my daddy's little golden-haired girl that could do no wrong and Bob was a teenager. He left when he graduated from high school. He left to go study at Texas university [University of Texas] in Austin. Then I got the whole room by myself. Before that I was having to sleep in Mother and Daddy's room on a little half-bed thing. Twin bed? Something. I was just such a nuisance to him that we weren't even really good friends. Then when he went away to school he didn't come home that often and he was busy over there flunking out. I think he was in pharmacy school.

Q: Pharmacology?

Begneaud: Pharmacology. He was going to be a pharmacist. But you know, eeny-meeny-miny-moe kind of thing of what he was going to be and he barely got out of high school. See, he was dyslexic. Very dyslexic. Back in that day dyslexia was not recognized as being a real problem that was okay and that you could do something about it. So Bob just always thought he was not as smart as he was supposed to be.

Anyway, he always laughed and said he lived in Austin, got a job. I think one of his jobs was making milkshakes in a little five-and-ten-cent store that had a little dining counter. So it was a

long time—several months—before Mother and Daddy realized he was not still in school. Then of course he was drafted and went into the Navy.

But meantime I was just plodding along, bouncing around with my little cousins and whatever and I just thought life was fantastic and it was. It really was. Looking back on it, especially in this day and time with so much dysfunction that we see in so many families, I'm sure that there was—Mother's daddy being an alcoholic was certainly dysfunctional—but it's like dysfunction wasn't really recognized then. So you had to like not do that.

[Laughter]

Begneaud: Anyway—

Q: Before you got the room to yourself, you and Bob shared a room for a little while when you were really little?

Begneaud: No, no. I had like a little—I guess it's a junior bed in Mom and Dad's bedroom. Yes, we had two bedrooms. In fact the street that we lived on then was a nice little subdivision, but since then we've been back to look at it and it's like the ghettos. It is so bad. And Bob laughed. He said, "I can't believe that we grew up here. This is really the ghettos."

Q: What does it look like?

Begneaud: It's really bad. All the little houses—they were probably—I can guess square footage because I've been a realtor for forty-five years so I can pretty well eye that now. Maybe a thousand to 1100 square feet. Two bedrooms and a bath and a living room, dining room, and kitchen. We had a separate garage. But now the houses were all frame houses and nice, neat, with gardens and all that, and in fact we had a really deep lot. I remember that because most of the neighbor children were boys, so they wouldn't let me play baseball with them. So my daddy built me a baseball diamond in the back of our yard. We had a real deep lot and he was with Gulf States and I guess with that electric line company he was able to get a hold of some telephone poles or something. Anyway, we had a big—what do they call that? Not a back splash, but a back—like behind the pitcher? There's the big thing with the—

Q: Oh yes, with the net.

Begneaud: Yes, but there's a name for that. It's backstop. Anyway, so my daddy built that for me and then—it wasn't that they wanted to come play with me, I got to play any position I wanted to play because I had the key to it then. So needless to say I was pretty much of a tomboy.

Q: You were saying that you were a nuisance to Bob because you were your dad's little girl and that you once told on him for something that he did to his room? Like repainting?

Begneaud: Yes, I tattled on him.

Q: What did he do?

Begneaud: He painted—I'll never forget this—with red paint, he painted his bed. But he didn't just paint the bed, he painted designs all over the wooden bed. I saw him doing it and I didn't pay too much attention to it, but I remember I was out playing or something and when I came back in he really had painted a lot of the furniture in there with fleur-de-lis—I don't know what all it was, but just stuff. So I ran in and told Dad about it and Bob didn't really appreciate that very much. Of course he got into trouble. And this was kind of like *na-na-na-na-nah*! I was tacky. I really was tacky, but he forgave me. We got to be really, really close, close friends and I was really happy about that.

As it turned out, as I grew up, he and [Byron Richard] Rick [Begneaud] were really close, when Rick was a little boy, so it ended up being really, really, really cool.

Q: Right. You were saying Bob moved away, he went to school, and then he was drafted. Was there a way to be in touch during those years?

Begneaud: Not a lot. I have a whole slew of letters that he had written to Mother and Mother kept them and then I kept her stuff. Anyway, they didn't call long distance very much. It was probably too expensive or something, wouldn't you think? I don't know.

Q: It was a different time. Now, people text and email and back then it was harder to be in touch.

Begneaud: That's right. That's right. I know when he was in the Navy—and everything was rationed then, during World War II—we decided that we were going to take a vacation out to see him in San Diego, but everything was rationed—gas and everything—so Mother would trade her sugar stamps and I think we had shoe stamps because of the leather. I've forgotten the different things that were rationed, but Mother would trade all those things to get gas stamps so we could drive out to San Diego. Then Bob kind of got the word that he thought he was going to be shipped overseas so we really got in a bigger hurry.

And I don't know how they found this woman, but something that Mother knew, knew this lady who had a little girl. Her husband was in the hospital out there so she was able to get the stamps to go out there. Daddy decided to give her a ride out there and she was obnoxious. Totally obnoxious. She was a great big heavy lady, so took a lot part of the car, and she had this little girl. I was about—well, let's see if we can figure that out. I was 'bout in '36 and that was like in the early forties, so I was eight or ten? Eight, nine, ten years old. And this little girl was about six and she also took a lot part of the backseat of the car. And Daddy was very, very soft spoken, very patient man. He was so funny because—and he also would not make a scene about anything. He was a really neato guy. He wasn't really old then, but he was a good guy.

Anyway what his deal was—he was trying—we didn't know how much time we had before Bob would be sent over so we were in a hurry to get out there. And of course the trip wasn't planned like we would get to such-and-such and get a hotel. We didn't make reservations or anything. We just started across the country.

I never will forget when we crossed the desert. Daddy had to stop and get some kind of ice thing to hang on the outside of our car so that our motor didn't get too hot going across the desert. That's really ancient, isn't it?

[Laughter]

Q: Different time, yes.

Begneaud: Anyway, this lady would say—and it was just this great big lady that liked all the trees. So we'd get started and she'd tell this little girl—I've forgotten what their names were—she'd tell the little girl, "Now don't you tell Mr. Rauschenberg that you want any ice cream because he does not want—we have to keep going." Of course the minute she said that, "I want some ice cream." She would whine and all. Finally she'd tell Daddy, she'd say, "Mr. Rauschenberg, you know what? We'd just as soon stop and get her the ice cream and then we'll be done with that." Of course she's the one that wanted the ice cream. The little girl hadn't even thought of it until she mentioned it. And so we'd get a little bit further—and Daddy used to tell this story and he didn't tell it with a smile on his face either. He didn't like it. Then she would want something else and then she would have to go to the bathroom and we just slowly went across the United States and Daddy was getting steamier and steamier.

Anyway we did get out there and it was a really nice trip after we got out there, to be with Bob and some of his Navy buddies and all, and we saw San Diego and the zoo and all of that. But what I was going to tell you is that, so then we started home and we stopped, just by chance, in

this little service station way out in the middle of the tumbling weeds in Texas to get gas. When Daddy gave him his credit card, the guy looked at him and said, "Rauschenberg? The man that owns this service station is named Rauschenberg." That's not a real common name. That's not like Brown or Jones. And so it was one of Daddy's nephews and of course he wasn't at the station at the moment, but the attendant called him and he came to meet us and we went out to his house for a little while. I think we had dinner or lunch or something and he gave Mother a whole big stack of gas stamps and Mother was so excited because she was going to get to come home and give all of her friends and people she had traded with it all to double up—and she had planned all that. Coming home after that she was planning all of it out, "Sally would get this many." So that was her entertainment coming home, figuring it out. It was like she had a whole stack full of gold coins or something.

Rauschenberg, his sister Janet, and a friend from the Navy, San Diego Naval Repair Base, 1944 or 1945. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Unattributed

So we got home one night and the next morning the war was over. So everybody was glad the war was over, but Mother didn't get to give her—

Q: Give out her gold? So how was Bob? How was that trip that time with him?

Begneaud: That was fun and Bob has always been not just—it's not like happy-go-lucky. That's not it. He's just always been a happy person and even when things weren't going exactly the way he wanted them, he would fix it so that it would be okay. In fact when he first decided that he was going to pursue art, he thought, "Well, all real artists went to Paris." That's where you had to be if you were going to be a real artist. So he of course didn't have the money to get to Paris, so he taught dancing on a cruise ship to little gray-headed ladies so that he could get to Paris.

Q: Really? Wow.

Begneaud: He was a good dancer. A great dancer. Big feet, but he was really a good dancer and he loved dancing. Anyway, he got over there and that's where he met [Susan] Sue [Weil] and I think he then began to realize that that was not exactly where he should be to—especially what he thought about art. He broke all the rules. And not like, "I'm not going to do what they're doing." It wasn't any kind of thing about being a rebel or something. It was just that's not the way he saw it.

He was really kind and sweet about it. Because there was a lot of argumentation when Bob first started doing stuff. Sometimes critics and things would tell him, "That's not art. That's garbage." I remember one time I was standing next to Bob when this guy—I don't know what university, but he was a university doctorate, probably in New York, and he was just really reaming Bob

out. He said it was just disgusting, what he was doing. “This is not art, it’s just really,” and he’d shake his head and say, “This is really garbage. This really is just garbage.” And just, “You can’t call that art.” I’ve often wondered what he thinks now. Of course he’s probably dead and gone, but I wonder what he—

Q: After he saw the success, if he had a change of heart?

Begneaud: Yes. And so—

Q: Someone at the [Robert Rauschenberg] Foundation, before I came, gave me this letter that you wrote to Calvin Tomkins, who was writing a profile. This is back in 1963. And you wrote about something that Bob made for you when you were a child. An oil of a duckling done on the end of an apple crate.

Begneaud: Yes. I have it right here in the bathroom. He said, “If that ever shows up in any show, I will come back and haunt you.”

Q: Aw, it’s cute. It’s so cute.

Begneaud: I had the mumps or the measles or something and he was babysitting me I think.

Q: So you were how old?

Begneaud: Well, let me see if there's a date on the back of it. 1940.

Q: You were four.

Begneaud: Yes and so I had mumps or something like that. Some childhood thing and Bob was babysitting me, so he painted that for me.

Q: So he was 14?

Begneaud: Mm-hm.

Q: Did he make stuff a lot when you guys were—when he was—

Begneaud: Yes. All of his textbooks and things like that were all just full of designs and images, but it was not really looked upon very kindly. Teachers didn't like that because he was messing up the school books. I don't remember this except him telling about it and Mother telling about it, but when he was in high school he was running for treasurer, or I don't know, could have been president—you know how they do that—and he had a wonderful, wonderful campaign—

Q: Posters?

Begneaud: Well, he went to the butcher shop where Mother traded and got the guy to give him a whole bunch of butcher paper and that was this long. And so the whole inside of the lobby and

whatever at the high school had pictures like—he'd do a picture of Betty Grable and he would say, "Betty Grable says, Vote for Rauschenberg!" And then he would do, "Hedy Lamarr says, Vote for Bob Rauschenberg!" And so Mother said that the posters would go all around the whole lobby naming all the movie stars of the day saying, "Vote for Rauschenberg." And he would draw a color picture of them too.

Q: So you said that maybe the art that he was doing at the time wasn't so valued. What were the values in your home when you were a child? What was valued?

Begneaud: We didn't have any art. Bob was making things like this and that was really, really cool for me—and of course you can see I hung on to it—but we didn't have art in our little house. I think even when he made things—there's a painting in the hall there that he did for Mother for Mother's Day and I think there is a date on it. Some lilies. So he did some really nice things, but I don't think anybody hung them up and made anything to do about them. He didn't get any encouragement at all from family or at school.

Q: Even beyond art. Every family is sort of governed by different values. So what was important in your family?

Begneaud: Mother was very, very spiritual and so were we. And Bob was. In fact at one point Bob said he thought he was going to be a preacher. He thought he might want to be a preacher. But then he changed his mind. But I don't know. My daddy hunted and fished a lot and so we had a lot of—in fact during the Depression Daddy was working then, he'd got a second job that—

Port Arthur is surrounded by oil refineries. Magnolia was on one side, the Gulf Refinery was on one side, and Texaco was on one side—and then the marsh was on the other side, so it always smelled great in Port Arthur. [Laughs] But if you lived there you didn't notice so much. It was when you left and came back that you went gahhh.

Anyway, Daddy got a part-time job at the Gulf refinery. He was not working at Gulf States at the time. I don't know exactly how that thing worked out except that I do know that Daddy was actually meat hunting for extra money and he got a shift job so that he wouldn't have to go to work early in the morning. And he'd go duck hunting and kill the ducks and they would clean them and get them nice and everything, and then he would sell them to the doctors and the people that were wealthier.

Q: And did he try to teach Bob how to hunt and fish?

Begneaud: Yes.

Q: Did he also try to teach you any of that?

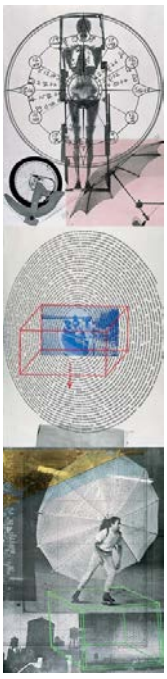
Begneaud: Yes. In fact, I got a .410 gun when I was seven and Daddy took me out to a field that was right out in Port Arthur there to teach me to shoot it. I would stand so that when you pulled the trigger, it didn't knock you over. I never will forget, the first shot that I shot hit a bird. I probably didn't even mean to, but the bird fell dead and my daddy thought—that was so wonderful and he told that story forever, that my first shot with that shotgun that I killed a bird.

And I didn't even like killing the bird. I really liked killing tin cans. That was a lot more fun to me. I was a pretty good shot. In fact I still am pretty good. I shot skeet for several years after I got married.

In fact Byron [Begneaud], my husband, until he had this arthritis so bad—in fact it was kind of funny because I never did really know for sure whether Byron married me for love or for my daddy's duck lease. It was probably at least a toss-up. But I hunted a lot with Byron. I really was not a real good hunter. I was a good shot, but I didn't like the cold and the duck blind and that kind of thing so much.

Q: What about Bob?

Begneaud: No. Bob didn't—he didn't like hunting at all. Now he did fishing. In fact one of his pieces—that's his *Autobiography* [1968]?—the piece where there's three sections to it and one of them is a little picture in the center of he and Mother and Daddy and a little row boat thing and he's holding up a little fishing pole. Now he caught a fish one time with no bait. He was just dragging this—see, Daddy would make him sit on the floor of that little boat so he couldn't fall out. He was little; two, three. So he couldn't sit on the seat because they were afraid he would fall out. I'm sure they didn't have life jackets or anything like that. Bob used to laugh that—Mother swore that that's what it was, that he caught a fish one time without even any bait on the hook.



Robert Rauschenberg
Autobiography, 1968
Offset lithograph on three sheets of paper
198 3/4 x 48 3/4 inches (504.8 x 123.8 cm) overall
From an edition of 2,000, published by Broadside Art, Inc., New York

Photograph used in central panel of Rauschenberg's *Autobiography* (1968). Rauschenberg boating with his parents Ernest and Dora Rauschenberg on the bayou near Port Arthur, Texas, ca. 1927. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Unattributed

Q: Did you guys have animals around? Pets?

Begneaud: I didn't. Bob had a goat one time. Now we had dogs, hunting dogs, so they weren't really like house pets or anything. After we moved here to Lafayette—we moved here when I was twelve. In fact I had my twelfth birthday here. We moved just a few weeks before that, so I had cocker spaniels, but I don't think that Bob had pets like that. I also had horny toads. Do you know what a horny toad is from West Texas?

Q: No, maybe not.

Begneaud: They're a toad that's flat and they actually have all these horns on the back of it and points and things and they're called horny toads. And our grandfather—it was still out in Gatesville—used to send them to Bob and me in a big kitchen match box, you know the kind that's just about the size—I know this thing can't see what I'm doing with my hands, but you know those kitchen matches that are pretty good sized and you strike them on a board or something? He would poke holes in it and put the horny toad in there and then put a string around it and then send it to me in the mail. So I used to have horny toads. That's just kind of weird pets. They're not ones you play with very much, but my daddy would tie a string around his back leg and so that he could run in the grass outside and everything. I don't remember playing with it too, too much. As far as pets I know I never did have one and I don't think Bob had one while I was around. But they did have a goat at one time before I was born because I heard them talking about that.

Q: And you said your mom was religious?

Begneaud: Yes.

Q: What was the church like that you went to?

Begneaud: It's fundamentalist. It's a Church of Christ. We still go to the Church of Christ here in Lafayette and it's a church that goes just by the Bible. No extra rules or regulations or whatever,

just by the Bible. Mother was a real do-gooder, but not like for the idea of doing good. She just did that. If somebody at church had a baby or was ill, Mother was the first that went there—not with a box of candy or a little doodle for the kid—but go wash the dishes or maybe the clothes and ironing or whatever. I can remember being a teenager when this lady at church—she already had two or three kids, little. Every Saturday Mother would jerk me up and we'd go over there and we'd do her laundry and I'd play with those kids and kind of babysit and Mother would get caught up in her housework. So she was really a good person and we were so lucky to have her. She was really a pretty lady and silly. Silly, silly, silly, and I love silly. It's so easy to be silly and it makes you so happy and it usually makes people around you happy. Bob enjoyed that. He was pretty silly also on occasion.

In fact it's so funny. When Mother was old—I guess several years before she died, eight years before she died—she had a stroke. It only affected her legs—she just couldn't walk anymore. She was wheelchair-bound. We'd still go to shows and things and Bob would—I remember one time in Dallas I believe it was, he made them line her wheelchair with yellow roses. Fresh yellow roses. He was always so sweet with her. He furnished her with round-the-clock sitters and nurses. I walked in and he was talking to her on the telephone. She still, most of the time, called him Milton. That was her privilege. And he was okay with it. So she said, "I'm talking to Milton." She said, "You want to talk to him?" I got the phone and I said, "Hey, how you doing?" He said, "I was just asking Mom what she wanted." He wanted to go get her stuff all the time. And she said, "Well I never had a Cadillac." And so he was telling me, he said, "So Mother said she never had a Cadillac," so he said, "I want you to go get her one." And she also had macular degeneration, really, really, really bad. Bob was always afraid that he was going to get that.

Because it was in our family. Some of her sisters had it and one of her nephews. And Bob was terrified that he was going to get macular degeneration. It would have been kind of hard in his line of work.

But anyway, so he said just go get her a Cadillac. I said, "Bob, she doesn't even drive." He said, "Well, those ladies can drive her." He said, "Don't get her a black one or a white one." He said, "Red's too gaudy. That doesn't look like Mother. Maybe kind of a soft blue or a soft pink." I said, "Bob—" and he said, "Just get them to paint it. Make it something that she really would enjoy." So I said okay. I gave Mother the phone back and he told her that we were going to go buy a Cadillac. I can still see her sitting there. Mother's telephone cords were always a mess. Almost every time—which was almost every day—I'd have to take that phone loose and let the phone undo that because it would get so wound up. She'd sit there talking on the phone and she'd do that. I could still see her sitting there. She said, "You're so silly." She said, "I don't even drive." And so he must have said, "Well the ladies could drive it." She said, "They don't know how to drive a Cadillac." She said, "We don't know how to do that." She said, "I don't want that after all. I was just teasing."

To go to shows and events, he'd send me money and he'd say, "Now go buy you and Mother nice dresses—" He was always buying me something. Always, always. It was so cool. And not necessarily for a birthday or for Christmas. He'd just send you things. Like a big thing of rubies. But anyway, we were going to some real big show in New York and I remember the governor was going to be there and the vice president and all these people and so he wanted Mother and me to be dressed in formals. We had the hardest time finding Mother a dress because—this was

back like when people were wearing muumuus and all kind of loose things. We went to New Orleans and Baton Rouge, all the stores here, so finally I said, "Mother, if you had the exactly perfect dress, what would it look like?" She was so funny. Her little lips were kind of quivering. She said, "Well, I hate to say this—" and I said, "Say what?" She said, "I want a belt." She said, "My waist is my best thing," and she was embarrassed to say that, so it was making her kind of cry. I said, "Momma, that's all we need to know. Now we're going to find a dress with a belt." It was so funny because just a few days later, a friend of hers told us there was a little shop in New Iberia [Louisiana], which is about thirty minutes from here, that they had a lot, a lot of formal clothes. We went to New Iberia—this was after we'd been to Houston, to Baton Rouge, and to New Orleans and all over kingdom come looking for a dress and not knowing what we were looking for. I didn't know what we were looking for.

So anyway, just right after we got to the store we found this light blue chiffon—of course Mother had platinum she called it—platinum blonde hair. It was this silver, silver hair. She grayed beautifully. And it wasn't blue. She didn't do the blue, but she just had platinum hair and she'd wear it all up in a bun. She was a pretty, little lady. Anyway, this was a blue chiffon dress that had the long sleeves, which of course—I'm at that age too. I don't do sleeveless either. You want sleeves. And the band here with all the sequins and stones, and it was fairly covered but just real soft and cloudy and almost fairy-ish looking, and it also had a belt about this thick—that they had to cut down, by the way, because it was way too long. Too big a belt for Mother's little waist. She really looked—from the back for sure—like a teenager in that dress. It was so pretty. And Bob was so proud of her.

But anyway, I remember that night, there was one part of the evening, after the dinner there was some dancing, they had an orchestra. He got Mother to dance and she was a good dancer too. And I can still see them just—of course he had her just sailing around that floor! He wasn't doing a dance where he would let go of her. And this was before she was in a wheelchair, so she had not had a stroke yet. Her with her platinum blonde hair and that light blue chiffon dress and all around the floor, it was just so, so nice.

Q: I want to go back in time a little bit. Oh yes. There's this story, which I'm sure you've heard—and David [White] at the Foundation has told me you've said, "That's not true"—that when Bob left the Navy, he hitchhiked from San Francisco to Port Arthur and found that you guys had moved to Lafayette. What's your version of this story?

Begneaud: That's true.

Q: That is true? Okay.

Begneaud: Except that he did know that we had moved to Lafayette.

Q: Oh, he knew.

Begneaud: He knew that we were moving to Lafayette. He knew that, but he didn't know that we had moved yet. So that was what it was. He got back to Port Arthur and realized that we weren't there. Of course then he came to Lafayette. Bob—we used to laugh and say—he didn't really lie.

It was embellishing and there's a big difference in lying because God doesn't like lies, but embellishing I think is okay. He'd always would tell that he came out of the Navy and his family just had moved and gone. But he finally found us.

Q: Do you remember that visit?

Begneaud: Yes.

Q: What was that time like?

