

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of

Jack Cowart

Columbia Center for Oral History Research

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## PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Jack Cowart conducted by Sara Sinclair on May 6, 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: Jack Cowart

Location: New York, New York

Interviewer: Sara Sinclair

Date: May 6, 2015

Q: Today is May 6, 2015. This is Sara Sinclair with Jack Cowart at the Roy Lichtenstein Foundation. All right. So we begin with you. If you can just tell me where and when you were born and a little bit about your early life, some of your early memories.

Cowart: Pre-Bob? That early?

Q: That early. [Laughs]

Cowart: When I broke my teeth falling off my bike?

Q: Yes.

Cowart: Tape is free, I realize that, but I won't make this into an autobiography. I was born on the 7th of February in 1945. Dad was at war. I was born on an Army camp. He went to Japan and I went to live with my mother who moved back to Virginia. I come from a Virginia family. My father and mother were both from the northern neck of Virginia. Then we moved to Philadelphia because he had a job as a civil engineer. I grew up in the western suburbs of Philadelphia for my entire pre-college life. We were the Yankee branch of the Southern family, we like to say.

I went to a Southern military college, VMI [Virginia Military Institute, Lexington] and actually graduated. It was there that I discovered art history. I went to be a historian and also since we were all going to be drafted if we didn't do something else. I didn't want to go in as a private. I thought I might as well go in as an officer. So I went to a military college, where my dad had gone, though I never went into the Army for more than three months so it was over-achievement. There were two professors who were underground in the English Department who had been to Harvard [University], Fogg [Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts] trained MAs in art history and they got me involved in that process.

I had the language for it. I had taken art lessons before. I had done some works of art. I had been taking Saturday morning art classes at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and all of that. I decided that from there, I wanted to go to graduate school. Vietnam was still raging and I was accepted at Johns Hopkins [University, Baltimore] to go into what I thought was an MA program, but it ended up being a PhD program, to let you know how much I researched it. This was in 1967. Then I got married, went to Europe, did my doctoral research in the south of France, working on French artists at the end of the nineteenth, early part of the twentieth century: [Henri] Matisse, [Henri Charles] Manguin and [Charles] Camoin, Jean Puy, others, the Fauves.

I came back to the United States looking for a job in 1972, I was working in Matisse largely and when I was writing, everybody I knew or kind of knew or thought I might know or want to know, there was a Matisse scholar, Frank [Anderson] Trapp, who said there was a job opening at the Wadsworth Atheneum [Museum of Art] in Hartford [Connecticut]. Not knowing what the

Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford was, nonetheless we came back and did some other stuff, I defended my doctorate and then I went and interviewed at the Atheneum. I seemed to be hired on the spot. Either I was lucky or imminently qualified, which I wasn't because I was green as corn. Or it was the right moment because the director there had been dilly-dallying so long in hiring somebody that he finally said the next person who comes in and fogs the mirror gets the job. Anyway, I was hired. This is where my [Robert] Bob Rauschenberg story starts, if that's enough of the pre-history of me.

Q: Sure.

Cowart: [The director] was [James] Jim Elliott, who had been a senior curator at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art at a time in L.A. where things were relatively loose, if not drug-fueled, and certainly exciting and free-thinking. Somehow he had been hired by the Atheneum to be the director. Jim, along with people like Henry [T.] Hopkins and people like Maurice Tuchman and the people who were working in L.A. County at that time in the sixties, were also involved in the contemporary art scene. All this was new to me because I had been in the south of France and had been doing art historical research in the Bibliothèque nationale [de France, Paris] and I was relatively closeted. I did know that contemporary art existed because you have the [Marguerite and Aimé] Maeght Foundation in Saint-Paul-de-Vence et cetera. So I was always noticing that there was contemporary art around and it appealed to me.

I was hired at the Atheneum as the assistant curator for paintings, which meant everything. It meant from Fayum portraits of 3000 BC, to whatever was up-to-the-minute. For the people who

had preceded me at higher positions, as well as the chief curator, Peter Marlow, and the collectors in the region, which had to do with Emily [Hall Tremaine] and Burton [G.] Tremaine [Sr.], the Atheneum had a remarkably strong core collection of contemporary art. In that case, this now looked like blue chip contemporary art, which it was, because it was formed by people like [Samuel Jones] Sam Wagstaff [Jr.], who had been there before, and the Tremaines and Susan Morse Hilles and some of the rich trustees. Jim Elliott came in and started working with Tony Smith. Tony had some ideas that helped to get other contemporary and modern art, and we had an endowed fund, which allowed us to buy things like [Willem “Bill”] de Kooning and [Andy] Warhol and other works.

So this was all very much on our mind. We didn't have very much money for exhibitions because they just were coming through an under-capitalized capital campaign for building. They built the building, but didn't have much money to run the place and/or pay its staff, but that's another story. I wanted to begin to find some cheap, or focused, exhibitions that we could do. Jim Elliott suggested that we should call up Bob. It seemed fine to me. I didn't know him. Bob was running a studio press, Untitled Press [Inc.] in Captiva [Florida], and Jim said that maybe we should go down and look at it.

This is my storybook version of this. I don't remember actually how all of it worked, but I do know that Jim said, “Let's go see Bob,” so we got on a plane and went to Captiva. This was my first trip and it was the first trip of only two that I have ever taken where I ended up bunking in the same hotel room with my director. One was under an extreme situation of a canceled flight coming out of Moscow with somebody later; any port in a storm. But Jim Elliott and I ended up

in this funky cottage at 'Tween Waters [Inn Island Resort]. That's when it was really funky. The cottages were just free-standing and it was like Bora Bora or something, which was remarkable. It was wonderful. We went Florida West Coast native.