Begneaud: Well, it was great. Mother and Daddy—we were all just so glad to see him and everything—he knew that we were moving but he didn't know the exact day. But they didn't know exactly the day that he was going to be getting out either. See, when we first moved here it was really hard for us to find a house because that was before the oil industry had come into Lafayette and all and there were really not very many rentals or anything like that. I was twelve—well, I was twelve just about a couple of weeks after we moved here. So they considered me a child and then we had a pregnant cocker spaniel. So the few landlords that would take a child, would not take a pregnant cocker spaniel. That was just as important to us. You had asked me a while ago if I had had pets and I had forgotten. That was after I was up in school. But we had this pregnant cocker spaniel.

We ended up moving into the Azalea Courts, which is not even here anymore, and some of the people that worked there were French. In fact probably all of them were French and some of

them actually spoke French. Bob got a kick out of trying to visit with them because in some of his adventures—maybe it was his preparation for going to Paris, I don't know—he had either taught himself or from a recording or something, had learned a little bit of French. So he had a good time trying to speak French and communicate with some of these local Cajuns.

Q: So the next few years, as you said, he moved to Paris to go to school and he met Sue. Tell me about how you first heard about Sue and maybe you can talk me all the way through to their wedding.

Begneaud: Well, we really didn't meet her, of course, until they came back. They were coming back to get married. [Note: Rauschenberg and Weil marry in summer 1950.] Sue's family, they lived in New York in a brownstone. We'd never seen that. But her father owned an island [Outer Island] off the coast of Connecticut. There's like a little group of islands there that were residential islands and there was a boat—it was like a taxi cab. A taxi boat, I guess it was, because there were no bridges. But that was one of the most exciting times of my whole life, was that wedding. It was so wonderful.

The wedding was on the island and there was a great, great big house that the family lived in and there was a little guest house. But the big house, it was fantastic, and it had even a place at the top—what would you call that? You see it in—

Q: Like a lighthouse?

Begneaud: Kind of but not—what it was, it was like a—it was not the same size as the house.

Q: Okay, like something you would peer out of at the top? Like a tower?

Begneaud: Yes, exactly, on the top of the house. I remember they had a fireplace that was so big that there were brick benches that you could get in the fireplace and sit with a fire in there. Which of course—from Port Arthur, Texas and from Lafayette, Louisiana we didn't have fireplaces at all. Especially ones that you could get into. Of course we had lobster for the first time.

But we drove up there for the wedding and I was going to be the bridesmaid. Of course my mother also sewed every stitch of clothes that she and I owned and half of her sisters'. She was a really good seamstress. She made my wedding dress from a Vogue pattern. She was really, really good. In fact my only ready-made dress was when I was a senior in college. One of the big retail people here, women's store, wanted to have a college board, like they had in *Seventeen Magazine*. He asked me to help him do that. The dress that I wore in that style show was a knit dress and Mother let me buy that dress. It was the second ready-made dress I had. All of my friends were jealous of me because Mother could sew so well and we'd go to Hyman's [phonetic], which was the local fabric shop, and every Wednesday they had a big major sale of remnants. I was so scrawny then, Mother could by a yard of material and make me a skirt. So every weekend I'd have at least one new outfit if not two. Sometimes she was sewing me in them as I was leaving to go on my date. She hadn't quite finished.

Q: So what were you both wearing for the wedding?

Begneaud: Well, I got to buy a dress at Neiman Marcus and I had that dress until not too, too long ago, but I think it finally just fell apart. But it was silk chiffon and it had two layers. The top layer was like a ballerina type dress and ballerina length and I even got to buy the shoes and everything at Neiman Marcus. I thought that was so unbelievably fantastic.

Q: How old were you?

Begneaud: Well, let's see. I'm not sure how old I was. Maybe sixteen or seventeen. I said that was the first readymade dress I had, my knit dress. That was the first one that I wore. This was for that one occasion. It was like a costume because I never got to wear it after that. Well I did wear it to church a couple of times. In fact there are pictures of me in the wedding pictures and magazines in some of those books of that little dress.

Anyway, it was so funny because when we drove up to New York in our—Chevrolet, whatever it was—and Daddy drove right up, in New York traffic and everything—which was a far cry from what we were accustomed to—and drove right up to the brownstone. Of course he couldn't find a place to park and I think it was Sue's little brother [James Leonard Weil] that came out and took our car and parked it somewhere. A garage or something. Anyway, met the Weils. Her mom, Ms. Weil, was the only licensed woman lobsterist in Connecticut, which my daddy thought that was so way cool. Then we went out to the island and we got the taxi boat. Sue is a fantastic person. I still stay in touch with her.

Robert Rauschenberg
Sue + Janet- Outer Island, Conn., 1949
Gelatin silver print
15 x 15 inches (38.1 x 38.1 cm)

Q: Do you?

Begneaud: Oh yes. She's just—she's wonderful. In fact I got a note just yesterday I think, in the mail, that she's having a show. One thing that Sue has done—she writes fabulously and she has written in a diary or ledger or something every day of her life. Every day. She says it's like brushing your teeth. She writes in that. She's done a lot of nice poetry. And so this show that she's going to have is something about her poetry. [Note: *Poemumbles: 30 Years of Susan Weil's Poem/Images*, Black Mountain College and Arts Center, Asheville, North Carolina, 2015] I'm thinking that a book is coming out about it. The little blurb that I saw—

Q: Yes, I think you're right.

Begneaud: —sounded like it was an art show—which it could be both.

Q: I think you're right. I met Sue, I guess it was several months ago now, and she was talking about going through all of her books of the poems and picking which ones were going to be a part of this show and I believe also then a part of a book. So how did you first—did Bob call you to tell you that this wedding was happening?

Begneaud: Oh, I'm sure it was Mother. He didn't call me. Of course I loved him to death and he loved me, but we still weren't friends.

Q: Right. So he called the family.

Begneaud: Because it's a big age difference. Mother, in fact she made us a dress for the wedding and then, as it turned out, I didn't wear that dress because when we got to New York, before we went to the island, Sue took us to Neiman Marcus. And I got to buy a dress and the ballerina shoes and stockings. I had never had stockings before. Stockings that came up and I got one of those little belts that has the hook to hold the stocking?

Q: Garter belt?

Begneaud: Yes, the garter belt. Yes. So I had all those big girl things and I never had had that before.

Q: So tell me about the day.

Begneaud: It was a gorgeous day and also Mother—certainly not me—Mother had never seen an outdoor wedding. Since then that's quite common, but it was not common then. Of course why would Bob have done anything ordinary? To start with, that was not his M.O. The usual was not his deal. But the island was gorgeous and there was this real flat part with rock and stuff and the waves would just come and do the—what do you call it?

Q: Just crash onto the rocks and spray.

Begneaud: All that up in the air and everything. That's where the wedding was, out there. And she's Jewish and so it was a Jewish wedding and not very large. I don't remember who all was there. I think it was mostly family, maybe some of her aunts and people, but it wasn't a big wedding. But it was a big wedding to us.

Q: Of course.

Begneaud: It was so fancy! But I don't really remember the reception except that I do remember that we had a lot of food. That was the first time we'd had lobster with the drawn butter. And of course any kind of seafood is at its best when it's freshest and this is like—like here, Byron would go out fishing and catch fish and come home, clean them, and we'd cook them that night. You can't beat that. That was kind of what that was there; they'd go catch the lobster and come home and we'd have lobster.

Q: Right. That's nice.

Begneaud: And it was a gorgeous day; bright, sunshiny and so there's some wonderful photographs of that day with that—what do you call that? When the waves that splash up? There's a word for that.

Susan Weil and Rauschenberg on their wedding day with members of their wedding party: James Leonard Weil, Donald Droll, and Janet Begneaud. Outer Island, Connecticut, June 1950. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Unattributed

Q: I don't know.

Begneaud: I forgot what it is, but anyway—

Q: And did your parents have an opinion about the fact that it was an inter-religious situation?

Begneaud: Mm-mm. They loved Sue.

Q: No?

Begneaud: No. Not at all.

Q: What else did you do in New York on that trip? Do you remember?

Begneaud: Not much. I don't know that we did much sightseeing that trip, but not too long—well I don't want to say too long. Within a year or so Mother and I went up to visit and then we got to go to the—Empire State Building. I still haven't been to the Statue of Liberty except flying over it going or coming to N.Y.C.

Q: I haven't been there and I live in New York.

Begneaud: Yes, you particularly will never go. The only people who go there are people that don't live there and I guess that's why I didn't because Bob never did get excited about doing that. But I always had so much fun in New York because—especially after Bob got to where he could afford to do things and he was so generous with us. So generous. He would hire a car for me with a driver that would take me shopping. The only problem that I would have with it is those stores were so big, I'd go in one door and then come out the wrong door on the wrong street. So finally then, we got a deal where—it must have been like a beeper that the guy would give me and so he would tell me—one time he told me, he said, "When you go in, look at everything around there really, really good, so you'll know what department to get in to get to come back out to me." And I've been selling real estate like for forty-five years and I have zero sense of direction. Zero. I know left, right, and up and down, but that is about it.

Anyway, I remember a lot, a lot of trips to New York and it was usually Mother and I. Byron was so good about letting me take off and go. He was always hunting and I would let him do that and I'd go off with Bob and— He was really good about taking me with him to big shows and events.

Sometimes Bob would call on Monday or Tuesday and say, "What are you doing Friday?" My answer was always, "Nothing!" I would always rearrange my plans to go with Bob. I never regretted it.

Q: When did you and Byron meet?

Begneaud: In high school. He's three and a half years older than I am, so he was a senior—no, he was a junior when I first met him. I was in the eighth grade, but in Lafayette at that time, eighth grade was in high school. It was not the—

Q: Middle school?

Begneaud: —middle school. He was a basketball player and it was funny because as I was going in the door with some of my little friends, this lady was in this car and she hollered at us and we looked over and she said—it was Byron's mother—and she had said Byron had forgotten something. It was a key or something and so she asked me if we would find him and give him his key. So we said sure and so we went in there and then didn't know him and asked around and of

course he was on the team so he was warming up, so I had to stand kind of over there with the team while they were warming up or whatever they were doing. I never will forget that I was so embarrassed to be there with all the guys. I'm sure I loved it also. So when he got over there, I gave him the key and everything.

So after that—I couldn't date. I didn't have dates. So he started coming over to my house. He would drive up in his car—he was older, so he had a car. He would drive over to my house in the car and he'd come in and he adored my daddy. See, Byron just took up with that hunting and fishing and no one in his family even had a gun. No one in his family fiddled with that and he just loved talking to Daddy. So he'd come to visit me. Like I said—looking back on it, I know that maybe he didn't come just to see Daddy, but he was certainly a plus. Sometimes we'd be—and my daddy would take us in his car—my daddy's car—to the movie and he'd always give me—Daddy would always give me a quarter in case I—then you could call on the telephone with a nickel—but he would always give me a quarter in case I needed to call him to come get me. Then when the movie was over, we would call my daddy and he would come and pick us up. That must have been so humiliating kind of for Byron. His friends, not with Daddy, because he and Daddy just got to be really good friends, which was really nice. In fact when my father died, Byron took it harder I think than anybody. He was just really, really heartbroken.

Anyway it finally got to where I could go in a car, but I could only go in a car with Byron because see, my daddy trusted him so much. Byron would follow all of the rules. If we were supposed to be home at ten o'clock, at quarter to ten Byron would start saying, "We have to go,"

or whatever and I'd say, "No, we can stay longer. We can stay longer." I'd say, "I'll call." He would say, "No, you're not going to call." Byron was always the mature one.

Q: So you were starting to tell me about some of the early trips to New York that you would take with your mom. What were your impressions of the city? What did you love about being there?

Begneaud: Well, it was all just so magical to me. Of course back then when we first started going, it wasn't like towards the end when we'd go. Towards the end when we'd go we were sitting in the front of the bus always. No matter what we did it was the nicest hotels and the nicest everything. But when we first started going there, we rode the trolleys and stuff, and Sue and Bob were separated—I don't think they even divorced for a good while, but they stayed friends. It wasn't until I was grown and married and for a long time, and one of my friends was getting a divorce and she and her husband were just adamantly mean to each other, and I thought, "Why are they doing that?" Because Bob and Sue were so cordial. Christopher ["Chris" Rauschenberg] stayed mostly at Sue's and there wasn't any kind of thing about visitation things and all. When we'd go up to New York Mother and I would just—we were anxious to see Christopher, so Bob would take us over. Everything was just so cordial.

Q: What was Christopher like when he was a kid?

Begneaud: He was adorable. Just adorable. In fact the first time he brought Christopher here, he was about a year old, I guess. Maybe a little bit more than a year. No, he was about a year old. One of my friends—very, very best friends—had a niece that was the same age. In fact they were

even born in the same month. So Needra—she'd take her niece and I would take Christopher and we would take our family car—of course we didn't have seat belts or anything and we'd sit those little kids right there in front—or beside us and we'd go to the drive-in and—we'd drink Coke. They didn't have any teeth—well, not much teeth. We'd give them potato chips and they'd drink Cokes with a straw. Of course little kids can drink out of a straw good. They're used to sucking. They probably weren't even a year old. I remember for years later talking about them being in the front seat of the car and Sue said, "I was just horrified that you'd been feeding Christopher potato chips," because they'd almost have to melt them without having enough teeth to do that. Two or three little teeth.

[Laughter]

Begneaud: They grew up just fine.

Q: That's sweet.

Begneaud: One of my things that I remember about Bob that was really fun—in fact I have a piece of art there that I'm going to show you in a minute that I just got about two years ago that's a zillion photographs of Bob. It's something that this guy from Brazil I think or Jamaica or something. Christopher has one and I have one. We don't even know him. We didn't even know him. It's just amazing to me how someone that didn't really run with the pack, like, how they had access to all these photographs. Because it's 8 feet long. I'm going to show you. It's fabulous.

But one of the things I was going to tell you I thought was really fun. When we first moved here—Lafayette has Mardi Gras and all that. Bob made me a Mardi Gras costume. Typically—it wasn't a clown or a fairy or anything like that that you would think of—it was a unicorn. And it was really, really, really cool because the front part of it, you stepped into it, and he made it out of burlap, so it was like burlap pants in the front. Then the back, it was like chicken wire kind of, to make the back and the haunches of the unicorn. The back legs—and they were sticks and they were tied to my legs. So when I took a step, that back leg took a step with me. And it had a great big tail with flowers and things in it—plastic flowers I'm sure, not silk. Then I had the head piece with the horn on it. Bob made a great big lei with these flowers for me. And he wanted me to go bare chested. Well I always had big boobs—too big—and there was just no way, even with little boobs my Mother wouldn't let me do that—but my other bosoms, for sure I couldn't. So finally we compromised and I wore a leotard top with the long sleeves and all that. It was kind of flesh colored and then with the flowers and all. But I won the contest, big time. I was the only unicorn on the streets.

Rauschenberg designing unicorn costume for his sister Janet, for a Mardi Gras celebration, modeled by fellow student Inga Lauterstein, Black Mountain College, North Carolina, ca. 1949. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Trude Guermonprez

Q: That was when?

Begneaud: That was pretty soon after we moved here and we moved here when I was 12, so that's like—well that was after Navy.

Q: Was it hard for you to start calling Bob, "Bob"?

Begneaud: No, because that's what he wanted and it didn't bother me at all. In fact I liked Bob much better than Milton. I never liked Milton. It's kind of a weird name and the way they said it in Port Arthur, Bob used to kind of mimic that all the time and say, "Milton. Milton." And he just hated that.

Q: Because he thought it sounded—

Begneaud: He just didn't like it. So he named himself Robert and he said he was named after his grandfather and his grandfather was named Robert. But he said he thought of a whole bunch of different names and he kept coming back to Robert. He wanted just a normal name. See, when you have a last name of Rauschenberg, you get to spell that to everybody that you talk to. Just to write it down and the lines are never long enough to do a first—see, like I have no middle name. Mother—I just have Janet Rauschenberg—because she said the lines weren't long enough to put another middle name in there. That's why I have kind of a short first name.

Q: Practical reasons.

Begneaud: Yes.

Q: I heard that your parents asked Bob to paint something in the church here for their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary?

Begneaud: We built a new church here and so they usually have a scene behind the baptistery and so Mother said, "My son's an artist. I'll get him to paint a scene." So they're normally—you see the baptisms of a long time ago, it's like in a river or something with the trees, and it's just real scenic and calm and that kind of look, and that's what she thought he was going to do. And so when it came in on some plywood—and it was greens and browns and just in a very different direction. So Mother was just mortified. She called him and she said, "Milton, what is that? What did you paint? What is that?" He said, "Well, this is the piece to put behind the baptistery," and she said, "Well, I know, but I wanted to have some trees and a nice little scene and everything."

And he said, "Mother, it is a tree. The bird sees the tree when he's flying over, but that's what the tree is." And then when you looked at it—not that he did it that way particularly, but you could stretch your imagination and think of it as being that—but they hung it up. They hung it up. In fact I still have it.

Bob had—I have two pieces of his art that's like hidden and Bob made me promise that neither one of them—well, actually three—but he knows that that one's in there and that's okay. In my bathroom, this one. But these other two cannot see the light of day. He made me promise and cross my heart and hope to die that I would never, ever let them be seen or be in a show.

Q: In a show? So one of them is from the baptistery and the other one?

Begneaud: The other one is a nude that came from Black Mountain, North Carolina. It's a 4-by-8 piece of plywood, not even very good plywood—and this great big, black, voluptuous, very voluptuous, nude on it. It covers the whole 4-by-8, just about. The story about that though is really—and this is true.

He brought that back—and I don't really remember it coming back, but I know that it never got on a wall. There'd been no way in the world my mother would have hung anything naked on the wall. Mother's little house is two bedrooms upstairs and Bob's one and there was a long closet. The door right here—it was an impractical closet. The door was right here and it was a narrow closet, but long. This was not even usable almost. You could kind of just pack junk in there that

you never thought you were going to see again. Well, that's where the thing of *Delores* would go and not only in the closet, but against the wall in the closet.

This was years later. We were sitting in the living room downstairs—this was a long time before Mother had the stroke and everything. We were talking about paintings or something and she said, "You know what? There's something I've been wanting you to see. But," she said, "it's upstairs." So here we parade upstairs and open the closet door and we had to get all the clothes and stuff out of the closet so we could get back to the part you couldn't get to. So we finally wiggled that thing out and under the rod and everything and got it out and she turned it around and I think she said, "Now, isn't this better?" Mother had painted a pink bra and pink panties on that big, voluptuous, big tummy kind of thing, and these little pink panties underneath it and this little pink bra across here. [Note: the additions were in yellow, see p. 118] And Bob started laughing. He says, "Mother. She was nude and now she's naked." Mother said, "She's not." But she still didn't get to show herself in the room. She got back in the closet. But I have that piece. Bob made me promise that I would destroy it.

Q: Destroy it?

Begneaud: I didn't destroy it, but I'm—

Q: You're protecting it.

Begneaud: Yes.

Q: Did your mom paint anything else?

Begneaud: Oh yes. In fact she painted—see, my daddy died when he was sixty and Mother died at ninety-seven. So Momma had a long time to be a widow and she was—Mother was vivacious and all. She had some little buddies and they took art lessons. They would go to a plantation here—or near a little town or something—and they would ask the owner if they could sit and have a picnic in their yard and paint. They put their blanket out and everything and had all their little stuff. So Mother has several paintings of that kind of scene and stuff. Every time Bob would come into town, Mother wanted to show him her art. And he was so sweet. Of course Bob has never, never ever said anything negative about anybody's art. He just didn't. He just didn't. He wouldn't say, "I love it," when he didn't, but he wouldn't be negative at all. Always encouraging.

With Mother, he told her, he said, "What I think I'm gonna do, I'm going to buy you a camera." He said, "And that way you can save all of your oil painting and everything and you can just take a photograph because that's what you're doing. You're taking—you're painting a photograph of what you see." And Mother said, "Well, I don't think that's the same." He said, "Well it kind of is the same." But she didn't let him buy—she didn't want a camera.

No, I have some of Mother's art and she painted some pictures of ducks, but not this way. More like real looking ducks.

Q: Do you remember Bob taking pictures when he was—do you remember when he started to take pictures? Did he take them when he was young?

Begneaud: No. I don't think he had a camera. I know he started taking pictures—we have pictures of when he was in the Navy and I think that was the first of many—of a lot of pictures, was when he was in the Navy. He had pictures of some—he had two friends—three guys in their Navy suits and everything, so we have a lot of pictures of those three sightseeing in parks and places like that.

Q: Did he tell you much about the time that he spent in the Navy?

Begneaud: He was in the medic kind of end and at first he didn't. I shouldn't say that because at first he and I didn't talk much. Because we weren't—it's like we weren't in the same realm.

[INTERRUPTION]

Anyway, I don't really remember conversations with him. And actually we weren't really together that much because when he'd come in, it was a big deal and all the aunts and uncles and all that—and all of a sudden he was gone again. So I don't really remember he and I—that age difference is big when you're young and then it's nonexistent when you get older.

Q: When did it change?

Begneaud: Probably after I married.

Q: And when did you marry?

Begneaud: 1956 and then Rick was born—we married in January of ’56 and then Rick was born in November of ’57.

Q: Okay, so Rick is six years younger than Chris?

Begneaud: He’s fifty-nine.

Q: Five or six years younger than Chris?

Begneaud: Yes, the first time we went to Captiva [Florida] was funny. Did you know about that?

Q: Hm-mm.

Begneaud: Of course Bob didn’t have a house or anything down there, but Mother and I and Rick, and he and Chris, so we met at the airport in Fort Myers [Florida], and I think Chris and Bob had gotten there before we did—and so we all went in a taxi out to the island. It was far and it was dark. The island was dark. It didn’t have many streetlights and almost no commercial—there was no Burger King or anything like that down there then. So it was all dark and every now and then we could see the water through the bushes. And so then we get to the very end—it was

the Plantation Inn and at the time—I think it's maybe called something else now. Plantation Suites? I don't know, something, but I think it was just a two-story wooden hotel. Bob and the two boys had a room and Mother and I had a room and we were on the ground floor. And this was not a big, fancy hotel with the big parking lot and all that. This was like a big house. In fact that building, I think, is still there but it's been added on to. But I've tried to see it when I've been down there since.

Anyway, that night when we were checking in, it was probably ten o'clock or so and they gave each one of us a little metal pail and a shovel. It just seemed so dark and funny down there. I thought, this is really, really a crazy place. They gave Mother one and me one and Bob one and all this and I thought, "This is so silly."

I didn't know about the shelling industry down there and about that that was such a big entertainment thing. But the next morning, it was so funny. Mother woke up before I did and so she's—this whole wall was white draperies and she's opening the draperies—and she looks out and she said, "Well look at those people all swimming out there without their bathing suits." And I bolted up in the bed and I thought, "Where has he brought us?" And what it was, they were shelling and they had—like the ladies had their dresses tucked under their girdles or something and the men had their trousers all rolled up. They were in their street clothes—not even like shorts or anything—in their street clothes and they were all out there in water ankle deep with their little pails and all. But it was so funny. "What are all those people doing out there swimming without their bathing suits?"

Q: Funny. So listen, I think we should pause today because we started later and I know you guys want to have dinner and I can come back tomorrow.

Begneaud: Okay.

Q: What do you think?

Begneaud: That'd be fine.

Q: Okay.

Begneaud: Now tomorrow is what? Thursday?

Q: Tomorrow is Thursday.

[END OF SESSION]

Transcription: Audio Transcription Center | Session #2

Interviewee: Janet Begneaud | Location: Lafayette, Louisiana

Interviewer: Sara Sinclair | Date: January 15, 2015

Begneaud: I don't think I could ever do your job. I'm so non-mechanical.

Q: Yes. I practiced a lot with this just to get comfortable with it. For me, it was the scariest part of the job as well.

Begneaud: It would be for me. Rick's son, Dylan [Begneaud], is a writer. Since he's been this big he's been writing poems. And not "Roses are red and violets are blue—" I mean really, really nice. Sometimes you think, "How did that come out of that little guy?" Of course he's a big guy now. He's probably as tall as Rick and about that big around. And he still writes. And so what he told me one time, we were doing stories—Rauschenberg stories and nanny stories and stuff like that. So Dylan told me, he said, "Mimi, I want you to tell me all of your stories and I'm going to write a book." He said, "Write them down." I said, "Well, I don't write well." He said, "You know what? I can get you a tape recorder." So that's what they gave me for Christmas one year; he and his sister gave me a tape recorder and I couldn't work it. It wasn't just like on and off. It was all kinds of other things.

Q: Yes, too many buttons!

Begneaud: Yes, that's right.

Q: Today is January 15.

Begneaud: Yes, the day before Byron's eighty-second birthday.

Q: Yes. I am sitting with Janet Begneaud and this is Sara Sinclair and we're at Janet's home in Lafayette, Louisiana. So it was great talking to you yesterday.

Begneaud: Yes, it was fun.

Q: I thought today we could pick up where we left off, which was you were talking about some of your trips to New York. I guess you would have been in your teens and your twenties when Bob was really coming up in the art world in New York City.

Begneaud: Before he came up. We used to go then too.

Q: So maybe you can tell me a little bit more about the trips that you came to New York for, events that you attended, different receptions or shows? Whatever comes to mind to start us off today.

Begneaud: Okay. Well, when you said "before he came up," that reminded me of a trip that Mother and I took when he was living in an abandoned building. He and Jasper ["Jap"] Johns. Jap lived on the floor above Bob and they had to act like they weren't sleeping there. So they had

built some sort of makeshift wooden platform thing to put over the mattress in the daytime and they had to make it look real artsy, they even had an easel that they put on top of it. I don't think either one of them painted on an easel. But that's what they did to make it look like it was okay because building inspectors would come around occasionally and they could have gotten in trouble. And there was a hero sandwich shop underneath them and Bob used to laugh that he and Jap couldn't both leave in the evening at the same time because the hero sandwich shop caught fire occasionally with the grease trap or something or other. So someone had to be around that when the smoke would come in, they could call the fire department.

Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns in Johns's Pearl Street studio, New York, ca. 1954. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Rachel Rosenthal

Q: What was Jasper Johns like?

Begneaud: He was a neat guy. He was a lot like Bob in some ways. In fact they even kind of resembled. In fact it was Susan Weil's announcement that one of the pieces on there is—I have it, I'll have to show you—is a picture of Jasper, like half of him is showing and I thought it was Bob. Rick said no, that's Jasper. When I looked at it real good I realized it was because they were kind of the same build.

Anyway, Mother and I used to go visit and one of the neat times—and I'm not sure if this was over the hero sandwich shop. It might have been one of those other abandoned buildings he lived in. I think it was. Anyway, it was fun because you went up in the elevator and then when the elevator opened, you were in the house. You were there. It was really kind of strange that there was not anyone knocking on the door and saying, "May I come in?" or anything. Just the elevator door would open and ta-dah!

I remember that Ileana [Sonnabend]—that was where we met her—but she came in and—we were there in the wintertime and I never will forget—of course we Port Arthurans and Lafayette, Louisianans did not have much exposure to Europeans. I remember she just impressed me so much. The elevator opened, the door opened, and here she walked out—and it was the wintertime so of course she had all of y'all's big New York coats on. We don't even have coats like that down here. So she had on this big heavy coat and all this and boots and she had an armload of irises. I thought that was so cool. Of course that's so European. After I grew up I learned that. She opened a big shawl over her shoulders, showed her huge presence. And so many irises. It was so neat.

Illeana Sonnabend in Rauschenberg's Broadway studio, New York, ca. 1960s. Elements for *Oracle* (1962–65) are shown in background. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Unattributed

Q: Where would you stay when you came up on those trips?

Begneaud: We'd stay there.

Q: You would?

Begneaud: Yes.

Q: So how was that, for you and your mom to stay in those—

Begneaud: Oh, it was fun. Yes, we'd have a good time. But this particular place—might have been when he lived on Broad—but anyway, it actually had a bathroom. It was a slim facsimile of a bathroom, but it was a bathroom. You just didn't want to go take any kind of long baths or showers. It was spit bath stuff. [Note: Rauschenberg had a studio at 809 Broadway from July 1961 through fall 1965.]

But anyway, that's where Mother found the portrait of me that Bob had done. I can tell you that—I don't know if I should tell you that right now—but this was when Bob was—I think it was in 1949. But anyway, he had been in a group show in New York and it was so, so not important. It was an outdoor group show and in New York, that's not really up there.

Robert Rauschenberg
Janet, 1949
Oil on canvas
30 1/2 x 25 inches (77.5 x 63.5 cm)
Collection of Janet and Byron Begneaud

But anyway, he had done the dirt piece and—do you know about the dirt piece? With the bugs in it and all?

Q: Mm-hm.

Begneaud: He didn't intend to trap the bugs. That was an accident. He felt badly about that. Anyway, one of the writers for the *New York Times* had come by and when he saw the dirt piece—and he was one of the people that really, really climbed on Bob. "This is stupid." He said, "It was like he was making fun of the art world by doing something like that." He just really reamed him out. He said, "You're not an artist. You can't really paint." Bob said, "Well, I can. I do it when I want to." He said, "Okay, I'll make you a deal." He said, "I'll pay you fifty dollars if you paint a portrait of someone and then take a photograph so I can see if you did it right or not." Fifty dollars was a lot of money to Bob then. He had none. So that was really a lot of money.

Not too long after that, he came home. In fact we just sold Momma's house just not too long ago, I hated to sell it so badly. Anyway, had two big oak trees in the front. He sat me out in front of one of the oak trees and I was holding the parasol that he brought me from Paris. When he was in Paris that was the prize he brought me, was a shocking green cloth parasol. It was strictly a sunscreen. It would have not been a rain deal at all. Anyway so I had the parasol—and I'll show you the portrait—and he painted my portrait in about just nothing flat and took my photograph. And so he took all that back up to New York. In fact he rolled it up—it kind of got a little bit messed up because it wasn't quite dry, the oil, he did it in oils—and he got fifty dollars from the guy.

This particular time that we were staying over the hero sandwich shop or wherever—no, it wasn't the hero sandwich shop. It was that other place where Ileana came. It was like all one big room. It was not partitioned off. Bob had made Mother a little bedroom with some sheets and string, so she had a little bit of a tent. Not a top on it, but a little enclosure. Then I just didn't have any, which was okay with me. But Mother found that back up against a wall somewhere and so she wanted to know what he was going to do with it. He said, "Well, it's for you. You can take it." So we brought that home. Of course then you could take anything on the airplane that you could carry; carrot cakes and everything. Every time we'd go to see Christopher, every time we'd go to New York, Mother would always make a carrot cake for Christopher because he loved carrot cake—he still does. Mother would sit in the plane like this, with the seat belt and with her carrot cake in her lap.

Anyway, we brought it home and—you know Leo Castelli?

Q: Mm-hm.

Begneaud: So one night we were at dinner and I don't remember—I think Bob had told Leo about the portrait or something. Leo asked Mom, "Ms. Rauschenberg, do you still have that portrait?" And she said, "Oh yes." She said it was hanging on the wall. So he said, "Ms. Rauschenberg, I don't have any idea what you own or what you have, but if your house ever catches on fire, that's the first thing—besides you—that's the first thing that you get out." Because it was the only real portrait that Bob had ever done. At the time. I don't think he ever did another sitting portrait. He did things that were—I think he did, at one point he did a self-portrait.

Robert Rauschenberg
Self-Portrait, ca. 1948
Current location unknown

Q: What did you think of the portrait?

Begneaud: It still resembles me a little bit. I was twelve at the time and my hair—he has my hair a lot darker than I remembered it, but maybe it was that dark. I don't know. But it's heavy oils. It's not like real fine portrait stuff. I'll show it to you. It's in Rick's room.

Anyway, that was one of our adventures. We went to a lot of parties and things there and one time, it was really funny. Byron, my husband, is a straight arrow. He and I had never seen anyone smoke pot and this was a long, long time ago. I don't remember what the opening was, but it was a big function—that was Byron's first and only trip to New York as a matter of fact. We went to the opening and all that, but there were several other gatherings going on and it had something to do with the university and I don't remember exactly what it was all about, but a couple of the students had things going and had invited Bob to go. He was always really, really good with students because he had come up in the art world with absolutely no encouragement. None. Zero. He really was very sensitive about young artists being encouraged and I think that's part of—I think I was telling you yesterday that he was never, never critical. Ever, ever. He always said that wasn't his job. So cool. I miss him a lot. I really do.

Anyway, he wanted us to go by two of these other parties. One of them we went to, it was really, really wild. We had to climb up—it was in a—I don't remember what part of New York it was in, but it was dark. They didn't have very many streetlights or anything and no traffic. Of course this was a really, really long time ago. I was probably thirty-five-ish and I'm seventy-eight now, so that's how long ago that was. You can do the math.

We climbed up about at least three flights of little, little narrow stairs. Some people had their garbage out on the staircase and it was just like a raw light bulb—not a fixture, but a bulb hanging—on each of the flights. That was kind of a funny setting. Now I had a long dress on and Byron had a tuxedo. We were really overdressed for this area, for sure. Anyway, we finally got up to the party and they were so excited to see Bob and I kind of got to be a celebrity because I was Bob's little sister. Later, when he really, really got to be more famous, then I got to be a big celebrity, so it was fun.

[Laughter]

Anyway, that particular night, there were several of us, say about four or five of us, kind of in a little circle there, talking. This guy was smoking and he puffed a couple of times and then he handed it to the guy next to him and he puffed a couple of times and then he handed it to the third guy and then he puffed a couple—and Byron was number four. Well, I'd never seen it, but I was hip enough that I knew what was happening—because I'd been with Bob before. Bob to my knowledge never did any kind of drugs at all. That was just a no-no. He did lots and lots of Jack Daniel's, but no drugs.

Anyway, this guy hands this little piece of a cigarette funny thing to Byron and Byron looked at it kind of funny and said, "Well, I don't smoke, but why do you all smoke the same cigarette?" Byron thought that was so strange, that if you were a smoker, why you didn't have your own cigarette. The guy that was handing it to him looked at him kind of funny and just laughed. That was our last event of that evening and we were staying in a hotel, Byron and I were. Byron was

ready to leave; it was like four o'clock in the morning. So I found my coat and I kissed Bob goodbye and he said, "You all don't leave yet. I want to take you home." I said, "Oh no. We're good. No big deal." We weren't good. We got downstairs—all those flights of stairs and looked out and it was dark and there was no traffic. There was not—certainly no taxi cabs. I mean, no cars. Byron and I looked at each other and way down to the right, there was a busy street and it was Houston [Street]. So I know now where we were.

But way down, like four blocks down there we could see all the lights and the cars going back and forth, so Byron and I started up that way. We were having to step over—literally step over—some winos on the street. We just stuck out like a sore thumb. Looking back on it, we were probably way safer with them than we would have been walking down Houston because they weren't even remotely interested in what we were doing. But it ended up that we were in a—actually a run by the time we got down there and I was in high, high heels and we got down there and it felt like all of a sudden we were safe because we could see the taxi cabs and traffic.

Q: How did that night start off? Why were you guys in formal wear?

Begneaud: I'm trying to think. It was a big opening. We didn't go to New York because of the opening. We were planning to go to New York anyway. Byron was going to go to New York and wanted he and I to go to New York, so when I talked about it, Bob said why didn't we come at such-and-such a time because there was an opening or something for him and so we did. But it wasn't like a really big thing. It must have had something to do with the university because I remember there were a lot of students involved. I always thought so well of him being so kind to

students because at the *ROCI* [Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange] opening in Mexico City [1985]—which was the first opening of ROCI—he nearly always met with the students. There was a big forum kind of room and so Bob took me with him. He was good about doing that. He usually had me on his arm to go places. One reason was when he got stuck with someone that he couldn't gracefully get away from, he would give me a signal to try to butt in and break it up. In Mexico at the student meeting, it really got scary at the end. The students came down on the floor shouting, "Maestro, Maestro," and it was like a stampede.

Q: Who were some of the favorite people you met?

Begneaud: I didn't really meet this person, but I had a really nice conversation with her. It was Julia Child. Bob loved wild duck. That was one of the only things I could do for him that was a real special treat. It was really an act of love because it was so hard to do. But Byron hunted a lot, so we had wild duck. And we were real finicky about the ducks because some ducks would get too much shot in them and they would not be pretty enough, so Byron sort of graded these ducks. We'd have A ducks and double-A ducks and we'd even have four-star generals. Those were the ones that looked like they just had fallen dead, they were just really pretty and white and all that. Those were always the kind that I would send to Bob, but I cooked them first. I would cook the duck and we always cooked them with a little bit of smoked sausage and gravy; they made some really, really nice gravy. It's a shame you're not going to be here longer because we could have that. It's really, really good.

What I would do is I would cook the ducks for him—preparing the ducks to cook is the day before. That's a three-hour job. Then you cook the ducks. We cooked them until they literally would fall off of the bone, but you cook them in gravy so they're not getting dry. They're just really tender and real juicy. Then after it was all done, I would take the ducks out—they were falling apart anyway so I would take them—I would take that middle part of the rib cage out so they would just have two big, neat pieces of real tender meat. Then with the gravy, I would take all of the grease off the top so it wouldn't be so unhealthy, then put cooked rice in there and some onion tops and make a rice dressing that was really good. I'd put a big chunk of rice dressing in and put the two halves back together and wrap them separately. Bob's friends that were invited over to eat duck, they knew they had to be very special friends because he wouldn't share his ducks. I would cook eight or ten of these ducks. That would take really a long time and then of course we'd freeze them and all, but he could take like one or two of them because they were self-contained.

This one time he decided that he would cook them, for me just to tell him how. So I sent him the duck up there with the instructions of how to season them and what to do the day before and all of that and I sent the smoked sausage so he'd have the whole thing. So this one night, he called me and it was about—I think it was about 10:30 or eleven o'clock here so that made it about what, 12:30 or one o'clock there. I could hear him—people—a lot of people in the room. He said, "Listen. I need you to help me." He said, "Julia Child is here for dinner." He said, "She's about to screw my ducks up." He said, "She's insisting that I'm overcooking the ducks," and he said, "I want you to tell her that you made me promise that I would cook them the way you cook them and that is a long time." And so—I said okay.

So she got on the phone and it was so funny, she said, "Hello, this is Julia." So I said, "Hi, this is Janet. I'm Bob's sister." She said, "Oh, I know. He thinks so much of you and he says that you're a very good cook." You know, that voice. I said, "Well, I don't know about being a really good cook, but I do wild duck real well." I had kind of figured out, I thought about it, she's accustomed to cooking tame duck and that's a way different animal than the wild duck is. So she said, "Well, he's ruining the duck." She said, "They are so overcooked right now and he won't take them out. He said that you made him promise to cook them a long time." She said, "Janet, they are almost burned." I said, "You know what, I appreciate you—of course I know that you know way, way more about cooking than I do." I said, "But I bet you one thing. I bet you I've cooked a lot more wild duck than you have." And she laughed and she said, "Well, as a matter of fact, I'm sure you have."

And so I said, "Well, my husband hunts a lot and we live here in south Louisiana," I said, "Probably once a week at least in the wintertime, maybe twice, we cook duck." I said, "I know this is different to you because you're accustomed to cooking tame duck." I said, "These ducks need to cook a long time." I was telling her the process and she said, "Oh, that's too long." She was just moaning and taking deep breaths and everything. I said, "Well, let me tell you what. You know you can always stop and get a hamburger on the way home. Why don't you let him cook them the way I made him promise he would because I've sent them up there a lot of different times and everybody that's ever tasted them really likes them." And I said, "That's the way I cook them is the way he's cooking them." So I said, "Give him another—at least an hour or hour and a half," and then I said, "See if you like them and if you don't, he'll buy you a

hamburger." She laughed and she said, "Well, okay. An hour. That's the most, not more than an hour." She had to make the rules. I didn't talk to her anymore after that, but Bob said that she told him to tell me that I had done a good job. That yes, I did know how to do them. But she said, "That's not the way you cook duck." She wouldn't ever admit that that was exactly—it's just that this came out okay. In fact she even enjoyed it. But I thought that was a funny conversation.

Of course the Fidel Castro conversation was pretty memorable. That was part of the ROCI thing, was that we went to Cuba and that was in the days of when we were not supposed to be in Cuba and could not fly into Cuba and it cost Bob a fortune to get his art in there because he had to send it to Denmark and then it went from Denmark to Cuba, which is crazy, isn't it?

Q: A long trip.

Begneaud: It was a huge expense to him. But anyway, the Cuba show was in three different locations—one of them was this big castle. [Note: *Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange: ROCI CUBA*, Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Castillo de la Real Fuerza, and Casa de las Américas, Galería Haydée Santamaría, Havana, 1988] We had to fly into Cuba on a private plane and we sat in the Miami airport having margaritas or something until almost midnight because I don't know why we couldn't go sooner, but we couldn't. There was some reason that we had to wait until late. We had to wait until the pilot came to get us or called us or something. Then we had to walk, it seemed like ten miles, luggage and all, to get on the private plane, and it was off in some hangar. It was of course part of the airport, but it was not the right part where we were

supposed to be. So we were walking across the tarmac and all dragging—I think then we didn't have rolling luggage, so we were just dragging luggage.

Anyway, it was [Richard] Dickie Landry and Bob—there were only about five of us or six of us. When we landed, the thing that they were really concerned about, Bob had—I think it was three or four 5-gallon barrels of Sears and Roebuck white paint. We didn't go through customs or anything because we landed late at night—that's probably part of why we had to go so late. It was really exciting. It was kind of scary, but it was exciting. They couldn't understand what those big barrels were and why we had them. At first they weren't going to let him take them, but he had to paint the inside of that castle with white walls because of his art. He was fanatic about the walls being light and clean. So we ended up taking the paint with us after we stayed there for an hour negotiating the paint deal.

Anyway, I was going to tell you about the meeting with Castro. They were having some kind of art week there and it didn't have anything to do with Bob. They were entertaining their writers and—their artists. We were invited to this function that they were having for the artists because Bob was there with art, but it wasn't for him.

Most of our parties were for him. See, you kind of get to be a celebrity to start with when it's for you. Anyway, Castro was there, but he was huge. And that big, big beard and really tall. He was like 6-foot-2 or -3, really tall, and he was the only one in the room that was dressed in military attire. He had on a—that kind of wool that has little things sticking out of it? That old wool?

Q: Okay, yes.

Begneaud: Looks scratchy?

Q: Yes.

Begneaud: Of course this is in Cuba, where it's not cold. So he's got this huge suit—big wide shoulders, a tremendous presence. The whole front of it was full of medals and ribbons and all sorts of awards. His whole chest. The whole thing. Anyway, I knew that there had to be some people there with him, guards and stuff. But there was no one that looked like they were supposed to be there until we got to this one part of the conversation where Bob reaches over and pokes him in the chest. We were talking about cooking. It was so funny because he was—of course he did his schooling in the United States so he reads and writes and speaks English perfectly—or at least beautifully. But in Cuba he only speaks Spanish. So we had a little lady translator and she was really, really cute. Her name was Carmen.

And he's very demonstrative. He'd be telling stories and it's all this—and he kept reaching over and hugging me. Of course I was a pretty cute little blonde at that time. Well Bob told him that he wanted him to come to Captiva, "Why don't you come over and let me cook dinner for you?" And so Fidel told him that our government wouldn't let him come. Bob said, "Well, you don't need to go with them." He said, "I just live right across that water. On the water. You just come in your boat, let me know when you're going to be there, and we'll come out and get you and we'll cook dinner, then I'll put you back on the boat and you won't even have to see the people

in our government." Bob was so—it had cost him so much money to get his art there and there was so much red tape and all that getting to Cuba so—Bob had really not good feelings about our government at that time. I was afraid maybe they weren't going to let us come back. I thought, "I bet our rooms were—" What do you call it? Where they could hear us?

Q: Bugged?

Begneaud: Bugged. I just knew that our rooms were bugged. Also then, he was acting silly and calling Fidel Castro "Fiddle" and all kind of stuff. I thought, "Somebody is bugging this room and we're going to be in trouble." You just shut your mouth. Anyway, he had a lot of really unkind things to say about our president at the time because of—it was his fault that all this had happened, the negative part.

Anyway, that conversation with Fidel was funny because we'd started talking about cooking—because Bob loved to cook. He could make the most interesting dinners that you have ever, ever sat down to, I bet you. Anyway, that was part of the art. That's very creative. Food can be.

Anyway, Bob reaches over and punches Fidel in the chest, like this, like you do with "I'll betcha." You know how we do that kind of thing all the time? And when he did that about eight people came forward like this—and Fidel just kind of shook them off. Of course they didn't know what Bob was saying—they didn't know what our conversation was. So then I knew that he had some protection in the room. Then he would punch Bob, so it was—we had a really neat conversation with him.

Anyway, Carmen is doing this and this—she's doing things just like he does, except very, very minimal. So at some point—and I'm watching her—and at one point I said, "Carmen"—and of course when I said Carmen, she stopped translating. And everybody stopped and he looked at me. I said, "I've been watching you. I think you tell the stories better than he does!" And he just died laughing. So he reached over and grabbed me and hugged me and laughed and laughed and laughed. When I first said that, her little eyes just got big, but then we all ended up laughing about it. I think that was one of my interesting conversations.

Q: Do you remember what else you talked about?

Begneaud: One of the things we talked about was—well he brought up the thing about that in the United States, that we had so much good medical information that we didn't want to share with them and a lot of educational stuff that would be so easy to share, but that we wouldn't do that. I agree with him. I think we made a big mistake by not stepping in. Like Bob said, they were just spitting distance, just about, from Florida and it's hard to have someone that's not friendly that close.