We were at 'Tween Waters, however awkwardly, and went up to see Bob, to look at the press and try to see what was there and how that might make something. It was a single source lender, of course, so it had advantages there. Bob was as generous as welcoming. This was before there was the big studio, then the big house. This was the small Gulf House, which was characteristically both disheveled and joyous and wonderful and hot. I think that they only had one or two presses there, [Little] Janis, I think. It wasn't as elegant or as complicated as it would get. But this was 1972, '73. I didn't even know when Bob had started it up, but in reading now, it wasn't too much before then that he had started this [note: established in 1971].

There were artists down there working. I don't remember who was working at the time because it was a blur. I was just a kid. But we did think that it would be clever because I was particularly interested in artists' presses and became more interested basically for my life. The novelty, if you will. Starting with Roy Lichtenstein, we were involved in a lot. I've always been involved in Gemini [G.E.L., Los Angeles] and these big curated commercial presses. But there was something fascinating about Untitled Press. Though it was a business and working with Castelli Graphics [New York] and other outlets—they were in the business to make some money—it wasn't like a commercial print shop. Bob would invite people he wanted to work there or friends. Cy Twombly went down, my guess is as one of the initial people who helped to get things rolling, literally as well as figuratively. [Note: Twombly made the first print series in April

1971.] This became an exhibition at the Wadsworth Atheneum with [Robert] Bob Whitman; one suite at least of everybody who had been working since the beginning of Untitled Press to that time [*Prints from the Untitled Press, Captiva, Florida, 1973*].



Nicola Del Roscio, Rauschenberg, Cy Twombly, and Robert Petersen working in Rauschenberg's print shop, Captiva, Florida, 1971. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Hans Namuth © Hans Namuth Estate

I think the idea is that we would travel. Jim Elliott was always an incremental, sequential thinker, rather than a finished, wrap it up with a bow kind of guy, as well as Bob, and somewhat me, because it could defer having to make hard decisions too soon. Originally we thought of the catalogue as almost a three-ring binder so that as new work would be produced, we could add it to the show—we could add it to the catalogue—and that these things would be living and organic. That was very Bob-like. I remember writing the curatorial text, which I sent to Bob, which did not pass, I guess would be a polite phrase. But it did goad him into writing, as I recall, the statement about Untitled Press.

[Laughter]



Q: Do you remember what his critique was?

Cowart: Oh, I think people called back and said, “Well, Bob would actually like it to be said this way.” We said, “Great.” This is where I learned that the principle of the curatorial body sacrifice is that you try to do your best, but in most cases it’s going to stimulate those who would otherwise not write. Bob wasn’t an essayist, he wasn’t [Robert] Bob Motherwell, writing essays. But it kind of goaded them or stimulated them—or maybe it was so bad that he said, “Gosh, I have to save this enterprise and rewrite it or write it in my own way.” In any case, it flushed out a position and that was mission accomplished because it ended up being better than the assistant curator of paintings at the Wadsworth Atheneum trying to make some kind of critical judgment. It became an artist statement, it was an artist press, they were artist prints, and it really hit the atmospherics much better than some kid from Connecticut dropping in could. There was a lot of going back and forth, starting when we went to Castelli Graphics in New York to see prints and get things framed up and to have a lot of discussions with other artists—how they wanted their work installed. So that was the beginning of my discovery of this guy named Robert Rauschenberg or then Bob Rauschenberg.

Q: Well, before we continue moving forward, I am interested in asking you about that moment when you come out of school. You graduate in 1972 and you enter the art world. When I was speaking with Dorothy [Lichtenstein], she described the feeling of the 1960s art world in New York City as being so small that you could hold it. I’m wondering, you’re an art historian, as you said, there was a bit of a gap between the period that you studied and then the period when you entered the art world. I’m wondering if you can talk a little bit about how you characterized that

moment that you entered the world from an historical perspective. How did you orient yourself around that?

Cowart: I tend to operate from a position of ignorance rather than large view. It keeps life simpler in some ways. I just took it for granted. I do know that I spent a lot of time in the city. From the Atheneum it was only just a train ride or a bus and train ride away from New York—it was just a couple of hours to get to the city. I came to the city a lot. I had my own issues of collection management and display and exhibition making and other things at the Atheneum, but when I came to New York I felt that I could get a grasp on what was new by going to a handful of galleries or looking around, which was, of course, even then I don't think accurate. But I felt that because we had some money to make acquisitions we certainly could hit the high spots and that that would be satisfactory. I wasn't setting myself out to become a contemporary art curator because I'm still drawn by history. This kind of dumb luck thing of bumping into Bob with Jim was the entrée and the stimulus. I wrote Bob at one time, I believe, or at least I certainly thought it, that he was the first living artist I ever met.

Q: Oh wow.

Cowart: In that way. A successful contemporary living artist. I had known of some others around the Atheneum, but Bob was significant, with a worldview and a world reputation. So he defined my view of what living art means and that's the little nugget I've always cherished, because Bob meant contemporary art for me. I may have said that in the ROCI [Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange] introduction at some time.

I wasn't troubled by the fact that I wasn't seeing everything when I came to the city. I felt that if I went to a certain number—and of course it was largely SoHo-based at that time so if I'd wander around SoHo and walk into everything that I could find. Then I would do 420 West Broadway. I don't think I ever went to Castelli Graphics, which was curious, because it was uptown. I'd come in and go straight to SoHo and just cruise the neighborhood. I went to the occasional museum show. At that time I actually spent more time going to museum shows than I do now certainly, or for the rest of my life. But it was a day trip. We didn't have any money so we'd go back late at night. And just explore—I would find the things that interested me.