Anyway, then he invited us to go to his summer house. Bob was actually—we were supposed to leave on that Friday, but he wanted us to go to his summer house on the beach on Friday and be there for the weekend. And Bob didn't really want to go and I almost begged him. I just said, "Look. How many times are we going to be invited to go to Fidel Castro's summer house?" I said, "Bob, we—I really want to!" Finally Bob said, "Do you really want to go?" I said, "I really

do." So he said okay. So he had to change his plans. He and John [Peet] and whoever, they were going to play tennis in Bali or something. Anyway, he kind of made those arrangements. It scared my mom to death. I think she thought we were not going to be able to come back or something. But anyway, it all worked out.

It was funny. The morning that they were to pick us up at our hotel—and that was what was unbelievable to me about the hotel—I ended up staying in Bob's room because my room didn't lock. There was just something really, really unsettling about being in a hotel with all these Russian soldiers in the streets with the guns and all this stuff and you couldn't lock your door at night. That just did not feel right. Bob had a suite, so I stayed with them. I did that several times on some of those trips. It was always more fun to be in there with them anyway.

So the morning that he was coming to get us—well, not he, but his car. As it turned out he was not going to go. That's how Bob did relinquish to go ahead and go, was that he found out that Fidel could not go himself. Carmen was going to come with us, but he wanted us to be his guest. Bob said he didn't think he could spend the whole weekend with Fiddle.

Anyway that morning we started packing and all. We were checking out of our hotel. So here's a little black car that drives up out there with the flags on the front fender and all that kind of stuff. A little black Mercedes. And Bob is—he never ate breakfast. Almost never ate breakfast. He's eating breakfast and watching something—he was really a soap opera fan. So they had the soap opera going in Spanish—which I know he couldn't understand exactly what they were saying, but he liked to think he could understand. So he's watching the soap opera and eating scrambled

eggs and they're sitting down there waiting for us and he's still eating scrambled eggs. And they keep coming—so then they called us from the lobby and said so-and-so was there. So I said, "We'll be down in just a minute. Just a minute." I look out the window and all those guys with the uniforms and all are leaning against the fender of the car and I'm thinking, "This is just crazy." So finally Bob got finished eating all that egg business and we got down there. It was so much fun going out there because we just drove, I don't know how fast, but really fast, through these villages and the little chickens were having to jump out of the way of our car and everything. Everybody would watch us because I'm sure that was not a common thing, to see the black Mercedes racing down the street with the little flags on the fenders and all. It was really fun.

We drove up to his place and there's this huge, big brick wall. I know that brick wall had to be probably close to 10 feet tall and in brass letters about 3 feet tall is the word DuPont. I think the DuPonts had probably left in the middle of the night with their clothes on their back and this was what they left and now it was Fidel's.

[Laughter]

Begneaud: It was fun—it was interesting because you could tell that their world had stopped in the fifties. It was—the age of all the cars were old like that. They all shined and ran. We were always amazed at how the people must have been so creative themselves to be able to keep those cars running and shining the way they did. They had colors that General Motors still hasn't thought of on those cars. Anyway we had fun out there that day and Carmen ended up being a

real kick and I had to leave her my heat rollers because she was so taken with those. I was coming home anyway so I left her my heat rollers.

Q: That's sweet. You've said that you were worried your brother was going to get you in trouble by making jokes and calling Fidel "Fiddle." Were there other times where you thought that the two of you might have ended up in hot water on your adventures together?

Begneaud: Bob didn't mince a lot of words. He was not an ugly talker and he didn't curse and carry on, but he always said what he was thinking—especially if you asked him. He may not have just offered it, but if you asked him, then you have to be ready to hear the truth because that's what you were going to hear, was the truth. Bob was very tactful and kind, but he didn't lie.

[INTERRUPTION]

Begneaud: Vice President [Walter F.] Mondale, this one big opening, he and I had been walking around— Most of the time, when we first got there—which was always late. Always, always late. We would go through—especially with Mom, later especially with her wheelchair and he would have people put the yellow roses on her chair—that happened about three times, I guess—and we would go through the show, just zip, zip, zip. But this one time—Mondale was who it was—he was a big enough stud with the government that he had Secret Service people with him and I'd kind of gotten bored, been there for a long time, and I kept noticing these people like Dick Tracy. They had their trench coats on and their little microphones—ear things or little thing

in their chest like a tie clip or something. So I walked up to this one—you could tell they were just bored to death—I walked up to this one and I said, "Who are you talking to?" And he looked at me and he said, "What do you mean?" I said, "Well, I've been watching you and you keep talking into your chest and I just wondered who was listening to you when you did that." And so he kind of laughed and he said, "Oh, you noticed that, huh?" I said, "Yes, are you all like Secret Service or something?" And he said, "Oh, we're just with Mondale and it's no big deal." I said, "Well, it must be a big deal. Is there a van outside that's listening to you all?" Finally he said, "Yes, this blonde is standing here quizzing us." He said, "We're too obvious," or something like that. We laughed about it and on. I said, "I feel a lot safer." I said, "I feel way safer now that I know we have people in the van that's ready to help us if we have a problem." That was kind of funny.

Q: What was it like going with Bob earlier in the day and watching him look at the space, make sure everything was hung correctly?

Begneaud: When Bob looked at—he didn't have a lot to say about each piece. He hated for you to say, "What does this mean?" A lot of times people say that. "Bob, what did you mean when you did this?" Most of the time he didn't answer because if he had, it would have been really sarcastic. It was like he would want to say, "You don't get it, do you? That's not a question." Anyway but it was good because one of my other things that I did with Bob that kind of was along that line, was that he would call me a lot of times. He was a night owl. He worked at night. He always felt like the sun and the beach and the surf coming in and all was too distracting. And he loved it, but—so he did most of his work at night.

But he'd call me sometimes late at night. Late, late at night and this was before cell phones and all that. So I had a phone put into my bathroom so that—because he called—he would be—oh, once a month or something he would call. Because when the phone rang, late, late, late like that, most people get alarmed with a late call because they would think that something bad had happened. I knew it was him. I would jump out of bed and run in there and I'd shut the door, and he and I would sit on the phone for at least an hour, sometimes two hours, just dying laughing, and he would be telling me about some work he was doing. I always enjoyed that so much because then when we'd go to the show and I'd see the things that he was talking about that he had made, then I could relate more to what—because he would have just been working on them, so he was enthusiastic and all about it when he'd be talking to me about it. So that was good.

I have to tell you, as far as walking through—my little mom was so adoring—but anyway, Momma would say, "Oh now, Milton, this one's pretty. I like this one with the roses on it." So I told her, I said, "Mom, Bob's art is not pretty." She said, "I never know what to say," and I said, "Let me tell you what. You don't really have to say anything. We can just go—just kind of change the inflection in your voice. Just kind of go uh-huh, uh-huh, because Bob's not really waiting for you and me to comment, but just to seem interested. Like you do get it." And so I said, "Just kind of change the inflection in your voice. This is nice." That kind of thing, but not that it's pretty or cute because he doesn't really like cute art. Anyway so the next time—so we were walking through—that was one of the times—I think that was before Mother was in a wheelchair. It was because we were walking and we'd walk up to one of the pieces and Mother would go, "Uh-huh!" And we'd walk up to the next one and she'd go, "Ohh!" About three pieces

later, Bob said, "Mom, it's okay. It doesn't matter. I know you like what I'm doing, but you don't have to—" And she kind of got almost like little tears in her eyes and she said, "Well, I never know what to say." She said, "I really like what you do, but I don't know what to say." Bob hugged her and said, "Mom, you don't have to say anything. You just don't have to say anything." But I thought that was so sweet, that she was so cute. "Uh-huh." "Oh."

[Laughter]

Q: How do you think he wanted people to respond when they were looking at his work?

Begneaud: He just wanted you to see it. Just to take it in. And you didn't have to like it. That was not a piece of it. You didn't have to like what he was doing, but he just wanted you to just really look at it and to see it. To kind of just take it in, and I think that was his—

One time this lady—I believe this show was in Houston that Bob had a chicken that was part of it. Was a chicken. It was a stuffed chicken of course. This woman was standing there and she said, "Oh, look at that stuffed chicken. Eww, that's gross." This was a long time ago when people wore hats and gloves. So this woman had a hat with feathers on it and he said, "As a matter of fact I was just noticing your hat with those feathers on it." He said, "That's so gross." She looked at him kind of like she was mortified. She just looked at him kind of funny and he said—his eyes were just kind of open—and he said, "That was a bird or a chicken that those feathers came from, wasn't it?" And of course, then she got it. So she kind of started laughing. She said, "You're right. I guess it's not much different." But it was so funny because he picked

right up on that. Bob was fast. He was a really, really good one-liner, and he and I had a good time with that. Because when you do stuff like that, you don't have to tell a big long story. It's just the comment that you get in. Anyway, I thought that was kind of funny with that—he told that woman her hat was gross.

Q: I know that there are a lot of pieces where there are images of you and the family. There's a photo of you crowned as the Yambilee Queen.

Janet Begneaud (then Rauschenberg) as Yambilee Queen, Lafayette, Louisiana, 1949. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Calvin & Inez Blue

Begneaud: He loved that. He loved that.

Q: Tell me about that.

Begneaud: In Louisiana, we have festivals. It kind of is about the Catholic Church deal because they have what they call the blessing of the crops. There's a shrimp festival, there's a sugar cane

festival, and Yambilee is the sweet potatoes of course. I was the Yambilee Queen and Bob just loved it. He just thought that was so, so way cool. But see, he loved me so much and of course I loved him back. So everything that I did that was good, he always kind of made note of it. So I do show up a good bit, especially with that crown.

But let me tell you a funny story about the Yambilee Queen thing. When we were in Malaysia, I went with him there and we were guests of the king and queen of Malaysia. On the way, we were first class, they had little orchids on the table, real ones and all that, and I had never flown first class before. Not like that. And it was really, really fun and they were feeding us the whole time and of course those little Malaysian stewardesses were just gorgeous. They're like little china dolls and they had little outfits. Anyway, we really were having a good time.

But on the way over there, we were told that in Malaysia it was not considered decent for a woman's bosoms to show and your arms you're supposed to have covered up. Well, this was summertime. For sure we didn't have anything long-sleeved and to go to this one big function, it was a formal kind of thing and so it was kind of bosom-y. So I thought, "This is really—" Bob said, "Don't worry about it. We'll buy you a sweater."

So anyway, we went to this function and I didn't wear a sweater. Anyway, we went to this function and were seated at a head table, and it was Bob and I and his entourage. Then across the way over there, they weren't sitting on thrones, but their chairs were different than ours, I can tell you, because of the king and queen. Bob had stood up and he was very glib and well-spoken and so he's telling them what a nice time we're having and how beautiful their country is and to the

king he said, “And your wife is so beautiful.” Which she was. And he said something about being a queen. And he said, “I brought my own queen.” So he reached down and grabbed me by the arm and stood me up and he said, “This is my baby sister Janet and she’s the Queen of the Yambilee.” Then he went on talking. So then later in the evening we’re just sort of milling around and the king came up to me and he said, “I didn’t quite understand what your brother said. Where are you the queen?” I figured that it’s sort of comparable to homecoming queen or something, but I knew he wouldn’t get that one. So I really didn’t know what to say. So finally I just said, “Oh, Opelousas,” because it comes from—the main part of the festival is in Opelousas. That’s the heart of the sweet potato country. Opelousas, Louisiana. But that was a big enough, funny word that I figured that would give him something to think about. So I just said, “Oh, Opelousas.” And then I just went on talking and he went, “Oh.” So I don’t know if he thought about it or he might have gone home to see if he could find the country of Opelousas or settlement or whatever. I thought that was so funny. But he said, “But I brought my own queen.”

Q: Very sweet. There’s another image of you holding Rick when he was about six months old and some other family photos that he would collage into different work. What did you think of that?

Robert Rauschenberg
Bubba's Sister (Ruminations), 2000
Intaglio
23 x 31 1/2 inches (58.4 x 80 cm)
From an edition of 46, published by Universal Limited Art Editions, West Islip, New York

Begneaud: When I see things like that, it just reminds me that he really loved me because he really did. He and I had such a wonderful relationship. This sounds kind of tacky maybe to say this because his thought process was so much broader and more intellectual than mine was because he just had been around more. I don't think he was any smarter than me, but he sure had seen a lot more of the world than I have ever or will ever. But we really thought a lot alike. In fact, a lot of times, people at shows and events would say, "Well what do you do? Do you do art?" I always said, "Nope, I never did." You don't really try to get to be second and that would have been the best I could have been, would be second, and that's not something you strive for.

Anyway, when I see images and all like that, it just reminds me how lucky I was to have that kind of relationship.

Q: What about images of the South? How do you think he carried—if he continued to carry—the South within him?

Begneaud: I think Bob was very proud of being Southern even when it was not—certainly he was more—he was worldly and not worldly just because he had been to a lot of places, but when he would go to the places, he really, really saw the places and he saw the people and all. See, to me, ROCI was just a fantastic idea and he did it beautifully. In fact I thought he should have gotten the Nobel Peace Prize for ROCI, but I don't think people really understood it because what Bob's idea about what they did with ROCI was that it was about peace and about understanding. He felt like that if the people, say in Mexico, could see the people in Budapest, that they were washing their clothes just like they washed their clothes and their little kids went to school just like their little kids went to school and their momma cooked the supper just like this one—it's like there was a common bond there and that through understanding—why would you automatically not like somebody because you didn't understand them? I think that whole idea is so beautiful and what Bob did with ROCI is that they went to all the different locations that Bob was going to show in and they would go there ahead of time and take a lot of video and Bob would collect some of their artifacts and whatever and a lot of photographs and all. Then he would make art using that stuff—and I remember at the show in Mexico, when people would come through there, they would look and they would point to things—not to other things—but to things that they had. Like little doilies. You know how that's a real common thing in Mexico, where they have little doilies on tables? Well Bob had some stuff with little doilies and they'd point and it's like, "Look, I have one of those." And what it is, is familiarity. When you can be familiar with something then you're not afraid of it and there's a bond there. I had really liked it.

This was in the eighties and you just didn't see that much technology. It would have been much easier for him to do it now than then, but like at an opening there would be at least two, maybe

three different television sets set up against the wall, just there, and the tapes would be running of another country. I remember at the show in Mexico City—in fact I was standing next to David White and we were talking and there were—I don't know what country it was, but it was one of the Asian countries—and there were these little Asian girls with their little pink—some kind of little headpiece and little pink tutus and little Asian music and these little girls looked like four or five year olds were dancing to this thing. And then in Mexico in front of that TV set were two little Mexican girls that were dancing too. I thought this is what it's about and that's what David and I were— David said, "Look at that." This is what Bob meant by all this.

Q: When you look at his work, do you see him in it?

Begneaud: Mm-hm. Always. Bob's work, a lot of it is really busy. There's just a lot of things. But see, his mind was like that. He'd think of twelve different things at the very same time. In fact we used to joke about that. It's like you had to think in staccato to follow us because we—see, I'm bad. I'm doing that with you right now. I keep changing the subject and I keep thinking, "Oh, that's not what we were talking about." But see, Bob and I would do that and I always knew what the staccato was doing. No, I definitely see him. It can be like a photograph of a red light or something and I can see that he thought that was something.

He always came to see Mom and me, but mostly Mom for Mom's birthday. And December 12 is Mom's birthday so he was here nearly every December 12. But one of the things he would do when he was here is he wanted to take photographs. So he and I would ride around, and he wasn't looking to see the irises in bloom and stuff like that. He would see some broken barn door

with a hatchet in it or something. Of course I'm not even remotely creative like he is, but what it taught me was to really see something, to really look at it, because most of us don't do that. You look but you don't see. So my eye became more aware of images because of him. I think his work is fun.

Bob also, I think, was really big on spectator participation. He liked you to be involved in what was happening. *Revolver* [1967]—the viewer actually pushes the buttons to make the discs revolve. It is fun to make it work. You become a part of it.

Robert Rauschenberg
Revolver II, 1967
Silkscreen ink on five rotating Plexiglas discs in
metal base with electric motors and control box
78 1/4 x 77 x 24 1/2 inches (198.8 x 195.6 x 62.2 cm)
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

Q: Which one, with the bicycles?

Begneaud: No, this was the one where there was this big metal box and these Plexiglas discs were inside of it.

I have one of the pieces that he did and it was called *Opal Gospel* [1971]. Are you familiar with that?

Robert Rauschenberg
Opal Gospel, 1971
Silkscreen ink on ten Plexiglas sheets in Lucite base with stainless-steel cover
21 x 23 x 7 inches (53.3 x 58.4 x 17.8 cm)
From an edition of 200, published by Racolin, Inc., produced by Styria Studio

Q: Okay, yes.

Begneaud: This also had those kind of discs, but it was—the name of the other piece is *Revolver*. It was a huge, big metal piece and frame and these discs were inside of it that were Plexiglas and it had all of the images on them. I don't remember how many were there. But there were all of these dials and switches on the outside of it.

Anyway and you could stand there and you could make them do this or this and every time you changed that you were changing what you were seeing. So he liked the idea of you being involved in it.

Q: Why do you think he liked that?

Begneaud: He was making you see his art and really see it. You didn't even have to like it, but you had to see, then you make up your own mind whether you like it or not. One of his big pieces that are the doors that open [*Solstice*, 1968]—that's really cool. Have you ever seen that piece?

Robert Rauschenberg
Solstice, 1968
Silkscreen ink on motorized Plexiglas doors in metal frame mounted on platform with concealed electric lights and electronic components
120 x 172 x 172 inches (304.8 x 436.9 x 436.9 cm)
The National Museum of Art, Osaka, Japan
Engineers: L. J. Robinson, Per Biorn, Tony Tedona, and Ralph Flyn

Q: No.

Begneaud: It is so much fun to do because the doors—they react to motion, they have that at the hospitals and stores. You walk up to it and they open themselves. Well, there's that piece that has five, or six, or seven of those doors, and you walk through it and it's really fun to get in there because you could go into one, then if you want to you could back up and then they get—so the doors get all mixed up like what they're doing. I think that's fun to do.

Q: I interviewed Anne Livet a couple of months ago.

Begneaud: I love Anne.

Q: And she was telling me a story about a time that you and your mom came out.

Begneaud: When her car burned up?

Q: No, maybe that's a different story. You can tell me that one too. She was talking about a time where Bob was being—they were celebrating the commission of *Whistle Stop (Spread)* [1977] in Fort Worth and you all drove out to a ranch—you were bussed out to a ranch to celebrate and the mayor flew in to give Bob the keys to the city.

Robert Rauschenberg
Whistle Stop (Spread), 1977
Solvent transfer, fabric and paper collage, screen doors, and train signal light on wood support
84 x 180 x 9 inches (213.4 x 457.2 x 22.9 cm)
Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth
Museum purchase and commission, The Benjamin J. Tiller Memorial Trust

Begneaud: Yes, in a helicopter.

Q: Yes and then on the way back everyone needed to pee. Do you remember this story?

Begneaud: It was jail. Oh yes.

[Laughter]

Begneaud: Indecent exposure.

Q: So tell me, what do you remember about that day?

Begneaud: That was really, really, really fun. The show was actually in Fort Worth, but it's the Fort Worth–Dallas area because they're back-to-back and in fact they're the same airport. There's a lot, a lot of wealth and show of wealth in Texas. It's wonderful people and I'm one of them—well not one of the wealthy ones—but I'm a Texan. I'm not really anymore; when you're married to a web-footed Cajun boy, you've got to become a Cajun. You just have to.

But anyway, I remember that night that I was so totally impressed with the deal in Texas. It was out on a hill and they had a big dance floor out there and they had two bands. One was a regular like band, band. Kind of maybe a little bit rock and the other one was a cowboy band. Bob and I—he loved to dance—so Bob and I learned to do the dance how—when the girl would hook her thumb in the back of the boy's belt? That's that Texas thing. And you can't stand still. You've got to go. It's like you're on a skating rink or something. You just have to move. We had so much fun dancing that night. In fact this was in the days when we all had platform shoes and then your pants drug the floor around them just about. I had gotten so tired that I had taken my shoes off and I literally ruined my pantsuit because it was—we just wrecked it. That was really fun.

Then on the bus back, they had the bus set up with a bar. They had a little combo in there with some Mexicans playing some Mexican music and we stopped somewhere to—actually we stopped because some of the ladies wanted to go to the restroom and it was like—sort of a stop-and-shop kind of store. It was a huge parking lot and so they stopped that bus out there and everybody walked into the store and we laughed because these two state troopers were coming out through the cars and like Bob says, drinking their RC Colas and eating their Moon Pies. Bob was at the back of the bus outside, doing a pee, and there was no one else around. At all. It was way out in the parking lot. The parking lot looked like half an acre and of course it was in the middle of the night so it was not like their busy time or anything. They arrested him and took him into the jail, which ended up being really fun. Of course what they did—somebody was on the bus with us because some of the people that were at the party were still—they were the hosts—I guess the social committee or something for that gathering. Of course all they did was call one or two of those people that had been at that party because there was some of the upper crust and politically up people and so they let him go right away. It was quite an adventure.

Q: And you said—when I was asking about Anne Livet, you said there's another story where her car burned out?

Begneaud: That's what I thought you were—this was—in fact this might have been the end of that story because Bob—Bob wasn't really good about going back to Port Arthur. That's when he was dyslexic and didn't know he was dyslexic. He just didn't have a lot of fond memories of Port Arthur except for family. And his family could be family and not be in Port Arthur. He didn't have to be there. Then of course we weren't there anymore. But Mother was just hell-bent

and determined that since we were so close that we would come back through Port Arthur to see all the aunts and uncles.

So Bob gave in and he said, "Okay, we'll do that." So they changed the flight plans so that we left the Dallas airport and went to—we weren't even at the—I think we were at [Dallas] Love Field, the smaller airport because we were in a private plane to go to Port Arthur. Then we were going to fly from there back to Lafayette. But we had been to a brunch that morning and there were several—

[INTERRUPTION]

Begneaud: But anyway, so we sort of had divided up because we had our luggage with us because we were getting ready to leave, but we had gone to another one of those fancy brunches. It wasn't really a brunch, but a fancy party. We were all dressed up. As it turned out, Anne was going to give Mother and I a ride—because we were in her car. And Bob and I don't know who all, they were in another car. So we're barreling out there. Of course if you met Anne, she's so precious and so vivacious. She had a brand new some sort of station wagon, so we're in the process of barreling out to the airport. The airport is kind of a little bit out of town. It's between Dallas and Fort Worth. This was a Sunday morning, so there's not as much traffic out there as there would be other times of the day.