At the Atheneum, we were also starting up a prototype for a concept that in retrospect became very, very important. It was at the Atheneum because Tony Smith, who was a very good advising artist, had said to Jim Elliott, who was a restless character, “You don't have any money for shows, why don't you take a room. There are six surfaces in that room. You could put things on them together, you could put things in them separately. You've got the ceiling, floor, and four walls. So what are you going to do? Why don't you use that as an endlessly programmable, quick and dirty showing space for contemporary art or things that tweak your curiosity?” The Atheneum, while it had a contemporary history, was largely controlled by a lot of great historic paintings and sculpture. It took a long time to make complicated exhibitions, but you could have this kind of little thing down there going night and day, kind of a boiler room of contemporary art.

Tony devised this concept, the so-called MATRIX gallery. Thank god we got some NEA [National Endowment for the Arts] funding and we weren't ready to make it—when I was there it was proto-MATRIX, and now, it's MATRIX 900. I think they've been doing exhibitions in the MATRIX series forever. Jim Elliott also took that program to [University of California] Berkeley, where it was further developed by the curator who had followed me at the Atheneum and went with him to Berkeley. I started up an equivalent program called Currents when I went to the Saint Louis Art Museum after the Atheneum. There are projects galleries now, as a general concept, even in the MoMA [Museum of Modern Art, New York], as well as other places—where they set a room as a projects room. We were at the front end of that as a focus.

So I was always scouting for things in New York for the proto-MATRIX gallery. It was really driven by Andrea Miller-Keller, who was managing it before it became real, so it wasn't my unique play space, but we were all scouting for stuff. We felt that by scouting SoHo, it was not bad. The Untitled Press show was quote, “a real exhibition” in the special exhibition galleries at the Atheneum. But this other thing was a living edge on the historic institution, which forced some contemporaneity, largely through people that Jim Elliott knew. Lucy [R.] Lippard did early works there. There were other performances that we used it for; we used it as an excuse to do a lot of stuff, which I think is the best part of these kinds of project spaces.

But I do think that I agree with Dorothy; she saw it earlier, in the sixties.

Q: Right.

Cowart: I saw it in the early seventies. It was only just about the time of [Robert C.] Bob Scull and those kinds of auctions, where contemporary art means some money and it was about investments and flipping and movement. We thought we'd find what we needed of things that were important enough that would make sense with the art that we were collecting and that the community might like to see—albeit particularly New York-based. When I look at it now, it was provincial in its own way; it was provincial to New York in that we didn't start looking at Chicago artists. Jim knew a lot of people from the West Coast and I think he always had a desire to have other West Coast artists that he admired, certainly Southern California types. There was never enough money or never enough interest. He also was running a museum so he had other things to do. But it was the Jack and Jim show.

The chief curator was Peter Marlow, who had much more formal tastes, though he did get roped into doing some exhibitions of Christopher ["Chris"] Wilmarth, for example, which I was involved in, with Chris. There were some others—an African American sculpture show that we were doing. These were little breakthroughs, inclusive and strange exhibitions. The Atheneum really engendered this because it was about creativity. It was very eccentric—anybody who could have Sam Wagstaff as a chief curator, who was working with Tony Smith and other people before leaving, had a liberal view. They had a Carl Andre big stone piece across the street, which was a cause célèbre in starchy Hartford [*Stone Field Sculpture*, 1977] and a big [Alexander] Calder stabile around the corner from the Atheneum [*Stegosaurus*, 1973] and a George Segal hanging in the atrium of this 1849 gothic American building [*Trapeze*, 1971]. It was a real mix and match. A gun collection from Colt. But beautiful decorative arts, beautiful Baroque

paintings, great, great paintings throughout, even the American landscape paintings. It was and still is a significant cultural institution of international art, European and American.

It was living from paycheck to paycheck, the museum was very tight in its monies, but if seen by comparison to today, we were really privileged with an acquisition fund. Later on, I would go to Xavier Fourcade [Gallery, New York], who was doing Bill de Kooning. We wanted to get, not a classic fifties de Kooning, but we became entranced with the latest paintings that he was making in Montauk [New York]. We felt that was more painterly, it was more artistic, it was different, it was on the front edge of things. We were not rebuying history. The Atheneum prided itself in its ability to do that kind of thing, two steps ahead of things. We didn't make press announcements or these kinds of things, to set ourselves up to be in competition with the Whitney [Museum of American Art, New York] or the MoMA or the [Solomon R.] Guggenheim [Museum, New York]. But it appealed to us, with the great American landscape tradition that we had in the collection, and the newish de Kooning was great. We said, "Show us everything you have," because we had enough money to get anything that he had that we wanted at that time. I've forgotten what we paid for the painting, but if anything, it was less than a hundred thousand dollars. It may have been closer to fifty, I just don't remember. We had enough play money to become dangerous in a certain way, if we went around. We felt that it was a system where we could buy a Warhol electric chair painting [*Triple Silver Disaster*, 1963]. We could go and look at things to add to the collection and as I said, we were rich in acquisitions; we didn't have ways to make exhibitions. But that's where the efficiencies of Untitled Press, for example, or single collector exhibitions or group collector exhibitions, would be enough to generate the occasional exhibition. I was only there for less than two years so I don't know what would have happened

next. But it was great grounding and that's why I've always felt that the launch, with going to the artist's studio—I would say that's probably the first living artist studio that I'd ever been to. I knew about Matisse's studio and I knew about the French artists' studio and I knew about Gustave Moreau's studio in the nineteenth century, early twentieth century. But those were kind of abstractions.

Q: Do you remember what your interests were while you were in Captiva? What your internal chain of thought was? What you were most into checking out and looking at?

Cowart: Well, I came from a family where our vacations were going back to the farm in Virginia. Though I had been in the south of France, I knew what palm trees were, I knew what a beach was, I knew the Côte d'Azur and I knew the Mediterranean. I was fascinated by the southwest coast of Florida. I basically fell in love with it, in its ramshackly way. It was old Florida, not that I knew what new Florida was or the older-older Florida was. But it was my first trip to Florida. I felt that I was someplace very far away and very exotic and the development on Captiva and Sanibel hadn't taken off yet. They had a bridge, but they didn't have the ferry. That's when Bob went, at the time of [James "Jim"] Rosenquist. They had an airport you could fly into. It was convenient. But I felt that it was a very foreign and wonderful and exotic and romantic situation. It was spellbinding, it was romantic, and of course, Bob was Bob. He was welcoming and he knew Jim from before. So knowing me as just Jim's handmaiden, or the person who was going to do the work, was okay. It was a very easy meet. Bob was a very easy greeter in many cases. Since we were there on his schedule, which meant there were no domestic relationships of having to worry about what time was bedtime and he'd just stay up. He'd just

work and talk and goof around forever. I was fascinated. If I was awkward in the same little hut with Jim, which I didn't realize how awkward I might have been or could have been or should have been—I was kind of a private person. But to us, it was a big adventure.

Q: Sure.

Cowart: I think it was an adventure, which made me fall in love with Captiva. Fast-forward a little bit then, with Dorothy and Roy having eventually a house in Captiva—Dorothy loves to go to the beach; Roy didn't like to travel very much. Some years later, I shamelessly would call Dorothy and Roy and ask if I could use the house on Captiva, all the time, for Easter when the kids had two-week breaks. Susan Cowart and I, our kids grew up basically going to Captiva, right down the street, two miles away from Bob's. We would always go up and see Bob. That would all be part of the adventure for them. They grew up knowing Bob and the studio. They grew up going to Roy and Dorothy's house at Captiva for spring break and I do believe that we used it during that period of time more than they did. But Roy and Dorothy, and Dorothy being the way she is, were so nice to share it.

We have always been hooked in the "Captiva as we knew it" point of view. This would have been in the late seventies or early eighties, when our kids were around, when we would go back with them as kid-kids. I try to get there as frequently as possible. Dorothy is using the house more now so it does kind of cramp my style of exploiting her house. I haven't been to Captiva in years; I think I went a couple of times during ROCI and some other times. But that was it. So I miss it. I miss Bob, but I miss Captiva too.



Q: Sure.

Cowart: I think those were the things and the fact that art was being made, the enterprise of art being made on the premises and probably conceived on the premises—it wasn't like when you go into these big commercial print shops where you have already made the collage, you've already made the instructions, you've already made all of these things that are going to be, the proofing and the printing, and you still have changes with your master printers—they happen. Those are tweakings. I got the feeling that a lot of stuff was really happening down there. If David Bradshaw or Bob Whitman wanted to do something, he had thought of it five minutes before and then, okay, let's see if we can do that.

Q: Right.

Cowart: That kind of immediacy was tonic to a structured curatorial mind that has to then do something else with it. I think you just understood or got a sense for the indeterminacy, the spontaneity of it. The looseness was different than when I was working with Roy in his studio for a long time. I was hanging around the studio for about four years in the late seventies with Lichtenstein, seeing how it was different. It's still art being made. But Roy was more linear. With Bob, when he was working not only for other artists that were there, but also his own work, with photography and screening and welding and people doing things and the entourage—plural entourages, I assume. People coming in and going out and dropping in. He became a destination down there.

Q: Right.

Cowart: Everybody wanted to go drop in on Bob in Captiva. It was very exciting, completely overwhelming in its own right, but at that time I wasn't put off by these kinds of complexities. We just were on a mission.

Q: Do you think that there's something that can be explained about why Captiva worked as a creative space? As a place that was fluid and that wasn't structured and that you describe as having this immediacy? Or do you think it's just one of those intangible things?

Cowart: Well, it's very relaxing—the word is really funky, at that time. That's what you would think of it. It was unvarnished, it was we're all here together, let's do stuff, let's have fun, let's work, let's make it. We've got something to do. I wasn't aware of any of the interior-exterior dynamics of what it was all about, but it was liberating. It's off the mainland and it's not Central Florida. It's beautiful and it's a compound. I think that this community of like-minded individuals—albeit you have to be on Bob's clock. But if you're down there you're already inclined to having it be that way. It became a performance piece. I think the life at Captiva was really ongoing performance of many kinds, but an art performance, never losing sight of the art part. Dealers would drop in on occasion, I assume, and we'd go down there to try to do a deal or something. But it wasn't set up as some kind of show-and-tell factory. Because there were various houses where you had to walk and they're far more gussied up now than they ever were then. Even going out from Bob's house to the road, you were thinking I'm going to be attacked

by wild animals or something scary or spooky at night and I don't want to go there. I want to stay on the main road and come in the other entrance. It seemed slightly off-the-grid and it was. It was primitive. I'm sure that we didn't have a phone in 'Tween Waters. These were thatched roof shacks.

Q: Right.

Cowart: It was pre-tourist, like a refuge. It's hard to maintain that in the twenty-first century, especially with all the rest of the studio development in the building and the price of real estate and the fancy people and the big villas and all these things that are going on and the occasional hurricane that comes in and tops everything and you start all over. Then, it seemed a world near, but very far away. That was creative. I think Jim and I did a lot of brainstorming down on that one trip and then after that, he handed it off to me and I just ran with the ball.

Q: Right.