Anyway, we're just barreling down the road and Anne's just talking a mile a minute and all of a sudden—Mother is sitting in the front with her and I'm sitting in the back and I'm looking out

the window—and it was a sunshiny day, but it looked like fog out the front window. Finally I looked on the side and this was smoke coming out. I said, "Anne. Anne, look at all the smoke." She said, "I think it's just that oil refinery over there." So I said, "No, it's coming out of your car." And she said, "My car is new." And I said, "Well, it's on fire." So when we started stopping, then the smoke really started coming out and so we jumped out—after pulling off the interstate onto one of the feeder roads there—and we jumped out the car and we grabbed our luggage and all. The car is just smoking and smoking and smoking and we didn't actually see flames, but it was like a lot, a lot of smoke was coming out of the motor. Anne was real good about it. She said, "This is my brand new car. There must be something wrong with it." I said, "Yes, I think so."

But anyway, so here we are standing on the side of the road with our luggage and there's no traffic. Finally this guy comes by in a truck and it had an open bed on the back of it. It was like a—not a dump truck, but it was like a farm truck. He stopped to help us. He was so funny. He was an old black guy. So he said, "Where you ladies going?" Anne said, "We've got to get to the airport." He was going to call someone to see about a car. She said, "No, we'll have to tend to that later." She said, "We've got to get to the airport." So we all three got in the front with him and it wasn't a two-seater. It was all just one seat. We all three got in the front, put the luggage in the back, and struck out to the airport. Anne's giving him directions of how to get to the airport. She lived, I think, in either Fort Worth or Dallas at that time and so she knew the area and got us there. It was so funny. I think that's why we ended up in a private plane was because we missed our other one. Anyway, Anne just left her car out there smoking. I never did know for sure if it

burned down. She said it burned down, but I don't know if that was a ha-ha or what. But I know it didn't run well.

Q: So I read an article actually where Rick was talking about a *Cardboard* piece [1971–72 series] that was in your home in the seventies.

Begneaud: Yes, it was funny. The name of the series was *Cardboards* and he was here in Lafayette and it was funny. He said, "I'm going to make you a piece of art." This was during duck season when Byron was hunting. It was a Sunday and this was back before we had Lowe's and Home Depot and places like that that were open on Sunday. I had to call a friend of ours who owns a lumber company here, for him to go open his place of business for us that morning so Bob could get some plywood. Because even though he used a lot of garbage, he always used good garbage and good materials. Because, like I said, it has to last.

So Doug Ashy, who owns Ashy Lumber Company, opened his place that Sunday morning and we got some lumber. In fact he didn't even charge us for it. I think he thought the whole idea was so crazy. Anyway, we had ridden around and one of our big hospitals here was doing a big, big renovation so Bob picked up some cardboard pieces from that. It had been raining and it had sand dried in the edge of the box, that had been rained on and then dried. So it was a little cement there. Anyway, he picked up several pieces of cardboard and we had been to two different locations like that.

So he was here in our garage and had that plywood laid out and he was putting cardboards on it. A friend of mine that lives down the street had gone by in a little convertible and waved at us. She had met Bob several times at little gatherings. She waved at us and then she went off somewhere. She came back later that afternoon and we were still out there doing it. So she said, "I can't stand it," and she pulled up in my driveway and jumped out and she said, "Now I need to know, what are you all doing? What are you all doing?" Bob said, "Well, I'm making Janet some art." And she said, 'Well, where is it?" And he said, "You're standing on it." And she was like a gazelle, just whoop, and she was off it.

Anyway, he finished the piece [*Baton Blanche (Cardboard)*, 1971]. We also had gotten some nails that were like—they were like this—big, long nails at Doug Ashy's that morning. So we brought it in the house and we're nailing it in on the dining room wall and it's like 8-foot-by—I don't know what all and it's not just one piece. It was done in three pieces. So he's down at that end of the wall and Byron's driving up and I really didn't have much of his art at all. I had some, but not hanging. I had it like in my bathroom and in bedrooms. Not much of anything but those animals.

Robert Rauschenberg
Baton Blanche (Cardboard), 1971
Cardboard
67 1/2 x 130 3/4 x 16 1/2 inches (171.5 x 332.1 x 41.9 cm)
Private collection

So anyway, Byron drives up so I went out there to meet him and I said, "Now let me tell you what. We can redo the walls later. You be nice. Bob's made us a piece of art for the walls. It's in the dining room." He said, "What do you mean, redo the walls?" I said, "Well, it's nailed into the big—but that's no big deal." Bryon came in and he complimented it and all. Again it's like—and it was really interesting looking and that's what Byron kept telling me, it was interesting. And it was a super dinner piece. We got a lot of conversations for years after that when we had our dinner parties. Our duck dinners and fish dinners and whatever. But the end of that story is—oh then so finally Byron just wanted it down. It had been up about three or four years so he wanted it—he said, "Rick, do you want it?" Rick said "Yes, yes." He wanted it so Rick took it back with him and then Bob found out that Rick had it. So he bought it back from Rick and I don't even remember what the numbers were, but it was big numbers for Rick.

Then at the big [Solomon R.] Guggenheim [Museum] retrospective—where there were three shows at the same time in New York—it was at the uptown Guggenheim that I walked into this one room and that piece took a whole wall. [Note: *Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective*, 1997–98] David White was there again. I said, "David, this piece right here. What would that sell for?" He said, "Bob won't sell that. He doesn't want to sell it." I said, "I don't mean to buy it. I just meant, if he sold it what would he get for it?" I've forgotten now what the number was, but it was like three hundred and fifty thousand dollars or something, which was astronomically expensive. Big for me to think. I tell you, this was when cell phones had just started. So that was what, the eighties?

Q: The eighties.

Begneaud: Yes, because the phone that I used—somebody's phone—was a big—it was like a purse. It was big. I called Byron on the phone and I said, "Byron, you remember the Rauschenberg *Cardboard* that you took down out of the dining room?" He said, "Oh yes, yes." I said, "Well, it's occupying one wall of the Guggenheim." I said, "That's very prestigious." Then I told him—I don't remember what David said for sure, 350 or three-something I said, "That's what David White said that it would be worth." Bryon said, "Damn." Anyway that was—

Q: What did some of your friends say about it? You said it was a good conversation starter?

Begneaud: Oh yes. They all—they loved it. Byron was on the bank board here at the time and we had some function that the directors came here and one of the boxes—this guy has an electrical lighting company and he was one of the contractors at the hospital and so this box has his name on it and it's about this big on that thing. And he saw that. I hadn't even thought about that. He saw that and he thought that was so way cool. So then after that, a long time after that, after the Guggenheim thing, I ran into him at a party and I said, "You remember that piece of art?" He said, "Oh yes, yes." I said, "Well, it was hanging in the Guggenheim." We got a lot of mileage out of it.

Q: So when do you think your parents started to really understand Bob's success?

Begneaud: My dad never did. See, he died when he was sixty. The acclaim that Bob had had at that point, he had just won the Venice Biennale [in 1964]. His picture was in the magazine, but

Dad died before that—my dad died in 1963 and so Dad had not seen that. Then when we were in New York one time with Dad, Bob put—to make money so he could live he had—and he did this in my mother's maiden name, Matson. He didn't want to confuse his name with commercial art. But he had done the windows of Tiffany's [Tiffany & Co., New York] and in fact I had for a long time—I don't know what I've done with them, I'm sure I've got them here somewhere—but he had made plaster of Paris fruit, like he had some potatoes and he actually brought dirt dirt into Tiffany's, into the windows, and he had diamonds and all in the dirt and the potatoes and all. It was really cool looking. Then in another window he had some pomegranates and he had some whole and some that were open and they had rubies coming out. So my daddy saw. Tiffany's got a lot of ink in the *New York Times* about their windows and Bob had told the story about when the owner or manager came in one day and saw that dirt in there, he almost flipped out because there were zillions of dollars worth of jewels just in the dirt. He says, "Suppose we can't find them?" But then when the *New York Times* came out and made a big deal about their windows, then he was pleased with that.

Q: So what did your dad think of his son, as an artist, pursuing this?

Begneaud: He didn't really understand it. I think—like Bob used to say to the students and when he talked to them that, "You can tell your dad that you do have a real job." Because that's what dads—"You should get a real job." And I think that that's what my dad—my dad loved him to death, but he—first of all Bob had never done much in school. He didn't play sports, he didn't like hunting very much. He liked fishing a little bit. So he hadn't really gee-hawed with my daddy.

Now Mother, of course, lived to see Bob rolling and going and he made sure that Mother enjoyed his success. But when my daddy had that heart attack and Bob flew in, there could be only one of us in the room at a time and he was on oxygen so I didn't hardly go in at all because I felt like Bob had more to do with that. I was my daddy's eyes so I didn't have anything to prove with him. And I felt like Bob did.

Q: Do you know what that moment was like for Bob?

Begneaud: I think it was really, really hurtful. In fact when Bob was so sick and dying in Florida, several times he'd say something about his daddy. In fact he couldn't hardly talk because he had that trachea thing in his mouth, but one of the nurses said that he, several times, said something like he was talking to him, to his daddy. So I don't know. That was a hurtful thing for him.

Q: What do you think he would have wanted to say?

Begneaud: See, he knew that Mother adored him. But there's always a thing about mother-son and daddy-daughter that's just inbred. I think he felt that Daddy wasn't very proud of him and he didn't act like it hurt him. He didn't act like it bothered him, but I could see that it hurt him. Because some of the comments that he would make, like in jest, were not funny. He knew they were not funny, but he was just making light of it.

He bent over backwards to make Mother have a good time. She was so funny because—Mother grew up in really hard times, plus they went through the Depression and all of that, so Mother was instinctively very frugal—forced to be at one point—but remained frugal because that's the way she was. Like Bob used to laugh about Mother that she could take a—on a pattern when they say that you need 4 yards to make it, Mother could make it in 2 1/2, 3 at the most, and not skimp. That was always a joke for Bob. Anyway I remember one time—I was telling you yesterday about the Cadillac thing with him—that Bob was always saying, "Take Mother shopping. Just let her buy whatever she wants." Because she had that macular degeneration.

Of course Mother had really wonderful taste, but she couldn't see good. So we'd be—she called that "pulling on the clothes." I'd be pushing her in a wheelchair and when you're in a dress shop, how they have those clothes—when I'd be pushing her through them, they'd just be getting on her as we'd be going through. Mother would look at the price—she'd see something and she'd look at the price tag—and she couldn't really see it. She'd say, "How much is this one?" Well if it was something that I kind of thought I wanted her to have, then I would just lie about it. I'd say, "Oh, look it, Momma. That one's on sale. You can get that for $6.50. You can't even buy the material for that." She'd say, "Well, that is a good deal, isn't it? Well okay, let's try that." And so, one time, we had this stack of stuff and got up to the counter and so the lady all of sudden—she would pick it up and she'd be saying, "$99.75," and—oh, I know what it was. It was another lady that was—I think the register was not working or something, so this lady is reading them and this other lady is writing it down. So Mother's going—she says, "She's not talking about my clothes. Doesn't she know they're on sale?" So I kind of backed up so that the lady couldn't see me and I said, "Those are all on sale." She looked at me kind of funny and I said,

"I'll come help you in just a minute because we're going to go over here." And I steered Mother a little bit across the room and I went back over there and I said, "Look, just do that but don't say the price because she doesn't know how much they are." But sometimes the ladies that would stay with her would take her shopping and they would get the ugliest god-awfulest clothes and I'd have to go take them back. They just were ugly! Because Mother couldn't see them. And they were always something on sale and they were on sale so low—and see, they didn't know to lie about it. I always felt like God didn't mind me to lie about that. I didn't feel guilty about that. So you can imagine when you really got a $6.50 outfit, what that looked like, so I'd have to end up taking a lot of that stuff back.

What I started out to tell you though about the shopping thing. Mother had this little friend that was really good about calling her all the time. She was good but younger than Mother, but she was a widow also. In fact she was one of the artists that would go with Mother into the plantation yard and have the picnic and all. Ethel. I was there one day with Ethel. We had just gotten back from shopping. So Ethel called Mother and she said that she'd been shopping. And Ethel must have said, "What did you buy?" Mother said, "We bought me some underwear," and she said, "Milton is so insistent on me spending a lot of money, I bought two brassieres at the same time." See, that was so foreign to Mother that you would buy two at the very same time. I got the biggest kick out of that and Bob loved it. He just loved it. "I bought two brassieres at the very same time." And brassieres, not just bras.

Q: You said he would always come into town for her birthday?

Begneaud: Mm-hm.

Q: So how would you celebrate?

Begneaud: Well, we'd always go to a nice restaurant. After Mother had her stroke and was in a wheelchair then it seems like our celebrations were more. Because Bob was more affluent by then. But when he first would come in on her birthdays, he'd always have lots of flowers. Lots and lots of flowers. Maybe like six or so. See, he didn't want to go to the florist and get all of these arranged things with fern and all of that. He just liked flowers. And there was one particular florist that he would go to all the time because they understood that and he would just get a whole big ton of roses. In fact I have some of the vases that he used to—because you don't just put those in a little vase. You've got to have some big, healthy thing. He would always have Mother have a lot of roses. See, Mother was president of the garden club here at least four or five different times so she really had a green thumb. We used to laugh and say Mother could take a burnt matchstick and stick it in the ground and make it bloom. She'd always kind of fuss at him about it and say, "These all are going to die all at the same time," and Bob would tell her, "Then we just have to buy some more. When these are gone, we're just going to get some more." See, Mother's mind didn't work that way. It was like you don't waste. You just don't waste.

In fact at her funeral so many people knew about Mother and the flowers and all—and of course it seems like people don't send flowers as much as they used to—but you just almost couldn't get in the door, Mother had so many flowers. And Bob loved that. I don't know how many of

them he sent, but I bet you a bunch of them were ones that he sent. But he said he wanted her to be in a garden.

Q: That's sweet. In 1991, I think, Bob came back to Port Arthur, where he was recognized by the state of Texas and the governor, Ann Richards, for his contribution to twentieth century art. And they called it Robert Rauschenberg Day. Were you there for that celebration?

Begneaud: Oh yes and it was fun. Meantime too, Bob's aunts and uncles and all were getting into the picture and they were very totally impressed. This one cousin of his—in fact it was the cousin that was the closest in age to Bob—I told you earlier that all of our associations just about and friends and all were family. That's—we did everything together with family. And her name was Betty Sue and Betty Sue was typical South Texas in the way she spoke and everything. Cute, cute girl. She adored Bob.

Bob had dressed her up one time when he had come in—this was back maybe in the Navy days, because it was before we moved here—and the county, I believe, that Port Arthur was in, Jefferson County, I believe, was dry. So you had go ten miles or so to the next county and there was a nightclub there. Of course that was not the thing that mom and them were too crazy about, was the nightclub and the drinking and all that. So Betty Sue used to talk about that, that Bob—because she was a couple of years younger than Bob, I think she was four or five years younger—but he had dressed her up and put lipstick and everything, so she went with him to dance at the club there in Orange, Texas, which is just across the bridge and into another county. It was fun and it was a real big, big deal to the family, for the governor and all those people to be

making such a scene about Bob. Of course meantime Mom would send them articles and things about when Bob was in—he was on the cover of *Time* magazine three or four times. So it was noticeably well known.

I had one particular uncle, Uncle O. T. that—he was a big labor union person at one of these oil companies and not at all interested or knowledgeable about art. But when Bob started being on magazine covers and stuff like that, you'd have thought that he was an expert. He was so proud. So proud. In fact he went back out to the oil company and he told all those people about Bob and had brought the magazine out there to show them that he was on the cover of it. He was very impressed with it and he really took ownership of Bob, which he would not have before.

Q: That's sweet. So Bob got to know some of the extended family on those trips?

Begneaud: Oh yes. See, just like me, he had grown up with the family all being together all the time, making ice cream, going to the beach and all that.

Q: I wanted to ask you a couple of more questions about your parents. When you think about them now, how do you think they live on through you and how did they live on through Bob, each of them individually?

Begneaud: My daddy was very humble and true. A really, really good friend. In fact all of the guys that worked for Dad here at Gulf States, when Dad died every one of those guys—I didn't know that it was every one, but one of dad's friends from out there said that every one of the

guys—and there were forty-eight of these guys—came to the wake and they stayed all night at the wake with him. Normally they shut it down at nine or ten o'clock and those guys stayed with him all night long. Dad was very well liked and very appreciated. Bob I think probably took more from Mother than he did from his daddy. There was not any kind of bad feelings there, but there was not as deep a feeling there. Of course he knew that Mother just adored him and that's hard to pass up.

Q: Sure.

Begneaud: That sinks in. And then I'm a lot like my mother. And Bob was too—if there's an emergency or something, you had to just go fix it. She just didn't dwell in it. And Mother's little saying—and she used to do this all the time—she'd say, "If things aren't the way you want them to be, then you just work like the dickens." We used to say that's the only really curse word thing that I've ever heard Mother say and I'm not even sure that it is profanity. But she'd say, "You work like the dickens to fix it and if you can't fix it, you play like you like it." She'd do her little hands that way. "Play like you like it." And when you think about it, there's a lot of things that that works for because while you're playing like—and you don't just play like, you play-like—you play like you like it, then by the time you get through kind of playing like you like it, it doesn't make any difference anymore. There's some things you can't ever play like you like, of course, but a lot of things that we dramatize, you can. Because there are things that are not about life or death situations. "You just work like the dickens to fix it and if you can't fix it, you just play like you like it." And Bob used to do that.

Q: Well that's related to something else I wanted to ask you about. I know that after he had the stroke, he said to Calvin Tompkins, one of his biographers, "I can't stand myself or anyone else if they start whining. I just have to figure out ways to continue without getting so distraught." And that sounds like a similar attitude to what you're describing. How did his life change after that?

Begneaud: After he had the stroke and he was so sick? Yes, I stayed down there. I think it was seven or eight weeks that I stayed down there and he didn't want me to leave and I didn't want to leave. He and I kept playing like he was going to get well and I think in my heart of hearts I kind of thought he would. Because he had been sick—really bad sick—at least three other times. In intensive care and stuff like that. And he'd pull out of it. In fact while he was in the hospital there in Fort Myers every morning—he was in intensive care there of course—but every morning the doctors would have a little gathering of the loved ones of the people that were in there and they would kind of do a little bitty thing with da-da-da and about what was going on. I was always there and so I would go to those little meeting things there. And one morning the doctor said, "Now, Mr. Rauschenberg is—" He didn't say "not going to make it." I've forgotten the exact words he used, but it was like saying that he's terminal. And he looked over at me and he said, "The only people that think that he's going to make it is he and his little sister." He pointed at me and I said, "Well, he will. He just will." I held it better, thinking that he was going to get well.

I'm a big half cup full rather than half cup empty because I've always felt like anticipation is way longer than realization. So if you're anticipating and you're negative about it, then you're unhappy this whole time. And if it turns out bad like you thought it was going to, then you're

still unhappy. But if you think about it being good and it turns out bad, then you can get over that, but at least you've had this happy time in there. At least—positive time. And so Bob and I, the whole time, it was like this was temporary. We talked about, "When you get through with this or when you—" The trachea thing kept him from being able to talk. It was really bad. And of course at his age they couldn't take the trachea out. His body couldn't adjust back to it or something. I don't know, all that was horrible.

Anyway, there were some really, really cool things that were like omens. And he and I are both superstitious-like. In my purse right now is my whole little purse full of charms. He and I used to trade charms sometimes. I had a little stone—a little rock, like a street rock; it was the shape of a heart. And I showed it to him one time and he took it in his hand and he said, "I want this." He said, "I'll trade you." So we would trade things. He would give me something. I guess superstitious is what you can call it. It wasn't the end of the world.

See, I still love things about magic. I've always done that with my grandchildren; tell them things were magic. I'd give them a little bear, like a stuffed bear, and I'd say, "But it's a magic bear. It's a magic bear." And I'd make up some kind of a story about how it's magic or how it would help you have a good dream when you were sleeping, but you had to do such-and-such to it. That you had to put his hands together or something like that before you went to sleep because then it would make you have a happy dream. Bob loved all kinds of magicky stuff like that too.

But you had asked about meals a while ago.

Q: Oh yes. Mm-hm.

Begneaud: Bob was an unbelievable cook and I mean really unbelievable. Sometimes good and sometimes not good, but one of his things—he didn't make it too, too often, but sometimes—was this little seashell soup. You know these—on the beach these little seashells that come up in the sand and they're pink and blue and yellow and green? Then when the wave goes out, they dig back in. When the wave comes in, then all these little pink and blue—they're really pretty and they're about this big, little like little clam shells are all right there in the beach and then the second the wave goes out, they dig back in. One time he said he was going to make some soup. So we collected all these things and we rinsed them, but not enough. So we had soup with about this much sand in the bottom of the pot and Bob just swore that that was some of the tastiest soup he'd ever tasted. And it was tasty, but it wasn't good tasty.

[Laughter]

Begneaud: But it was fun doing.

But one of our things we did a lot, lot, lot was the taco festival. And we'd make tacos out of leftover scrambled eggs and all kinds of stuff, and as generous and all as Bob was and stay at unbelievably expensive hotel rooms and all that, buy expensive clothes, the only place that he was really frugal was with food and he would save leftovers. I think that's probably the only time that he made me cry was in Florida in his last house there, the Gulf House, Bob was working in the studio and his refrigerator—they were always nightmares. You couldn't find anything in

them and there were all these little packages and this and that and little leftovers from the restaurant where they'd made swans and stuff out of the tinfoil and you had to open the swan to see what piece of garbage was still in there.

Anyway, so I thought, "I'm just going to do Bob a favor and I'll just clean this thing out." So I went through that refrigerator and I just threw away just a ton of all that old stuff. Of course when Bob ordered in a restaurant, it was already kind of weird things. It was not just regular food. It was usually funny things that people didn't always eat to start with and then these were leftovers of that funny food, so it got even funnier and sometimes it looked like it was even like growing some things on top of it. I went through that refrigerator and I got it all cleaned out. I even wiped off all the shelves and everything and I put back the things that looked good to me and organized and all nice and clean.

When Bob came back—and I think we were going out to dinner or something—he came in and I said, "I want to show you what I did today." So I opened that refrigerator and said, "Look. Doesn't this look nice?" And he looked in there and he said, "Well, where's all the stuff?" And I said, "What stuff?" And he said, "All my stuff." I said, "All those funny little leftovers and all that, I threw those away." And he just was—he couldn't believe it. And he looked at me kind of funny and he said, "That was my stuff." He didn't fuss at me, but I could tell he was so disappointed in me. He said, "You shouldn't have done that. That was my stuff." And of course I immediately was—and he said, "It's okay," but I knew it wasn't okay. That was the only time in my whole life with him that he said anything or did anything that made me feel bad.

Q: Not bad then!

Begneaud: That's right. He was very, very careful to not hurt me.

Q: I just have a few more questions. Bob came back to Lafayette in 2005 to exhibit art in memory of your mom. Do you remember that?

Begneaud: Yes.

Q: And I think Chris participated in the show and Darryl [Pottorf] participated in the show?

Begneaud: Yes. That wasn't really about Mother.

Q: No? I've got that wrong?

Begneaud: Yes. I mean everything that Bob did actually was kind of for her. But that show wasn't really dedicated to her. [Note: *Robert Rauschenberg: Scenarios and Short Stories*, Paul and Lulu Hilliard University Art Museum, University of Louisiana, Lafayette, 2005]

Q: Okay. I must have read that wrong.

Begneaud: It was Chris and Darryl and it was our new museum here, the Hilliard. It's out there beside Girard Park. It's a beautiful space. In fact Bob and Darryl both said that it was one of the finest spaces for art that they had ever seen anywhere.

Q: Wow.

Begneaud: It was really, really well done. Bob was on the main floor and there was this little bit smaller gallery that was Darryl and then Chris was upstairs with his photographs. It was really a fabulous show. It was so funny because Lafayette has never seen that kind of attendance. We had people in here from all over the country because it was a Rauschenberg thing.

Q: What was Bob like with Chris?

Begneaud: They were very close. They were very close. In fact they had a really good relationship about being able to think alike and all of that. Chris was being interviewed—in fact it was here, for that show—I thought it was the sweetest thing. He was talking about—with his mom and daddy, Sue and Bob—and he said something about that he grew up seeing art and not in museums, but like riding the bus. He said that his mom could look at something and say, "Now, that's Monet right there," which of course was just—something. It was an image or something, of somebody getting off the bus, or something. Chris said that he had—that he grew up seeing and understanding art and then he said—he said something about, "In my life with my parents, I hit a home run." I thought that was really sweet.

Q: Yes. All right, what do you think? Is this a good place to pause for today?

Begneaud: Yes.

[END OF SESSION]

Transcription: Audio Transcription Center | Session #3 (video)
Interviewee: Janet Begneaud | Location: Lafayette, Louisiana
Interviewer: Sara Sinclair | Date: January 16, 2015

Begneaud: Hi. I'm Janet Rauschenberg-Begneaud, Bob Rauschenberg's baby sister, and it's really been a really fun job to be his baby sister. There's a lot of difference in our ages; he's about ten and a half years older than I am, so growing up with him, we didn't really grow up together. Not as friends anyway. It was only after I grew up that we really became friends and not just siblings, but really, really close friends. It was a wonderful, wonderful experience and it's one of my very favorite blessings that I've ever had, was being his baby sister. A fun job.

Q: To start today, I was hoping that you'd tell me a little bit about both of your parents and how they came to Port Arthur and how they met and married.

Begneaud: Yes. My mom was born in Galveston, Texas in a really not good situation. Her father was an alcoholic and it was really a bad deal with she and her siblings. In fact she used to tell the story about how she and her sister that was the closest to her, they were like six and eight, and on Friday he would get paid and give them a quarter and they would have to walk down the block or so to the beer joint and buy a bucket of beer. Then she said it would take both of them carrying the bucket back. I thought that's not—they didn't get a quarter to go spend and get a lollypop. Anyway, he had tuberculosis and died and so then the mom didn't know to do anything to make a living and so they ended up moving to Port Arthur, where an uncle of hers had a dairy. Mother says she remembers growing up on the dairy then after that and that that was kind of nice. It was

a dairy and farm and running and could be barefooted and all that. And so she ended up having a nice life like that.

Then she had got a job as a telephone operator. And this was this kind of a telephone operator, like Lily Tomlin deals. My dad was born in Rosebud, Texas, which I think has disappeared. It was a little, teeny place then and it's nonexistent now, but it's right next to Gatesville, Texas. He left home when he was about—I think about seventeen or eighteen. No, it had to be younger than that because he didn't even finish school. He only went to the tenth grade and Mother's education I think was to the eleventh grade, which was pretty much thin in that day and time.

But anyway, Daddy had a motorcycle and that's why I was forbidden as a teenager ever, ever to get on a motorcycle with anybody. Because Daddy had a motorcycle and to buy gas for the motorcycle, he'd go steal eggs out of the henhouse and sell them and buy gasoline out of it. Gas had to be really cheap. But he used to tell the story that one day, he said that God had punished him because he had a new Eisenhower jacket, the jackets that are a little bit full but they're tight at the bottom? And he had gone to the henhouse and got the eggs to go sell and after he left the henhouse he hit a rock or something and flipped over and all of those eggs smashed in his new jacket.

But anyway, he had a really good friend, Ed Ward—a couple of years older than my dad, but they were good friends—and so they left Gatesville and went to Nacogdoches, Texas and started working for the Gulf States Utilities. Then Gulf States transferred Daddy to Port Arthur and Ed

went to Lake Charles. But they remained friends. Mother was a friend of Ed's wife and that's how they met.

We had some really great photographs and Bob's used a number of them in some of his art, of them swimming. In fact when they used to go swimming there in the—I guess that was in just the canal there in Port Arthur—Dad fixed a tire inner tube and someone put a net, like a crab net, under it so that they could sit Bob in it floating while adults swam. Because they didn't make all the toys and everything then like they do now for little kids. So we have pictures of this little kid sitting in the middle of the inner tube. Then Dad made a thing for him so that his legs could go down through but his body would stay up in the net.

Robert Rauschenberg
Untitled, ca. 1954, with detail at right
Combine: oil, pencil, crayon, paper, canvas, fabric, newspaper, photographs, wood, glass, mirror, tin, cork, and found painting with pair of painted leather shoes, dried grass, and Dominique hen on wood structure mounted on five casters
86 1/2 x 37 x 26 1/4 inches (219.7 x 94 x 66.7 cm)
The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles
The Panza Collection

Anyway, Bob had, I think, a good little childhood. Then when I came along, ten and a half years later, Bob was already almost a teenager and I was just a raving nuisance to him and I was my daddy's little golden-haired girl and could do no wrong and Bob was trying to get along in life.

I remember one time, he was so angry with me. In fact he talked about this. For years after that he would bring it up. But he'd decided to paint the furniture in his bedroom and my mom and dad—we weren't poor, but we certainly were not wealthy either and it wasn't good for him to paint the wood furniture—the mahogany furniture. I saw him doing it, so I went out and tattled on him and he really remembered that. Years and years later. Years and years—like twenty years ago we would be standing around in Captiva, everybody having a drink or something, and he would tell them the story about that I was such a tattletale.

But anyways, we were not very good friends when we were that young, but then when I grew up, he and I became really close friends and we had a close, personal friendship together. It was fun because I even had a—we didn't have cell phones when this was happening, but I had a phone put in my bathroom because—this was after we were married and whatever—but he'd be working on some of his art and be excited about it, so he'd call me in the middle of the night. When the phone rang in the middle of the night, I always knew it was Bob and so I'd jump up and run in the bathroom and shut the door, then I could answer the phone in there. And we would sit sometimes on the phone until daylight, talking and laughing and giggling. And I was having so much fun and he would tell me about some of the art that he was making.

Q: Tell me more about the house in Port Arthur.

Begneaud: Yes. Realtor that I am, I can guess pretty well—it was probably about 1,100 square feet of living area. Wood—little wood frame house. In fact in this day and time it would have been really cool because young people really like them. The gabled roofs and all of that and a little front porch. In fact we used to play under the front porch in the summertime. We didn't have air conditioning, so there was no reason to stay inside. Anyway, it was two bedrooms, so Bob had his own bedroom and I had a little twin bed in Mom and Dad's room, which was the larger bedroom. Then after he left I got the room all by myself. So I really was not sad to see him go. That's tacky to say, I know. Anyway, it had a separate garage, a little wooden single car garage, but we had a real big lot.

Growing up there in Port Arthur, all of our neighbors were boys, so they didn't want to play with me. I don't know why, but they didn't want to play with me. So my daddy—I guess because Gulf States Utilities Company, he was able to get some, they were like telephone poles, I guess. Probably rejects or something. He built me a baseball diamond in the back of our yard with the big high posts and the screens? What is that—I don't know what that's called. Like a backstop. After I had that, then the boys all wanted to play with me and I got to play any position I wanted. Usually I liked to pitch and so I was the pitcher. I got to be more popular then, when I had my baseball diamond. But then, looking back now, in fact there's been several shows of Bob's in Port Arthur and of course we always went to them. And we'd go back and look at our little house. It used to be a little white picket fence kind of neighborhood and it's just become really, really like—really bad. It's not been kept up and all. It was kind of depressing. Bob said, "I can't

believe we lived here." And Mother would say, "But it didn't look like this. It didn't look like this," and it didn't. It was good. We had a good childhood, Bob and I did.

Q: How else would you spend your time?

Begneaud: In Port Arthur? Our social life was very limited. It was all family, it seemed like. I know Mom and Dad must have—I know they had a couple of other friends, but we didn't see those friends that much. In those days, people didn't get a babysitter and go out and do things. At least the people we knew didn't. We'd go visit. And people don't visit like that anymore. Now we didn't go have dinner at someone's house. We would eat at home and we would go visit them and they would probably have a cake or a pie or something and so we'd have a little dessert. People would come and see us like that. The kids would play and the parents would talk and that was the kind of socializing that we did.

One of the biggies—and Bob remembers this too because they did this when he was little too—is that going downtown on Proctor Street and parking the car in front of the movie theater and you'd watch the people go by. That just seems so silly, but that's what they did. I can't imagine how entertaining that could have been for Mom—and usually there was at least two of her sisters with her. She had four sisters. In a little not-air-conditioned car. The three ladies would sit in front and then all the little kids would just be jammed in the back, no seat belts or anything like that. And we'd go park downtown in front of the movie theater and watch the people go in and out. Then we'd usually have a quarter and go in and buy either a candy or for a quarter a lot of times you could get two things and a popcorn.

It was funny because—and I've thought about that since then and in fact Bob and I have laughed about it—that I never thought about that we should have gone in to see the movie. Like Bob said, it was like there was no movie in there. They just sold popcorn and candy so you could go do that, but not think about going to the movie. So that was kind of our entertainment.

Also on Sunday afternoons they would make ice cream and they had—the ice cream makers were the kind that you put the ice in on the top and then you had to crank them and then as the ice cream hardened, it was harder to crank. So the little kids would take turns. We'd put towels on top of the ice and we'd take turns sitting up on the ice machine while they were cranking. It was pretty tricky to stay on it. Bob did that too. We didn't do things because we were so little—there was so much distance in our age, we didn't do much stuff together, but in talking about it later, we laughed because we would have done all the same things, just at different times.

Something too that Bob and I had in common which is really kind of crazy, is that we both had recurring dreams and they were the same dream. That's almost spooky. In Port Arthur there's the canal that goes through there—the intracoastal canal [Intracoastal Waterway]—and there's a bridge, the kind of bridge that does this. And there's a little island on that other side and that's called the Pleasure Pier and that's where the rollercoaster and all that stuff—and there was a swimming pool there and Bob used to be a lifeguard. He almost drowned me there one time because he was the lifeguard and so Mother let me go with him for a little while and then she was coming back to pick me up. He was determined to teach me to swim. And so he would just

throw me out into the water, then he would stand there and, "Swim, swim." I was drowning, but I did learn to swim.

Anyway our recurring dream—and we didn't realize this until, I don't know, I was probably in my forties or something. And we were sitting around one night in Captiva talking, people were talking about dreams and all, and so I said, "I've had a dream a lot and it's always in the same place and it starts at the same kind of part and it ends at the same thing." I said, "I'm walking across that bridge—" And I'd never walked on the bridge. I'd only ridden in a car—but I'm walking across the bridge and I get right to that part that opens up and the bridge starts opening up. So rather than fall down in that water, I reached over and I grabbed the railing because the railing was like this, but then when you turned it up, it was like a ladder. So I reach over and I grab the railing and so I'm hanging onto that and all of a sudden there were a lot of people down there and they're all going, "Oh!" And it was like everybody was so afraid that I was going to fall. So I climb down the railing until I get to the bottom and then somebody had a big board and they put that board across that ladder and over here and then I walk across the board like that and then the minute I set foot on the ground and everybody's going, "Yay!"—the dream ends. It starts at the same place and ends at the same place. But the funny part about is, while I was telling the dream, Bob's telling his dream and he said—and then when the bridge opens he said, "I have to reach over and grab a railing." And I said, "Yes, that's what you have to do. And then, it's like a ladder," and he said, "Yes, then you climb down." And we're telling the dream together. Now his dream was a little longer than mine because he gets in trouble kind of because—I think it was Mom that was fussing at him for having made that commotion, but see,

mine stopped before that, which is so typical. Why would I dream that I got in trouble? I thought that was kind of amazing.

Q: Why do you think you both had that dream?

Begneaud: See, I can't imagine. I think that we had a lot of the same exposures because this was a young dream. This wasn't like a dream after we were grown, where we had gone on different paths, and I don't know—he also had never walked across there. He worked out there for a little while, he was the lifeguard. But I thought that was amazing, that we would have had that. But Bob and I thought alike a lot. Of course he had much more creative, wonderful thoughts than I did obviously, but we—we were good about being able to tell the same stories. Bob could be in the middle of talking about something and I knew what he was going to say and half the time I would kind of chime in and he would do that with me and it would end up that he and I were having this exchange, when it had started out that one of us was telling a story in the group, but it ended up being that he and I were having fun knowing how to tell the story. So I don't know what happens about stuff like that.

Q: Tell me a little bit about both of your parents. What were they like?

Begneaud: Neat, neat people. My dad was very quiet, a good-looking guy. Very quiet and soft-spoken and didn't talk a lot. In fact his friends always said that when Bully talked, you needed to listen. My daddy was nicknamed Bully. In fact after we moved to Lafayette and everybody knew him as Bully Rauschenberg. No one had any idea where that had come from. And where it came

from, was back early during the—that must have been the Russian war—where his friends out at Gulf States said he was Bolshevik and so they cut it short and started calling him Bully and that stuck. Until the day he died he was Bully, but he was anything but a bully. He was real mild-mannered, mild-tempered and all until he got mad. He didn't get mad often, but when he got mad, you paid attention. In fact it was funny because we could always tell when things were not going well because Daddy would—and he never sang. Ever. I don't remember ever seeing it. And even in church, he didn't sing. He'd hold the book and read the words, but not sing. But he would start going dah-dah-da-dah and when you heard that little tune you knew that things were not working out and you should do whatever you could do to change the scene. And he was hardworking.

My mom was a really pretty little lady and silly and that's where Bob and I got the silly thing, I think. Mom had a super disposition. She was hardworking, a good mother, and a good Christian woman, but Mother had this philosophy, which works, and it's worked for all of us and it'll work for you too, if you use it. Mother would always say that, "If things weren't going the way that you wanted them to, that you worked like the dickens to fix it." And that was the only profanity that any of us had ever heard her say, was "working like the dickens." If that's profanity, that was hers. Then she said, "Work like the dickens and fix it. If you can't fix it, you play like you like it." And sometimes it kind of got cut short. Sometimes, like when things were happening, Mother would go—and you knew that that was meaning now it's time to play like you like it. This is all we're going to do so play like you like it. In most instances you can play like you like it and then after a little bit you start even forgetting what it was you were playing like you liked.

Now there's certainly a lot of situations that you never do like or you can't even play like you like it, but there's more that you can do that with.

But Bob was so, so sweet to Mom. He was sweet to me, too. He was just a sweet guy, but he was particularly attentive to Mother. Our father died in 1963 and Mother died in—she was 97, so she died the middle of '99. So for all of those years she was by herself, but she did well being by herself. She decided—she did a lot of art and her art, it was kind of funny. In fact I have a lot of her art. It's just—it's stacked up. I don't really have it hanging, but she had a couple of little buddies that were also widows or divorced or something, about three or four of them, and they'd get their art supplies and drive around and they'd make a picnic lunch and they'd drive out like around New Iberia or some of these places where these antebellum homes are—we have several paintings of the antebellum homes—and they would get permission from the owner if they could go sit out in the yard. Of course usually the yards were several acres. And they would set up their blanket and their little art stuff and all that, have their lunch and paint.

And in fact one of Mother's paintings was funny. It was a scene and there's sort of a vacant area in the middle of the scene and so she was showing this to Bob. Every time Bob would come in she would get all of her art out and discuss it with him. One time he told her, he said, "Mom, what I'm going to do, just to save paint, I'm going to buy you a camera and then you can accomplish the same thing and you won't have to paint." And Mother said, "No, I don't want to do that. Why would I do that?" She didn't understand what he was trying to tell her. But this one painting, it was so funny because it's the willow trees and all this and then there's this sort of vacant place right there and so Bob said, "Well, are you finished?" And she said, "Well yes. I

have it figured out." She said there was a car right here and she said, "I didn't want to paint the car in there." This was a Chevrolet ad, so she painted the Chevrolet ad, but left the Chevrolet out. Bob said, "This is a classic," which is really cool.

Then one time, it was so funny because she—this was, I don't know, maybe in the eighties—this hurricane was coming through. I happened to be—at the time Rick and his kids were in Colorado and so I was out there visiting them when this happened—and of course Bob was in Florida. And this hurricane was coming in and it was really big—Andrew is what it was—and so Bob and I were talking on the phone, but Byron was here. So I said, "Byron is going to take care of Mother." Bob was real concerned because Mother's house that—in fact this little house that he designed—had what we called a picture window. It was like a window that was about 10 feet by about 9 feet. Real big. In fact it was half the size of the room and it was all glass. And so he was concerned about—because with her trees and all—that a branch or something might break the glass. So I called her and I said, "Mother, we need to figure this out. Why don't you let Byron come get you and you can just come to our house?" And she said, "Don't worry. I've got it all worked out." I said, "What do you mean you worked it out? What did you work out?" She said, "Well, I had one of the neighbors put—you know those paintings that Bob has here?" She said, "You know the ones that I don't like?" She said, "He nailed them to the window." So she said, "It can't break the window now." When I told Bob about that—that was the nude that I had told you the story about the other day and this one that he painted for the church, the Church of Christ, and she had drug those out and had the neighbor—but she said, "Don't worry, I didn't turn them out." See, that nude lady was not going to be facing the street. When I told Bob that, Bob loved it. He said, "Do you know a photographer?" I said, "Well sure." So he said, "Get

somebody to go take a picture of her over there." So I called Philip Gould and everybody got a big kick out of it. I called Mother and I said, "Mother, Philip Gould is going to come over. He's a friend of ours and he wants to take a picture of you." She said, "Well, why does he want to take a picture?" I said, "Well, he just wants to take a picture of you in front of Bob's art." So she said, "Well I don't want him to see that naked lady." I said, "Well don't worry about that. I'll tell Philip not to get that part in the picture." She said okay.

Dora Rauschenberg with her "storm shutters" made from Rauschenberg's early paintings, Lafayette, Louisiana, 1992. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Philip Gould

So when Philip got over there, he told us that Mother had gotten all dressed up and it was a really good picture, but it did not show *Delores*'s picture. Anyway, Bob got the biggest kick out of it. In fact he used it in one of his pieces somewhere, but she was so cute.

Q: So he designed that house? Your mom's house?

Begneaud: Yes. It's really, really cute. At the time it was the only contemporary house in Lafayette, Louisiana and that big picture window, my daddy hated it because Mother would always leave that open because of the light and everything and on Sunday afternoons people

would drive by and stop—not turn the motor off, but pull up and really stop and look at that house because it was like a little box and it was really cool. The front part of the house was two-story, and then the back part was Mother's bedroom and a bath and the kitchen over here, and then upstairs was like a balcony. Of course we've seen houses like that now, but at the time that was the first in Lafayette and it was a neat house. In fact I just sold it about less than a year ago. I just hated to sell it. I had rented it several times, but I sold it to a little artist couple that just love it. That makes me feel good. In fact every now and then she sends me a text and says, "Thank you for selling us this house. We love it." And Bob loved it.

Q: Tell me some of your early memories of Bob. You told me a story about his campaign for student government?

Begneaud: Yes. Bob was dyslexic and of course in his day and time not only was that not even known, it was certainly not accounted for. So Bob was not real involved in school activities and I think probably because he was not a good student. Anyway, he decided one time he was going to run for class president and it was really cool. He went to a butcher store there where Mother shopped and the guy gave him a whole bunch—I don't know, not a whole roll I'm sure, but just miles of butcher paper. And he made these signs that went all around the inside of the school, the courtyard, and some out—inside the auditorium, that said—he drew Betty Grable, the typical picture of Betty Grable, and it would say, "Betty Grable says, 'Vote for Rauschenberg!'" And then he did Hedy Lamarr. I don't remember all of the old actresses and all, but anyway, he did these all over the campus. He got a little notoriety for that, but he didn't win to get to be the president. He had the best campaign for sure.

Anyway, as a young man, Bob was a really good dancer. Port Arthur, that county, Jefferson County, was dry. I don't know if it still is or not. All that means is that people had to go across the bridge over into Orange, Texas to dance and to have beverages. Bob loved to go dancing. In fact that's how he got to Paris after he got out of the Navy and decided to kind of pursue art. He thought that all artists came out of Paris, France. He didn't have any money to go to Paris, France but he hired on as a dance instructor on a cruise ship and danced with all the little gray-headed ladies and taught them to jitterbug because jitterbug was a big thing then. That's how he got to Paris.

Q: How would he stay in touch with you over the first few years after he moved away from Port Arthur?

Begneaud: I'm sure we didn't think about long distance phone calls so much. It probably was so expensive or felt like it was or something, so Bob would write letters. I have just about—I don't know, probably all of them because Mother saved them. After she died I found the box of all the letters and he'd draw pictures in them. Then during the war the letters changed and they were on tissue paper and this because you didn't have to put very much stamps on it and I mean tissue paper—and Bob's handwriting was very bold and large, but you could tell he had deliberately tried to make it small and no spaces between. He was good about staying in touch with Mom. I'm just trying to think—of course he and I didn't really grow up together, so I didn't really know him too much as a little boy and what I know mostly about him being a little boy is what I've heard, more than what I saw.

Q: Well, tell us a little bit of what you've heard.

Begneaud: Well for one thing, Bob at one point thought he might be a preacher and obviously he changed his mind on that score, but he was going to be a preacher. His part-time job was lifeguarding and then he did some mowing in the neighborhood. That was another little job that he had. But he also had a little car that was—I don't know if it was a Model A or a Model T. I get those mixed up. The kind with the little rumble seat in the back. In fact my daddy—after Bob left and went away to school and everything and they keep the car—my daddy turned that little car into a truck. They redid the rumble seat or something and did it and it was turned into a marsh buggy because my daddy was a big hunter and—down there in South Texas—what was the name of that marsh? It's before you get to Galveston. Bob did go hunting with Dad some, but he never did like hunting very much. But I don't know that much more about what he did as a kid.

Q: Well, let's move on to how he told the family that he had met Sue Weil and you can tell me the story about that trip to New York.