Cowart: I'm sure I was being steered by Bob and anyone else who was there. Making an exhibition was almost going against the grain of the nature of Untitled Press, which was kind of a continuum. But all of a sudden, it was show time. I was probably annoying because we wanted basic things like photographs and artists' biographies and checklists.

Q: Right.

Cowart: All of which Bob and everybody else knew about. This was like we were trying out—try the play in Boston before it opens in New York. Hartford had a great reputation for being able to work with contemporary artists in a low-key way. So you were trying this out on the road before you had to go someplace else. It was just a party.

Q: What would you say to someone who doesn't understand why Bob moved to Captiva? Why he left New York and went to Captiva?

Cowart: I don't know why Bob left New York and went to Captiva, myself. I never gave it a second thought. This was the ignorance and the blissfulness of youth. I never thought about what's this guy doing here? It was a very creative atmosphere. I thought New York was great too. I certainly spent a lot of time on Lafayette Street in between times; maybe even David White was there at that time. My life with Bob gets confused from the beginning to the end because everything to me is a continuum. I didn't see it as some kind of a migration. It looked like it was just an opportunity.

I have had so many retrospective thoughts about why Bob was there. It was the Gulf Coast. It wasn't Texas, but it was across the coast from Texas; it would be there and not there. The climate's the same; a little bit different, more tropical. But then I saw certain equivalencies to why Roy and Dorothy left New York to go to Southampton—old Southampton, before it got fancy. It was old money Southampton, but it was outside the scene, which can be enervating if you're in the middle of it, where it makes it seem like it's more work and production and being on-call for everyone else's agenda rather than your own. I missed all the previous iterations of

Bob in New York, but this paradise that was opened on the West Coast of Florida seemed just natural and free. So that was persuasive.

To come from an insurance city like Hartford, leaving Connecticut and arriving in Fort Myers was persuasive. Knowing people like Cleve Gray and Josef Albers, who had a studio near Yale [University, New Haven], an orderly set even though his studio was his house more or less. Bob was truly independent of all that. He didn't have a teaching job. He didn't have those kinds of daily operations. It became the alter ego, the alternative view to my life, which was married to a computer systems engineer, children, house in the suburbs, the whole deal. It was wonderful. I just thought if you're going to be an artist in that way, unless you're going to be a commercial artist or you're going to be a portrait artist or you're going to be some kind of artist who needs to relate with other people, but for artists to relate to artists—it was kind of nifty to have this. You could say it was over-achievement—it was a bit far away. You didn't have to go that far away to get out of the city metaphors. You can go to Bucks County [Pennsylvania], you can go into the mountains, at that time you could have gone out to Eastern Long Island [New York], go to wherever. But it was kind of rugged and it was a barrier to accessibility, which I think is another good thing.

Q: Okay. Thank you. All right, so you stayed at the Wadsworth for two years and then tell me what happens next.

Cowart: I wasn't looking for a job because I was perfectly happy at the Atheneum, though it wasn't going to really help pay my bills. They were having trouble paying theirs. It was revealed

to me that the Saint Louis Art Museum was looking for an associate curator of nineteenth- and twentieth-century art. My family and I decided that I would go interview for that because the Atheneum had only so much capability. I went out and interviewed for that job and got it. Then we moved to Saint Louis.

I knew, but didn't really know, the complexities of it—that there were great Saint Louis collectors, people like Joseph Pulitzer and the Schoenberg family and the Weil family and [Ronald K.] Ron Greenberg and Joe Helman and other dealers and collectors and moneyed folks. It was a very lively scene. They had a Contemporary Art Society, they bought work for the museum, they had a big exhibition program, they had a big capital campaign to double the size of the museum in the great beaux-arts building. It was in the art belt of Saint Louis, as we say, the culture corridor in the park where people believed in the art museum. The Saint Louisans, I found over time, would give you as much rope as you wanted, just don't hang yourself with it. They would basically say bring us new stuff, amaze us; go at it.

It was a very nurturing society with enough clout to do stuff. That's where I developed the Currents program. That's where I did more exhibitions. That's where I did my first exhibition of Roy Lichtenstein [*Roy Lichtenstein 1970–1980*, 1981], my first real exhibition of Henri Matisse for the cutouts [*Henri Matisse: Paper Cut-Outs*, 1978], which got there before the MoMA. I did a whole range of exhibitions: Ellsworth Kelly [*Ellsworth Kelly: Sculpture*, 1983], I went to see more artists in their studios throughout Chicago, throughout the West Coast. I did West Coast artists, all built on this very happy influence that I had had with Bob and how natural it could be to go meet living artists and then, without trying to be a tastemaker in contemporary art, find

things in contemporary arts that interested me, to include ceramics or music or performance art or international German painting that was contemporary at that time. We had a great collection; it spanned all parts. We could also acquire new things all the time. We had gotten our first Twombly painting. Again, it was advantaged. That was from 1973 to '83, more or less. Even though we had never lived in the Midwest, it was just west of the Mississippi, it was like Philadelphia West or Boston West.

Q: Okay.

Cowart: It was a gentele society at that time and it was idyllic. It had a very interesting worldview because Saint Louisans wanted to travel to Europe, they wanted to travel to New York, they wanted to see collections, they wanted to go to the West Coast, they wanted to go to Canada—wherever I could take them, they wanted to go. That all built on these easy conversational relationships, “I know this artist, let’s go see their studio, we’ll call them up, we’ll find somebody, whether it’s in Italy, [Count] Panza [di Biumo] and Varese.” I think that was a real second training ground on a wide range of things. I don’t think I did anything Rauschenbergian at the time because Bob didn’t need me and I don’t think I needed him. I was dealing with other things. But that’s where it became much more institutional learning. I think I had a department of one, which was me and maybe a secretary. It was a one-person operation.

Q: Yes.