Begneaud: Yes. Bob met Sue in Paris. She was over there also. They fell in love and Bob realized, and Sue did too, that you didn't have to be in Paris, France to be an artist. In fact if anything, it was detrimental. So they came back and they were going to be getting married in New York. Of course we had never been to New York. Our vacations normally were to go to Galveston and stay there on the beach and then once a year we would make a trip to Gatesville, Texas to see my daddy's daddy, who was really a neat old guy, and his wife—was the second

wife and she was a witch. She was a real witch. She even had witch shoes. She used to terrify me as a child. Terrify me. Anyway, we'd once a year go see them.

So a trip to New York was really a biggie. We went in our car, and Sue's parents lived in a brownstone— I was really kind of proud of my daddy after I grew up and could realize what New York traffic was like. He drove our little Chevrolet right up to their front door, which I thought was amazing, that you could do that in that kind of traffic and all. There was no parking place so Sue's brother came down—or cousin or something—and took the car and parked it.

But I was so excited because I got to go to Neiman Marcus and get—I was an attendant. I was the bridesmaid and the maid of honor and all that. I was able to buy a dress. In fact I had the dress—I kept it until just a few years ago. It literally fell apart. Of course I was not wearing it, but it was the ballerina skirt and ballerina shoes and I got my first stockings. I had never had stockings before. Anyway, it was a really exciting trip. They got married out—Sue's parents owned an island off the coast of Connecticut and beautiful big house there and I was so floored because it was a big fire place, so big that there were like benches sort of on the side of the brick that you could get in the fire place where the fire was and sit. Sue's mom was—in fact what I was told was she was the only licensed woman lobsterist—however you say that—in the state and of course we had fresh lobster and drawn butter and all that. I don't remember very much about her dad. He was very present, but I don't remember very much about him. But anyway, it was a gorgeous wedding. None of us had ever heard of an outdoor wedding and of course since then it's a very common thing. But they got married on the rocks there and the waves would be coming in and splashing up and you see the pictures of the—what do you call that? I don't know

what that word is, the splash or whatever that is behind them, but it was really, really pretty. We had a gathering afterwards, a big party.

All of Bob's experiences seemed like they were one-of-a-kinds at the time and most of his things have taken hold and become more common, including his art. He jumped out and did a bunch of this stuff first and now a lot of people have been influenced by Bob's work. Anyway, I had a lot of fun experiences with Bob in some of the places that he took me. I was a good traveling mate with him because I was always ready, for one thing. It'd be like Monday and he'd call and say—maybe even Tuesday—and say, "What are you doing Friday?" And I'd say, "Nothing." And one time he said, "Well, selling real estate, don't you have appointments and things?" I said, "Yes, but they're not like yours," and I had a couple of buddies—realtor buddies that would swap off with me when I would have these phone calls.

One of them was, he called and it was a Tuesday and he said, "What are you doing Friday?" And I said my "Nothing." And so he said, "Well I want you to come to New York. Sonja is coming over to have lunch and I've already told her that you were really a good cook, so we're going to make lunch for her." I said, "Sonja who?" I was trying to think if it was somebody I should have known. I said, "Sonja who?" He said, "I don't know. Do kings and queens have last names?" I said, "Well, I don't know." He said, "Well, I just know her name is Sonja [née Haraldsen] and she's the queen of Norway." So I said okay. I said, "So you told her I was a good cook?" He said, "Yes. I also told her you were a queen." He said, "I told her you were a queen and that you had been to school and you had a degree in cooking." I have a degree in home economics. It's not cooking. A little bit, but no.

[Laughter]

Begnaud: So anyway, he said, "Try to get some crawfish and come up here."

So I did. Mother made her typical—he liked pecan pies, so Mother would make pecan pies and then freeze them and then you just wrap them in foil and then they're like a hockey puck. You can put them in your luggage and they're easy to carry. So she made some pecan pies and I got a hold of some crawfish and some—and Mother made also sweet potato casserole. In those days you could take anything on the plane that you could carry. It wasn't about any kind of security or anything. So I got on the plane with all of my goods and this little Queen Sonja was so, so cute. She was really a cute lady. She called Bob that morning and she said, "Is it okay if I wear my pants?" Bob said, "You can wear whatever you want to or not whatever you don't want to wear." She came and she had some long pants on and she said that she never got to wear things like that. Her husband the king was there, something about the UN [United Nations]. I don't know what they had him there doing, so she came and she was really, really fun.

At the time, Rick was living in New York, he and Shannon [O'Leary Begneaud Joy, his then wife] and Dylan, my grandson, was a little over two, and Logan had just been born, the little girl, and she was only just a couple of months old. I have some really cute pictures of her. You know how you cross your legs and you put a little kid on your leg and it's like a horsey ride? And she's singing that little song, but in her language and all that, and of course Dylan's dying laughing. Then Bob's neon bicycle was in New York at the time and so she decided she would try to ride

it. Of course it doesn't really ride anymore, but anyway, he's helping her and she gets on the neon bicycle. So here's the little queen of Norway sitting on the neon bicycle. It was really fun and we had a really nice lunch.

Q: Did she like the food?

Begneaud: Yes. Yes, it was—we did a good thing. Bob was really a good cook. Sometimes he was a little too creative in his cooking, but he was a good cook.

Q: What's an example of him being a little too creative?

Begneaud: Well, seashell soup was one of the things. He didn't make it too, too often. It was a really good idea that didn't work out too well, but the little seashells—and I don't know what the names of them are—but at the beach they're the ones when the surf comes in, there are all these little pink and blue little tiny—this big—seashells that are on top of the sand and the second that the wave goes out, then they dig down and go back into the sand. So we collected a whole bunch of those for him to make seashell soup. We washed them and washed them and rinsed them and rinsed them and washed and washed—and so he made seashell soup—it was like about this much sand in the bottom of the pot. It tasted more like sand than it did like seafood and Bob was so disappointed because they didn't stay pink and blue and colored. They just got to be gray. So the color didn't work. I know the first time he made it was really bad, we had lots of sand. Then he made it again another time and there was less sand, but still too much.

One of his favorite things that we would do and it was a way to clear the refrigerator, is that we would have a taco festival. We would make tacos out of everything that was left in the refrigerator and that was always fun because there were a lot of margaritas that went along with the taco festival, so it was always a big party.

Q: Will you tell me about one of the first trips that you took with your mom to come up to New York City before Bob had really come up?

Begneaud: Yes. Bob was living—I think it was when he lived on Broad Street, but anyway—Jasper Johns lived on the floor above him, and Bob lived I think on the third floor and I think Jap lived on the fourth floor. [Note: 128 Front Street, Rauschenberg's studio was on the second floor and Johns's was on the third] Anyway, they lived over the hero sandwich shop and it was funny because they couldn't both leave in the evening because the hero sandwich shop about once every month, they said, would catch on fire. So someone had to stay so that they could call the fire department. This one time that my mother and I had gone to visit, and we of course stayed at Bob's in this place where he wasn't even supposed to be staying himself. His bed was just a mattress, and he and Jasper both had done this; they had built wooden frames that fit over that so that it didn't look like a bed so much. Put an easel on it. It looked like an art station or something.

Anyway, Mother and I went up to visit and we stayed there with him, and of course when the elevator came up and opened, you were just in his house and it wasn't like—you didn't knock at the door or anything—just the elevator opened and you were there. Bob had made Mother kind

of a little bedroom, by using some sheets and string, he had sort of partitioned a little part off so she could kind of have some privacy. I didn't get to sleep in there. I slept out in the open area. But it was fun. That's where Mother found the portrait of me that Bob had leaned against a wall back somewhere. That was not his favorite piece at all. So we brought that home.

Q: Will you tell me the story of the portrait?

Begneaud: Yes. The portrait, that was kind of a neat deal. This was when—in fact it was Bob's first art show and it was a multi-artist show and it was out-of-doors—the piece that he had in it was his dirt piece, which was really like an ant house. It was two pieces of glass with dirt in it. He was a little distressed because he—and not trying to, just accidentally—had captured a few little bugs that were in there and it really made the piece a little bit more interesting, but he felt badly about it because he had messed up the bugs.

Anyway, the critic, when he came through—it was somebody from the *New York Times*—and actually Bob got some write-up about it. He really got some ink about it. But he was just adamant at Bob saying that he was an artist and calling himself an artist. He says, "This is just ridiculous." And he really, really was hard on him—he said, "Not only are you not an artist, it just belittles artists for you to consider that you're an artist and you're making garbage like this." But he did mention Bob in his article, just a couple of sentences, and it was very negative, but Bob didn't care. He thought that just ink was kind of nice.

Anyway, during this confrontation and him saying that he wasn't really an artist, he said, "You can't paint." Bob said, "Well I can." And he said, "You can't do a portrait," and Bob said, "Sure I can." So he bet him fifty dollars. This was probably in the late—well I guess maybe in the early, early fifties—fifty dollars was really a lot of money to Bob, especially since he didn't have any. And he said, "I'll bet you fifty dollars you can't paint a portrait." And Bob said, "Well of course I can." So he said, "Well bring me a portrait and a photograph of what you paint and I'll give you fifty dollars."

So Bob came home not too long after that and he put me out in the yard in front of one of the oak trees there at Mom's house and I'm holding the green parasol that he brought me from Paris, so this was really early, early on. And he painted a portrait of me and took my picture and he went back to New York and got his fifty bucks. But sort of discarded the painting. Then when Mother found it and wanted it, he said, "Oh yes, you can have that." So Leo Castelli, years later, Mother was telling him about it because see, to Mother, that was really painting. She was a little bit like that critic. She didn't really understand all the things that Bob was doing too much. So she was talking to Leo about it and Leo was very interested. In fact he told Mother, he said, "Ms. Rauschenberg, I don't have any idea what you own or what other possessions you have, but if your house ever catches on fire, that's the first thing you get out." So I know he must have thought it was kind of interesting.

Of course since then, it's framed—modestly. Bob didn't like big, fancy frames. So we have—it almost looks like apple crate kind of framing. But anyway, I still have that.

Q: So how did you and Byron meet?

Begneaud: I was in the eighth grade and Byron is three years older than I am, so he was what, a senior or something, but he was a basketball player. I didn't date. That was part of my little girl thing—my daddy's little girl—not even think about getting in the car with a boy. Anyway, with some of my little girl friends, we dropped by the basketball game and we were walking in and Byron's mother drove up and she kind of tooted the horn and motioned for us to come, so we walked over there. She asked me, she said, "Do you know Byron Begneaud?" We said no. He was an upperclassman. They didn't know us. She said—I think it was keys that she wanted—she said, "Would you mind giving him these keys? He'll be playing basketball." So I went in and I found him and went up to him and gave him the keys. I didn't think that he even paid any attention to me because he was like in a different stratum, being an upperclassman and all, and then a boy. But then not long after that, he started calling me and he started coming to my house. See, he would drive to my house in his car and then if we went to a movie, then we would get in my daddy's car and my daddy would take us to the movie and I always had my little money—like a quarter, so I could call my daddy if I wasn't having a good time. I could call my daddy to come get me. Then when the movie was over, well I'd call my daddy and he would come get Byron and me. I thought that had to be so demeaning to him, to Byron. But he really, really fell in with my daddy because my daddy was a big hunter and fisherman and no one in Byron's family did that. And so he just loved coming to my house and hearing all the stories.

He'd walk in and he'd say, "Well Mr. Rauschenberg, did you catch any fish?"—or whatever and so Daddy—and I can still see that—Daddy reach in his pocket and get one of his Camel

cigarettes out in slow motion. Put that in his mouth and light it and he'd say, "Well—" Slow talk. Then he would start telling Byron some story, whatever it was he had done that day or something. And a lot of times we were going to be late for the movie or right on time or something and I'd get behind my daddy—I mean behind Byron—and I'd tell Daddy so Daddy then would think he was going faster. He would talk a little bit faster, but he would still tell the same long story. But Byron just loved that. They became really, really close friends. In fact it got to a point after we got married where I really couldn't decide whether Byron had married me for love or for my daddy's duck blind. I'm sure it was at least a toss-up. Anyway, they were really good friends and that made it really nice for me too.

Q: When did Bob and Byron meet for the first time?

Begneaud: It was before we married and there was not—Bob was fine with Byron because I liked him, so that made it okay. But they never had very much in common. In fact, they never did. The only thing they really had in common was me and so it was like I had two different kind of worlds. When I went places and did things with Bob, it was like it was a whole different world than when I came home. In fact we used to kind of laugh about that because—and I'm talking about later times in Bob's life when he could afford nice stuff—and he would always send a car for me to the airport and it would say B-E-G-N-O because they couldn't do the B-E-G-N-E-A-U-D, so they'd do B-E-G-N-O on the sign. When I got in the backseat of that car, it was like there was a—theoretically or hypothetically, it'd be like a little tiara, that I was able to be the queen. Then when I got back in the car on the way back to the airport, it's like I had to take that tiara off

and leave it on the seat because when I came home, it was not the queen thing anymore. Not the same world, not the same queen anyway. I am still queen but without a crown, but very happy.

Q: Tell me how you learned that Bob was going to be a father.

Begneaud: That was so exciting. When he called to tell Mom that they were going to have a baby, of course she was excited to death. Of course I was still young and stupid enough that it wasn't as big a deal to me. I thought it was exciting, but it wasn't as big a deal as it was to Mom, but then after Christopher was born and Bob came home with Christopher and he was so adorable. Cutest, cutest little boy. A good friend of mine had a little niece that was the same age as Christopher. In fact they were even born the same month. We used to put them in the front seat of the car and of course there was no seat belts or car seats and so she and I would drive around—go get Cokes with a straw and feed those little babies Cokes. Babies can suck out of a straw really good. It never occurred to us that they didn't have teeth and we'd give them potato chips and they would mush them around and eat potato chips. Sue had a fit when she found out one day that I had been feeding Christopher potato chips. "He could choke to death on those, he doesn't have any teeth." I thought, "Well that's interesting." I hadn't really thought about that you need teeth to eat potato chips. But Christopher was a beautiful, beautiful child.

Christopher and Robert Rauschenberg, 1952. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Susan Weil

It was funny, one time when Bob brought him home, Christopher was about—I guess by this time he was like one-and-a-half or—he was about two, I guess. They flew in to New Orleans and Daddy drove over to pick him up and for some reason Mother and I didn't go. I don't remember all that. But anyway, so Bob had Christopher and he didn't know us much because he very rarely was here and he sure didn't know Daddy. I'm sure he had been told to beware of strangers and whatever. So Bob wanted to go see something about the luggage that didn't get here or something and so he left Christopher with Daddy. And Daddy was so funny, he said that Christopher didn't want him to hold him and so he said that Christopher, just keep walking around and looking back at him and Daddy would just follow. He said he walked all over that airport and Daddy just was one or two steps behind him and that he'd just—when you are not familiar with somebody—he was leery about him. But before that visit was over, they were big buddies. But Daddy laughed because he said they walked a mile while Bob was seeing about the luggage.

Q: Will you tell me about some of the other things that Bob made for you over the years?

Begneaud: One of my really fun things—this was right after we moved to Lafayette—and of course Mardi Gras is a big deal here and we had never had that in Port Arthur. So Bob made me a costume and naturally it wasn't a clown or a fairy or a typical little costume that a child would have. It was a unicorn. It was really pretty clever because the front of it, he made it out of burlap. So you stepped in the front and it was like pants and then from the middle of the back, I think it was chicken wire or something, he had made the frame of the back of the horse and the buttocks and all that and they had a big, big fancy tail of raffia with flowers and all that in it. Then the two back legs were like wooden dowels and they were wired each of them to my front legs, so when you took a step, the back leg came too. That was all burlapped. Of course Bob wanted me to go bare-chested and he had made a big lei of flowers like the tail that I was to wear, that was going to make me covered up. And of course my mother did not sit still for that. So we ended up with me with sort of a flesh-colored leotard and then of course I had the head piece that had the big horn out here and all.

Naturally I won the competition because I was the only unicorn there, maybe that had ever been there, maybe still hasn't been there. I don't know what happened to that costume. It aggravated me after I grew up and got to thinking about things. How would I have not kept that? Why didn't Mother keep it? Because it was really clever. There's a photograph of it in that one piece of art that we have there, but it's not me in it. It's when Bob was making it for me because he wasn't here for me. He made it and sent it to me.

Q: What's the first thing that he made for you?

Begneaud: Well back when I was about—I guess probably three or four years old—and I either had the mumps or the measles or something and Bob was having to babysit with me for a little while Mother went to the store. He made me a little picture and—I started to say painting, but I don't know if Bob really wanted to call it a painting. He made me promise that I would never ever, ever let it get in a show anywhere. He said that that's not just student art. He said that's kid art. But it was just a little duck and he painted it on the end of a wood crate, like an apple crate. You want to see it?

[Laughter]

Q: Yes!

Begneaud: This is it. I think this won't count as putting it in a show, so he wouldn't be angry for me to show it to you. Anyway, Mother kept that for a long time. It's not signed, it's just dated on the back. That was back way, way before the signing days began.

Q: I hear that your parents asked him to make a painting for their church?

Begneaud: Yes. Momma did. The congregation, they built a new church and churches, behind the baptistery, they always have a little scene like by the river or something like that and you don't just go buy a painting like that. Someone has to paint it because it fits on the wall and it's

big. So Mother says, "I'll furnish that. My son's an artist and I'll get him to draw a scene for us." So she called him and he agreed to do it, I'm sure under duress.

The day came that the big, big piece got here and we opened it and it was a very contemporary green, brown, all kind of—in every different direction. Mother stood there and she's going—so she called him and she said, "What is this? I thought you were going to make a scene for us like with trees and things." And he said, "Momma, that is a tree." She said, "It's not a tree." He said, "It is a tree. It's a tree like a bird would see if he was flying over." Mother looked back at it and she said, "Milton, there's not any birds sitting in the congregation looking at the tree. I wanted you to do a tree, tree." Anyway, they hung it up and it was there for a long time, but then when they moved out of that church, Mother brought it home. It wasn't like the *Delores* thing, but she didn't have any place to hang it particularly. It's a great big piece. Bob made me promise that I would destroy that and the big *Delores* piece, which I didn't destroy them, I just forever put them away so that they would not ever get—he made me promise that I would never ever, ever let either one of those pieces get in a show or be seen.

Q: Would you like to tell us about the *Delores* piece?

Begneaud: Yes, I can tell you about that one. To me, it's really a sweet little story. My little momma, like I said, is a wonderful Christian woman and everything and the idea of a nude hanging in her house was just totally—it wasn't even thinkable. I don't really remember even how that piece got to our house here. I'm sure it was just mailed or something. Anyway, Mother was just mortified by it. So in our little house the one bedroom that was Bob's upstairs, the closet

there was just a very dysfunctional closet; door down here and it was a whole length of the room, but it was only about this wide, so it was almost unusable. Well that was home of the painting and it wasn't even just in there; it was facing the wall in there, to be sure that it would not ever be seen.

Years later we were sitting in—and this was—Mother had that stroke in about I guess in 1990 or something like that, '91. So it was before that. After Bob was doing well and everything. We were sitting there on the sofa and Mother said, "You know what? There's something I've been wanting to show you." And so we all traipsed upstairs and we opened that closet door. We had to start taking things out of the closet because it was so way back in there. Anyway she finally, finally wiggled it out. Had to get it under the rod and everything. And she took it and she held it to the side like this and she said, "Now, isn't that better?" And we looked at it, and Bob just burst out laughing. She had painted a little pink bra and little pink panties on this big black voluptuous—in fact it was a 4-by-8 piece of plywood and she covered the whole thing. That's how voluptuous she was. And this little pink bra and the little pink panties. She said, "Isn't this better?" And Bob looked at it and he said, "Momma, she was nude, but now she's naked." She said, "No, she's not naked now." Mother did not get that different thing. Anyway, *Delores* went back into the closet, face against the wall. That was one of the pieces—that and the church piece—that she had nailed on the window during the storm, which I thought was pretty clever to have the two old Rauschenbergs nailed to keep the rain from coming in the window.

Q: Will you tell me about your mom's reactions to looking at Bob's work when you would go to openings?

Begneaud: Yes. She was so cute because Mother's—of course she adored Bob. That was a very mutual thing. He adored her and she adored him, but she really never really quite got what he was doing, except that it didn't matter because he was doing it, so that made it okay. It made it good even. So usually when we were at a show, Bob would always go like in the afternoon before the opening to kind of walk through to be sure that the lighting was what he wanted and whatever. I always would go and most of the time Mom would go too.

And so when she would look at it, she would say things like, "Now, isn't that pretty? What is this, Bob?"—and all this. And it was so distracting for her to make those kind of comments. So I told her one day, I said, "Mom, you know what? Bob's work isn't meant to be pretty or cute or any of those kind of things." So she said, "Well, I never know what to say." So I said, "You know what? You don't have to really say anything." I said, "It's not dependent on our comments about it." I said, "What you do is just kind of change the inflection in your voice. Just kind of go, "Yeah," "Ah," "Uh-huh," or, "Oooh," or "That's nice." Nice is a good word. Not cute or pretty, but nice. That very night, we were going to the show and then after we'd get to the show, usually he'd make a sashay through there and we'd get to go with him again and maybe the hostess or somebody, people like that. So Mother is going through the thing and she's going, "Oooh, uh-huh," and then we'd get down to another painting and she'd say, "Ohh," and all of these just tremendous inflections and all in her voice.

About three or four paintings down Bob took Mom and he kind of held her in his arms and he said, "Momma, it's okay. You don't even have to say anything. It's okay." But I thought that was

so sweet, but he understood what she was doing. He says, "Momma, it's okay." But she was commenting on each piece of it.

Q: You attended a lot of different parties and openings and events. Who are some of the favorite people you met at some of those gatherings?

Begneaud: Well, there were a lot of movie stars. In fact Liza Minnelli came up to me one time and she said, "Are you Bob Rauschenberg's sister?" And I said, "Yes." She said, "Oh, I'm so excited to meet you." She said, "I've always wanted to meet you." I said, "Judy Garland's daughter is not a slouch. That's pretty cool." She said, "Oh, but not like Bob Rauschenberg's little sister." And then we did the Kennedys because—I can't think of the name now. Not Jack. What's the daughter?

Q: Caroline?

Begneaud: Caroline [Kennedy]. Her husband [Edwin Schlossberg] is an artist, a sculptor. He and Bob were friends and when Rick was living in New York there—Rick and Shannon lived there for about I believe a year and a half—then Caroline's little birthday parties and things, then she would invite Dylan and all. So we kind of got to know her that way—but I met a lot, a lot of celebrities, but they acted like I was the celebrity and I liked it. It was kind of fun.

[Laughter]

Begneaud: So Caroline was one of them.