Cowart: But again, it was kind of a one-person operation. I'm sure Ron Greenberg—there were other people who were collecting Bob, who were showing Bob, who knew Bob. I would always go back to Lafayette Street, I'd hang around, probably a bit too much, or stop in to say hello with no other purpose in those cases. Saint Louis was just a two-hour flight and flights were cheap, all things being equal. So I would come to New York and stay a couple of days and plug back into the same circuit of people that I had seen when I was in Hartford and develop it a little bit better.

Q: And Bob would sometimes be in New York and sometimes not be in New York—

Cowart: Yes.

Q: —but you would still pop by?

Cowart: Yes. This is a blur, of course; it's history. If I would go to Sonnabend [Gallery] or to [Leo] Castelli, I would sometimes go to Lafayette Street. I would still do the same things. If Bob was there, Bob was there. If he wasn't, I would say hi to whoever was with no particular purpose. So that wasn't project-driven.

Q: Yes.

Cowart: But in Saint Louis, there was Washington University, which had a very active studio program and print shop. I got to know some of the printers there, the experimental printers like Peter Marcus and those who were also aware of contemporary printmaking, print activities. They



were inviting artists in to come and work in the studio and in the shop for their students and also to make things. I think I was probably an irritant to the staid characteristics. I got on the board of a contemporary art space down on the riverfront, which one of my directors regarded as dividing the territory, as opposed to making it richer in the community. There was still a kind of territoriality. I was involved in a sculpture park out on the west part of the city, Laumeier Sculpture garden [Laumeier Sculpture Park]—on the board of that. Again, that was competition, quote-unquote, but I had this less structured view because it was better anyway. So why not develop that kind of capacity or capability within the city?

Q: Right.

Cowart: The alternative art space on the water, the temple of beaux-arts, beauty and splendor on the hill in the park, and then the twenty-three acres of rolling landscape out west, where you put Mary Miss sculptures and [Mark] di Suveros and [Alexander] Libermans and all of that. In the eighties, it felt like most anything you wanted to do, you could probably figure out how to do and for the betterment of the community, whatever that would be. We were involved in sculpture programs in the Missouri Botanical Gardens. We did five or six Currents shows a year. All of these targets of opportunity kept popping up plus big shows and acquisitions. Things went along. I think the next Bob thing started at the National Gallery [of Art, Washington, D.C.]—

Q: Right.

Cowart: I was there in '83 so we were going through a whole series of serious exhibitions and institution building and collection forming and all of these things. There was the overlap of [Donald] Don Saff and Bob, and I assume I had bumped into Bob enough times at the [Robert E. and Jane B.] Meyerhoffs' and we could have been still going to Captiva. There was a very easy relationship. The Meyerhoffs were collecting Bob Rauschenberg, to be sure. I knew Bob, they knew Bob, Bob was around. The Corcoran [Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.] had a biennial that had Rauschenbergs in it before me. I don't even know if I saw that. But he certainly was around in Washington and in Maryland. This was targeted as an opportunity to think about the National Gallery and *Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange* [1991], which got presented, I don't remember how.



Rauschenberg, Jack Cowart, and Donald Saff at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., November 1984. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Unattributed

Q: Well, Saff said in his oral history that in one of the early conversations with the Gallery, they discovered that there's this policy that no living artists could have a one-person exhibit there?

Cowart: Yes.

Q: Do you remember that? He said that you were very—I don't remember the word he used—but you were willing to engage, to explore how you could make this work, and how you could make it happen.

Cowart: Well, going to the Gallery in '83, '84, I hadn't thought about it much. I was the other full curator, along with E. A. Carmean [Jr.]. The East Building opened in the seventies and E. A. was doing focus exhibitions of suites of work of dead artists, shall we be so blunt?

[Laughter]

Q: Sure.

Cowart: David Smith and other classical fifties artists. E. A. and I, we only overlapped for about a year. I thought we overlapped a longer time than that, but I guess it was complicated. He then went on to become the director at [Modern Art Museum of] Fort Worth. But I came in and he went away. We had a new modern twentieth-century building that we wanted to get more living twentieth-century art in, one way or another. It could have been loans; sure, there were loans. The Tremaines' collection was being solicited. The Hubert Neumann, Morton [G.] Neumann [Family] Collection was being solicited. We had had discussions with [Harry W.] Hunk and [Mary Margaret] Moo Anderson about trying to develop a national collection by other collectors elsewhere, maybe or maybe not, rating other communities. Who knows? We were always on the lookout for collection-building by collecting collectors because the National Gallery prides itself in collecting collectors—not collecting works of art—one by one by one.

Q: Okay.

Cowart: So obviously living artists were all part of that. When the Chester Dale Collection came to the National Gallery, [Pablo] Picasso was in it and he was living at the time. They had some kind of operative notion that you had to be twenty-five years dead. I don't know if that was a rule or a practice. As a sidebar, when I arrived at the National Gallery, Ruth Fine was the curator of modern prints and drawings. Ruth was doing an exhibition of Gemini, and that was living artists obviously. They were still making prints. She could do Gemini because they were developing the plan to get the Gemini archive and she had hoped to get the Crown Point Press [San Francisco] archive and she was thinking about ULAE [Universal Limited Art Editions, West Islip, New York] and Tamarind [Institute, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque] and all the rest of the print shop archives could come to the National Gallery. She succeeded in some, not so with others, but she had really plowed down a lot of the resistance to contemporary art in the National Gallery because of the Gemini show. So I came in behind her, in the wake of this.

The real rule—it was not really a rule, but it was a notion, that still everybody was discussing, was: is the MoMA involved in contemporary art making the market for the artists? No, we don't want to be there. They didn't want to buy at auction and they didn't want to take any leadership position in anointing important artists because this is the nation and all acquisitions by the National Gallery are forever. You couldn't undo mistakes. It was hard to speculate on this. MoMA could buy and sell and trip, swap, and do everything else. It was a uniquely gilded cage with handcuffs kind of place, but with enormous potential.

So the operation was that you could not do a one-person show of the primary medium of the artist.

Q: Okay.

Cowart: If an artist is viewed as a painter, you couldn't show his or her paintings. But you could show his or her drawings, or his or her prints, or his or her something else, as long as it wasn't in part of the canonical definition of what that artist was. By going to alternative media, you could skirt the issue. There was also another way, which I'm very proud that somehow I figured out. I think I had one of the lawyers or maybe it was E. A. who tipped me off when he said, "Go look at the trustees' definition of what constitutes a show." I found that somebody had advertently or inadvertently written down in some minutes someplace, in some bylaws, that a show meant ten works or more.

Q: Okay.

Cowart: Therefore, we feisty people in the twentieth-century department said oh well—we could do non-shows of the primary work of a living artist as long as it's nine works or less. We don't run up against that stipulation. I immediately called up Roy Lichtenstein because I had done the Roy '70–80 show at the Saint Louis Art Museum and it toured the world. Roy would call me when he needed something and I called Roy when I needed something. What I needed was a loan of nine paintings to start an artist room project at the National Gallery. Of course he said yes and

the rest is history with Roy and me. I think Roy was the first one in because nobody could argue that Lichtenstein wasn't a significantly National Gallery-type artist. We also knew he was in the Meyerhoff collection and he was in the Tremaine collection and he was in the Anderson Collection and the [Eli and Edythe] Broad collection and everybody else's collection in the whole wide world. He was already validated and vetted.

We started this artist room project at the National Gallery, which was endless loans from artists; Jasper Johns, Sam Francis, and we went on and on. In the third iteration is where the Bob thing comes back into play, after having softened up some of the territory along the way. If there was a significant gift component to an exhibition and if the institution felt the artist was important enough, they would consider doing an exhibition, provided the National Gallery could help curate and make that decision about what work would come to the National Gallery. So in my fractured fairytale recollections of ROCI, which went on for so many years, it became an endless delight and a certain big distraction. I thought that we could make a deal that I would be able to curate the pick of litter from the best of the best from whatever country Bob was going in [note: the National Gallery of Art acquired one unique work from each international ROCI country as gifts of the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, with the exception of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics for which Rauschenberg made two editioned series, but no unique works, and Tibet]. We were very struck by the fact that Bob's idea was going to be to travel and to work in situ with the artists who were there and it would be international. We were a national gallery, but we had international artists—European and American and Asian and everybody else. That was before practicality struck and I think Bob got a lot of materials in some countries and then came back and put them together in Captiva. That's another minor nuance of the story, but he had made

relations with other artists and other sources in those countries and had been in-country and all of that. So that was fine.



Installation view, *Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange* (also known as *ROCI USA*), National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1991. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Unattributed

Along the way this began to intrigue [John] Carter Brown [III], my supra director, because he liked reliving part of his youth as well. He remembered Rauschenberg and contemporary art and Pop art was very much an E.O.B. [eye of the beholder] at Harvard and a very classical operation. But this represented some of the *laissez faire*, the *joie de vivre* of his youth before he got structured into blockbuster land, running big exhibitions and museums. It also appealed to John [Currie] Wilmerding, who was my deputy director and my immediate report. There was a chief curator as well. Basically, it looked like they would indulge a program like ROCI because nobody knew what ROCI was from day one. It wasn't until later that we became aware that it was everything. It started out naïvely simple. Rauschenberg is going around the world, he's going to have these things, and the best of these works will come to the National Gallery. It will someday make a show, which is a summarization of either the acquisitions themselves in the short version, or if it's the long version, then we'll figure out how much space we have for it. It

was after we had solved the artist room problem and the Gemini thing before that, where there had been Bob prints of course.

I think that this course was appropriately subversive. I must say that we, in the twentieth-century department, certainly felt that we were helping to bring the National Gallery onto the beam of contemporary art with living, practicing artists involved in many ways outside the general taste categories that had been established by the so-called West Building, which was the historic center of the institution, and to the new building, which had gotten up as far as [Jackson] Pollock and Abstract Expressionism. There was a Warhol in the collection that I inherited, *A Boy for Meg I* [1962] and some other early Pop pieces, but not many. Carmean was much more into Bob Motherwell and these kinds of formalist attractions. Pop was considered to be a little common at that moment. Zero Minimal, no Conceptual—anything post-1965 was not yet there. This was only 1980-something. No muss no fuss. You have [in Washington, D.C.] the Hirshhorn [Museum and Sculpture Garden], you've got the Corcoran, the National Museum of American Art at that time for the Smithsonian. Other things were happening. It didn't have to be everything to everybody.

The National Gallery was elite and reflective and contemplative, totally not Rauschenberg by then. I think that amused Bob too. But I do think he had the goodwill of Carter Brown and the support of John Wilmerding and certainly our engagement, and Bob's infectious and sometimes overindulging personality, which always worried the very proper folks at the National Gallery.

Q: What were they worried about?



Cowart: Well, Bob's public drinking was— Pretty much the social standard of the National Gallery was a bit more controlled and a bit more formal and more proper. I think it was just that Bob would get very loquacious and very complicated and wouldn't follow the National Gallery rules because those weren't his rules. It was his definition of the moments. That had to be handled well and we joined a pack of co-conspirators to make sure that it worked out well. Ruth Fine helped, everybody in the Gemini and the works on paper projects and the print shop people—all of this was a mission to have it come to be.