One that really impressed me was Isabella Rossellini—I was sitting at a dinner table with her one night and I was so glad that I had a really, really neat outfit on and I knew it was really cute—because she was gorgeous. But it was just so amazing to me that she had a simple little black dress on and the little single string of pearls and these little single stud pearl earrings, but she was so beautiful. This was—she was doing—was it Lancôme? I think she was their representative. And of course, not even a sign of makeup. Just gorgeous. And then the editor of *Harper's Bazaar* was sitting there at the table and he introduced me to her. He said, "You can come and work for us. I'd like for you to come and work with us." I thought that was so cool that he would—I knew it was a lie. He was just being nice, but it was fun for him to be that nice.

Q: What about some of the trips that you took? How about the trip to Cuba?

Begneaud: Yes, that was a pretty exciting one. In fact that's still one of my favorite deals because at the time the United States were not in good cahoots with Cuba. This was during the ROCI series and so Bob had a big show down there. In fact he had three locations. One of them was a big, big castle just sitting right on the edge of the water there and there was a big Russian ship there. The only people that were in uniform around there were the Russians and of course this was a time we were kind of afraid of them. That was kind of spooky.

Anyway, Fidel Castro—they were giving a big dinner for artists in Cuba and it was writers and performing artists, and it was just a general art thing. They invited Bob and his little entourage.

Dickie Landry and Christopher and there were, I don't know, six or seven of us, to this event. As it turned out, we had a major conversation for over an hour with Fidel himself, just standing like this. In fact—and I was a cute little blonde at the time and he liked that. And so he kept putting his arm around me.

In Cuba, when he's in his homeland, he doesn't speak English. He always would speak Spanish. Knowing that we didn't speak Spanish, he had an interpreter there and she was a cute little Cuban girl named Carmen. Fidel was very demonstrative. He was a huge frame and one of the things that really amused me was he had on military clothes like of the fifties and this was in Cuba, where it's hot as sin, and he had this wool suit on. The kind of wool that has little things that stick out, like you know it was scratchy. He had this big suit and the whole chest is full of ribbons and medals and dangle things and all this. Just the hero, like there he is, this huge statue and this big beard, great big guy. And here's Carmen, who was shorter than me, but she's standing there and she is interpreting him and he's very demonstrative. He tells stories and it was all this, and so she's doing that, but not as much as him. She's doing his stuff and so at some point during the thing he was telling this big story and it was loud and all this and I said, "Carmen," and when I said Carmen, she immediately stopped interpreting and he kind of stopped and looked. I said, "I've been watching you," and I said, "You tell the stories better than he does," and he just died laughing. He grabbed me and he hugged me and he laughed and laughed and laughed. And he'd go, "Yes, yes." He well understood what I had said.

He and Bob had a big exchange. We started talking about food and Fidel liked to cook and Bob likes to cook and so they had this exchange about it. At some point, just in gesturing, Bob

reached out and punched him in the chest, you know how when you're talking to someone? When he did that, about eight or so people just came alive. So we knew that was their secret service. They weren't in their uniforms and ribbons like he was, but they were there for a reason. Of course he just kind of nodded them off. Then after that, he would do this to Bob and Bob would do that back to him. Bob invited him over for dinner and Fidel said, "Well, I can't go. Your country won't even let me in." I was telling Sara [Sinclair], at one point I was wondering if they were going to let *us* back in the United States with some of the comments that Bob was making because he was pretty done with the United States to start with. Because it had cost him a fortune to get his art to Cuba because it had to go to Denmark first and then to Cuba. But anyway, so he made several comments about that. So he said, "Look, you don't need to involve them." He said, "I just live right across that water. You just get in your boat and you come across the water and let me know when you're coming and we'll meet you out there and bring you." And he told him, he said, "I'll cook you the best dinner you've ever had." When we left, as we were walking away, Bob hollered back at him and he said, "I'll be waiting for you to call. I'm waiting for you to come and have dinner."

But some of the conversation was about, Fidel said—and not in a mean way—but he was just saying that he was disappointed that the United States had so much and that we wouldn't share it. That we had so much medical information and stuff that would help people, but that we wouldn't share it. And education. That we wouldn't participate with them and help them. I think we've all been kind of sorry we didn't do that. Anyway, it wasn't in an ugly way. He was very cordial and all that, but while I was there it was pretty spooky because I had to end up sleeping with Bob and them. They had a suite. The door on my room didn't even lock and there we are in another

country and all of these Russian soldiers are all over the place and that was a little bit spooky. Not that you thought they were going to shoot you, but it just felt like an unrest kind of situation. Then, to be in a room by yourself and the door doesn't lock. So I was kind of freaked out about that and it was always more fun to stay in Bob's room anyway.

Q: Tell me how people responded to ROCI, audience members that you saw.

Begneaud: Yes. It was unbelievable. Of course the whole deal about ROCI and I know that probably other people have talked about this on this tape, but Bob felt like that—and I loved him more for this—that people of different cultures and different nations understood and knew the people in other cultures, then there wouldn't be any reason to be afraid of them or to not like them or anything. His idea about ROCI was that he wanted the Asian people to see what the European people were doing and they were doing the same thing! They were going to work, and the wives are washing the clothes and cooking the dinners, and the little kids are playing on the playgrounds and going to school, and then they're doing that same thing in this other country. We have to teach our kids to hate somebody. They don't start out that way. Bob was really, really just intent on these different nations and these different cultures being able to like each other and to understand each other.

So in doing ROCI, his entourage, tapes and all that, would go to one country and do—just life. Like the workers, the—it wasn't a sightseeing trip. A lot of times it was like the women washing the clothes at the creek on the stones and stuff like that, and little kids running around playing with balls and stuff at school. He would always bring some artifacts from that country. Then,

when he went back and made the art, that would be part of it. And then say he had maybe something from Mexico and then something from China. Then at his openings he would have at least two and sometimes three or four television sets set against the wall kind of out of the way, but with these clips running and it would be showing the—something China and whatever and the life there, and then over here would be another country. I was telling Sara the other day that this really was driven home to me, that one time I was standing there in front of it—and we were in Mexico—standing in front of one of these television sets and I don't know what country it was, but it was Asian. There were these precious little girls, looked about four or five years old, and they had their little pink tutus on, their little pink head things and all, and their little Asian music—doo-doo-doo—and these little girls are dancing and all this. And standing in front of the television set in front of us were two little Mexican girls. They didn't have tutus or headpieces and they were doing the same thing. I thought, "This is what this is about. Those little girls are playing with these little girls." To me that's so wholesome and so heartfelt and that was kind of what Bob's whole deal was about ROCI.

I was not at the Russian show, but you were talking about how the people reacted to it. That's where he did the pig, with all the neckties on the pig [*Uptown Pig Pox*, 1988]. It's really a cool piece, but from what I had heard about it, there was a ton of people that were trying to get in there. Those people had never seen anything like this and they were like five and six across, and went all the way down a block and around the thing and that line stayed like that until people could get in.

Robert Rauschenberg
Uptown Pig Pox, 1988
Cast aluminum, enamel, lexan and fabric
36 x 72 1/2 x 22 inches (91.4 x 184.2 x 55.9 cm)
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

I was at the show in Bilbao [*Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective*, Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, 1998–99] and—that was not part of ROCI, but this was just another show—but that show in Bilbao was unbelievably well-attended, and people oo-ing and ah-ing. You could tell they're not just walking around and looking at art; they're discussing it and Bob and their friend, "Look at this!" And that's what Bob liked. He really wanted you to—not just to look—but to see. And a lot of his work were participation pieces for the see-er, whether it was working something that made it turn—

One of his really fun pieces that I loved—what is the name of it? The big piece that's mirrored and it has sound? That's terrible, I can't think of the name of it. I can't think of it. [Note: *Soundings*, 1968; the work is activated by sound sensors.] Anyway, it must be—I'm guessing—at least 12, 14, maybe 16 feet wide [note: 36 feet wide]. Great big piece. To look at it, it's just dark images, kind of mirrored, and no color. But then it responds to sound and so when it hears the sound, different things of it light up depending on the frequency. It's so much fun because you'd walk by it and you'd go do-do and something goes up, and then you'd da-da and something else lights up. It's really a fun piece. The story was that it was at the Museum of Modern Art

[*Rauschenberg: Soundings*, 1968–69] and there was a little group of Catholic school girls in their uniforms and all were coming through the thing, so the nun sat them all down in front of there and they started singing to it and the thing almost blew up. It was just going crazy with those little girls sitting there singing. But a lot of Bob's art was about—that worked, but you had to work it and that's really what he wanted. He wanted you to be a part of it, not just look at it.

Robert Rauschenberg
Soundings, 1968
Mirrored Plexiglas and silkscreen ink on Plexiglas with concealed electric lights and electronic components
96 x 432 x 54 inches (243.8 x 1097.3 x 137.2 cm)
Museum Ludwig, Cologne
Ludwig Donation
Engineers: Billy Klüver, L. J. Robinson, Fred Waldhauer, Cecil Coker, Per Biorn, and Ralph Flynn

Q: Do you see your brother when you look at his work?

Begneaud: Yes. In fact he taught me to see things differently than just seeing them because you know how Bob—his work, just to look—like Mom wanted that little scene. Well you just never see that in Bob's. He doesn't do little scene things. But we'd go photographing a lot of times when he'd come home, we'd take a ride and go photographing. And he wasn't interested in the oak trees with the dripping moss. He would rather see the broken light post with the old bicycle leaning against it or something. When you start looking at things like that, then you see things differently.

Q: How did he change the way you see things?

Begneaud: I see things like that now. I'll notice them, which I probably would not have ever noticed and certainly not to the degree that he does—did—in fact he told somebody one time—this person was again ridiculing and sort of shaming him for painting things that were like the streets of New York. This guy was saying, "We have so many beautiful things here. You just put all the dirty things, the broken things, into your art. We have beautiful things. Why don't you put that in there?" He just kept going on and on about it. And so Bob told him, he said, "When you walk down the street, what you see are the things that you have in my art. If you have to feel like they're dirty and not worth seeing," he said, "How miserable are you when you walk down the street?" He said, "It's not like you're walking in Central Park. You're walking down the street." He said, "You have to learn to appreciate what you see."

[INTERRUPTION]

Begneaud: Am I doing too much detail?

Q: No, no, never. That's impossible. So what was the question? How did he change the way you look at things? The way you see things?

Begneaud: Kind of like what he said to that guy that day in New York, is that, "If the only thing that you think is pretty is something that's just pretty, then you're miserable." You need to be able to appreciate what you see. I think Bob taught me that it doesn't have to be the babbling brook to have a nice thing. Of course I think that's fun about his art is that you can stand there

and look at it and every time you see it, you see one more little something that you didn't really pay attention to the first time. I think when you're just driving down the street, that that works also; that you see something that you really hadn't paid attention to and it's not really anything significant, but it's there.

Q: Will you tell me about the *Cardboard* piece that he made?

Begneaud: That was funny. He was making a series of cardboards and he was at home here and visiting. So he said, "I'll make you a piece of art." I said, "Good, good!" It was a Sunday and this was in the days that we didn't have the big box stores, the Lowe's and the Home Depots and all that kind of stuff, but we needed some plywood. And so Doug Ashy is a friend of ours, so I called him up and on Sunday afternoon he opened—he had Doug Ashy Lumber Company—and so we went down there and Bob got some of the nails and he used really good plywood. Not any junky stuff.

But before that, on the Saturday he and I had driven around for him to find the art. They were doing a big, huge renovation at Lourdes Hospital, so he found all of these cardboards. This one particular one, it was—I don't know what had come in it. It was long and narrow and about this big and it had some sand down in one end of it that had been rained on and now was sort of like cement in there. It was like there. And the box was really dirty and the ends of the cardboard, instead of fitting like this, they were all like cuckoo and had been wet and now dry, and wet and dry. Anyway, he had several pieces like that. I asked him for this one piece, I said, "Do you want me to knock the sand out of this?" "No, no, no. Don't worry—don't do that."

So we're here in our garage and Byron had gone hunting and so he has all this laid out. He made three pieces and they weren't just square. One was this way and like this. Anyway my neighbor friend down the street—she knows Bob. She had been to several gatherings with him there. So anyway, she had gone by and she saw us and she waved at us and whatever she did. We're still doing stuff—and I say "we" loosely. I'm the one that goes to get the nail, you understand. "Hand me the glue," that's my participation. But it's participation.

So anyway, in a little while she's coming back by and this time she pulled in—she had a little convertible. She pulled in and jumped out the car and she said, "I just have to know what you all are doing. What are you all doing?" And Bob said, "I'm making Janet some art." She said, "Oh, well where is it?" And he said, "You're standing on it." And she was like a gazelle. She just whoop. Anyway, he finished the piece.

He came in here and I'm holding it up while he's nailing and he had these big—these nails are like this. Like my finger. So he's nailing all this stuff in the wall and I hear Byron pulling up in the driveway and I think, "This is not going to go over real big." I didn't have any of Bob's art hanging, except in my bathroom—well both bathrooms and in the bedroom. Anyway, I went out to the car and I said, "Let me tell you what. You're probably not going to like what Bob's hanging on the wall but," I said, "—just zip it. We can always redo the wall later. It's just sheetrock." So Byron came in and he was really good about it. He was kind of like Mom. He was, "Oh yes, uh-huh." It was not negative. But then it turned out to be a really, really good conversation piece when we had dinners and things after that, everybody loved seeing it and

talking about it. In fact the electrical company owner whose name was on that box, he got a big kick out of that because it was very, very prominent. But then—we kept it up, I don't know, three or four or five years.

So finally Byron told Rick, he said, "I'm kind of tired of that up on the wall. Do you want it?" And of course Rick wanted it. So Rick took it down and took it back home with him and then Bob found out that Rick had it. So Bob bought it back from Rick, which was really cool for Rick and this was back a long time ago and that was a lot of money for him. Then time goes by and at the big Guggenheim retrospective show that Bob had, I walked into one of the rooms there at the Guggenheim—the uptown Guggenheim—and there's this piece on the wall. And it's just the piece in the room. I was standing next to David White. So I said, "David, what about that piece up there?" I said, "What would Bob get for that?" He said, "Oh, he doesn't want to—he won't sell that. That's his." I said, "Well if he did, what would he get for it?" And I've forgotten the exact number. It was something like 350 or 375 or something, at least. So there was a person there with a cell phone and it was of those big kind of purses. So I called Byron from there and I said, "You remember the *Cardboard*?" And so I told him that and he said, "Damn." It was funny.

Talking about making art, one time when I was in Captiva—in fact Bob had been ill so I was down there. He was in the hospital and I was with him and then he came home from the hospital and he was way better and for some reason there was hardly anybody on the island but me and I think maybe one other person. So he was making some art and I was helping. I always had fun doing that. I would get to go fill the can with water and put it there and sloshing it around so

that—whatever Bob was doing. So anyway, we did that for a while, like most all afternoon. Then about, I don't know, it was about eight o'clock or something and we went for dinner.

[INTERRUPTION]

Begneaud: So anyway, this one day—and we had been doing that all afternoon and really having fun. One of my jobs was that I was cutting the images out. It'd be a big thing and he just wanted this piece, with scissors that were about this long. That was one of my jobs; I was cutting images out and putting them on there. He would do things, he was so sweet. He'd say, "Would you like it here or do you think it would look good over here?" I'm sure that what I was doing had absolutely nothing to do with what—

[INTERRUPTION]

Begneaud: But anyway, we went to dinner that night, there on Sanibel. We were sitting there and we were talking about how I had fun doing that and making art with him. So I said, "Those pieces that we were making this afternoon, now when you sell those, what will you sell them for?" He said, "I don't even know." Bob enjoyed the money, but he never did like the negotiating—he just wanted it to be there. I said, "No really, you have some idea about it. What do you think those will sell for?" He said, "I don't know, probably 250 or something like that." I said, "Thousand?" He said, "No, hundred-thousand." I said, "Let's get dessert and we're going to go make some more." But anyway, we had fun. He was really entertaining me mostly by letting me do stuff like that with him.

Q: People say that he always liked to have lots of people around when he worked.

Begneaud: Yes. Not that they were always doing something. The TV was always going. Made you totally crazy. He was a big soap opera fan and so TV was always going and there was always at least a couple of other people in the room. Some of them were really helpers and of course some of Bob's work is not stuff that he actually constructed himself because he has some—he had a guy that did metal work beautifully, that did some of the stuff. He told him what to do, but as far as the actual construction—so he always had people around. And really good friends. Really, really good friends. In fact they were like family to him.

Q: What was Bob like with students or other artists that were coming up?

Begneaud: Very sweet. And very, very encouraging. In fact with all of the shows that I attended with Bob, in most cities there was a university. A lot of times it was about the show. But he nearly always would have a meeting with the artists and they would just be—I remember in Mexico City—it actually got to be scary at the end, but there was this big huge auditorium, but the seats went up a little high. Almost like a bullring or something, but it was indoors. And it was just chock-o-blocked with people. In fact they were even on the floor with us. There were about three of us and we were sitting in folding chairs there. And Bob would talk to them. What Bob would try—he was just being encouraging. He knew that a lot of them—and I would venture to say most of them—were not encouraged by their families because it's not like you're going to learn to be a doctor and then when you get through doing that then you're going to be able to

make money and make a living. As we all know, the arts—all of the arts—are not a sure shot and there's just a ton of super talent that's out there that never gets—they don't ever even make a living doing just their art. So I think mommas and daddies are aware of that and they tend to want their kids to do something that they know that they'll have a livelihood that keeps them safe. They're not really usually too encouraging about art. Bob would always say, "Tell your daddy that you are going to have a real job. Don't worry about it. This is a real job."

Anyway, this one time in Mexico that I was talking about. After it was over with, they all started doing like this and screaming, "Maestro, Maestro." I was and they were all screaming and it was accolades for him, but they just kept closing in and closing in and there was just so many of them. So some police came to get us, to take us out, because it was like they wanted to touch him. It was a little bit scary; they were about to have a riot or something. But it was not that anybody was angry or anything, they just loved him.

Q: Will you tell me about the time that Bob introduced you as a queen to the King of Malaysia?

Begneaud: That was really funny. We were guests of the king and queen of Malaysia and it was really a super trip. The country is so beautiful and everything. In fact, I ended up having to leave her my Anne Klein jeans because they didn't get designer jeans over there very much and she took me shopping. She had a little car with a driver and the little flags and all that on it and so she asked me the night of this function, she said, "Would you like to go shopping?" Of course I said yes. So she came to get me. She asked me, she said, "Do you have any blue jeans?" And I said yes. And she said, "Just wear your blue jeans." So I wore my blue jeans. My designer jeans

and she had really blue jeans, like dungarees, and they were the kind that you put hammers and stuff on them and they were bright, shiny blue, not washed enough and all that. And she just raved about my jeans all afternoon. We were about the same size, so when I got back to the hotel after the shopping trip, I was telling Bob how she liked my jeans. He said, "Well take them off and I'm going to give them to her." And I said, "Well, they're dirty," and he said, "Well, how can they be that dirty? You just had them on a few minutes." He says, "She'll wash them." Anyway, I took my jeans off and he called a courier and he rolled them up and put them in a bag and the courier took them over to her and I got the most fantastic little note from her. He couldn't have sent her a mink coat or anything that she would have appreciated that much. She was really, really sweet about it.

The night of the dinner, it was so funny because we were at the head table and there were a lot of tables out in front of us and all facing the wall where the king and queen were sitting. It's like I was telling you, they weren't on thrones. They didn't sit in a throne, but their chairs were different than ours, I can tell you. But anyway, so they're sitting there and Bob gets up and is being nice and saying what a good time we're having and thanking them for their hospitality and whatever and he said something about—this was before the blue jean thing—but he said something about the queen. He told the king, "You have a really beautiful queen there," or something. Then he said, "But I brought my own queen." And he reached down and grabbed my arm and he stood me up and he said, "This is my little baby sister Janet and she's the queen of the Yambilee," and then he just went right on talking and all. And of course there was kind of a quiet came over the room.

So later in the evening we're kind of milling around and that little king—he was about this big—came up to me and he said, "I didn't understand what your brother said. Where are you the queen?" I was just like what are you going to say? Do you know what homecoming is? Do you know how insignificant this is? But I just—I couldn't. So I just said, "Opelousas." I thought that was a strange kind of word that he could think about. And he went, "Oh, okay." And we just went right on. I'm sure he wondered forever what or where Opelousas was. Anyway then that was the same night that she asked if I wanted to go shopping with her. And again that was pretty big company, when you go shopping with a queen. Those people are bowing and scraping and all. You see, that's kind of the fun thing about it. You're not the center, but you're with them. So you get all the accolades along with it.

Q: You told me that you and Bob had a game that you played at parties and functions?

Begneaud: A lot of times the game was—everybody wanted to talk to him. Everybody did. A lot of times, probably most times, the conversations would get real involved. Way more involved than he wanted to be. A lot of times the person that was involved in the conversation was not somebody he really wanted to talk to anyway and then with the conversation getting real deep, he just would get trapped. So we kind of had this thing. He had this kind of way that he would signal me across the room because he knew I would talk to anybody. In fact it was just almost a challenge to me. The crazier they were, the better I liked it.

Anyway, he had this kind of little thing that he would tell me, so I'd get over there, so he would introduce me—and a lot of times as a queen, but not so much at a gathering in the United States

because it was not—they knew what homecoming was. It wasn't so significant. Anyway I'd come over and he'd introduce me to them and then he would slip away and leave me there. He used to laugh and say that he had to invite me to the gatherings so that I could take all those people and talk to them and free him up. I had a good time.

Q: Are there any other stories that I haven't asked you about that you want to tell today?

Begneaud: I'm sure there's a lot, a lot, a lot more stories because we were together for a lot of years, but I've told you a whole bunch of them. I'll probably think of some more after you're gone. I don't know if you want this to be a full-length movie or if we're going to have to do it in segments.

Q: Okay, so then just one last question. Obviously your brother is very well-known and celebrated. But if I was just to ask you to describe your brother, what you would say about him?

Begneaud: It's funny that you are asking me that because it's almost like he's two people. This one people was this well-known and a lot of times just revered person that people—I'd stand in line with him and businessmen would come through and say, "I just want to touch your hand." Just really that kind of thing. And then the other piece of him is just my sweet brother. I really do miss him.

Q: Thank you so—

Begneaud: Like I said, the best job in the world was to be his sister.

Q: Sounds like he was a pretty sweet brother.

Begneaud: Yes, yes. For sure.

Q: Thank you so much.

Begneaud: Thank you. I've enjoyed telling you my stories.

Q: I've enjoyed listening to them.

Begneaud: It's like reminiscing. In fact Craig [Kraemer, interview videographer] and I were talking about that a while ago. It's like you do something and it was really a lot of fun, but then you stop thinking about it and it's like on a shelf or something. Then when you get to talk about it again, you relive it. So I've had a nice time.

Q: Good, I'm glad. Thank you so much.

Begneaud: You're welcome.

[END OF INTERVIEW]