I think the show opened in Mexico [*Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange: ROCI MEXICO*, Museo Rufino Tamayo Arte Contemporáneo Internacional, Mexico City, 1985]. For the first stage, I had decided that I would try to make the curatorial selection, which didn't go down terribly well with the Rauschenberg gang. It was in that announcement that Bob wants you to have this one. After that it became very clear that Bob would make the decisions or somebody on the Bob side of the line would make the decisions. It was not going to be curated by me. I would then vouch for it and then this would be the assigned work to come to the National Gallery as part of the ROCI collection. We could go along with that. I would just be the buffer in between and have to vouch for this. I lost some curatorial control, but I didn't realize how much total curatorial control I had lost on the whole exhibition project anyway. It was international relations and the National Gallery was very interested in international cultural exchanges.



Robert Rauschenberg  
*Altar Peace / ROCI MEXICO*, 1985  
Acrylic on canvas with aluminum frame, and colored,  
mirrored aluminum and tin “snake”  
123 1/2 x 90 x 24 1/4 inches (313.7 x 228.6 x 61.6)  
National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.  
Gift of the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

Q: Okay.

Cowart: We were working with every embassy in Washington. We were an international arm of cultural diplomacy and here's Bob out doing things like going to Cuba or Tibet or China. The notion was that he was another kind of ambassador. It may have been raggedy and rough, going to Moscow and all those places, but this was not outside the larger worldview of the National Gallery, so sit back, take a couple of deep breaths, and we'll roll on.



Robert Rauschenberg  
*Cuban Acre / ROCI CUBA*, 1988  
Enamel and acrylic on galvanized steel  
84 3/4 x 216 3/4 inches (215.3 x 550.5 cm)  
National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.  
Gift of the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation



Robert Rauschenberg  
*Sino-Trolley / ROCI CHINA*, 1986  
Acrylic and fabric collages on fabric-laminated paper mounted on aluminum support with objects  
105 x 264 x 60 inches (266.7 x 670.6 x 152.4 cm)  
National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.  
Gift of the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

Q: So were you following his tour pretty closely? Following the work that he was producing in each country?

Cowart: Yes, perforce. I did go to Havana and I think I went to Mexico. I didn't have enough time to go jaunting around the world because we were still running exhibitions which were up and coming, and going to be next, but I would follow them from afar and be involved in the published handouts and look at the work and commune with either Don or Bob or anybody else, David [White] or whoever, about what kinds of work that were there. We would also see that there was a nominated National Gallery piece. I didn't go to Chile, but we looked at the copper pieces. So yes, I had to follow the work because as I recall, it was still a fight to keep the show on the books.



Robert Rauschenberg  
*Copperhead Grande / ROCI CHILE*, 1985  
Acrylic and tarnishes on copper  
91 7/8 x 144 3/4 inches (233.4 x 367.7 cm)  
National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.  
Gift of the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

Q: Okay.

Cowart: In my department, we had to make sure that this was kept as a going concern and that institutionally we weren't going to just put it into limbo and it would be in the by-and-by. We also had to plan far enough out. We tried to figure out whether we would show the work independently, one at a time, which we may have done, I don't remember anymore, or how it was going to conclude, whether or when there would be a grand finale exhibition. We kept moving goalposts to keep it within a planning sequence: when it was, if there was ever an end, and then who would expire first—us or me or somebody. I do remember within the mechanics of the institution, not everybody in the National Gallery world was happy about giving this much liberty to an artist regardless—just on principle.

Q: Sure.

Cowart: It wasn't about Bob; it was just that he was part of the blunt edge of where we were moving. The exhibition planning office could plan this thing out of existence in a pen stroke by

saying, “I’m sorry, we’re moving Angkor Wat to the National Gallery, and therefore, there is no room for their show, ever.” *The Treasure Houses of Britain*[: 500 Years of Private Patronage and Art Collecting, 1985–86], all these massive exhibitions, [*Circa*] 1492[: *Art in Age of Exploration*, 1991–92]—we would take everything and it would just clear the deck. There is no East Building anymore; it’s turned into the “show palace.” So there were times when we had to have meetings where Carter Brown, John Wilmerding, my department, and the exhibition planners were all in a room, and Carter would have to say, “We keep this on the books.” He would leave the room to go to another meeting. Two minutes later, people are trying to cancel it. Five minutes later, I’m calling Carter to get back in the room to remind them what he just said because he was the supreme authority. He would say, “What don’t you understand, boys and girls? This is going to be a National Gallery project, this is going to happen. Got it?” “Yes, boss.”

Q: What were some of the reasons people were so eager to take it off the books, other than the fact that it sounds like it was somewhat complicated to plan?

Cowart: Well, they didn’t know what it was. Nobody knew what it was. It was a pig in the poke. When the National Gallery did an exhibition, before the commitment to the exhibition there was a full slideshow by the curator of everything in the exhibition. You sat there in front of the exhibition planning committee, which included a lot of other people, the development officer, PR people, the treasurer, all these third parties. It wasn’t just done by curators having fun; they were not going to give you hundreds of thousands or millions of dollars just because you like an idea. You had to prove it up against every other potential show. So with the exhibition planning

committee, you had no control of your destiny. That was one of the most exhausting parts of the National Gallery, in my opinion. I had to fight daily to maintain the status quo. The status quo was that we were going to have a ROCI show and you had to fight to keep that every waking moment so you didn't get cut off at the pass. We would never make the decisions about what was actually going to be an exhibition; it was a committee, of which I was not a representing voting member at that time. Now, under [Earl Alexander] Rusty Powell [III], it's an entirely different system. But if Carter didn't like it, it wasn't going to happen.

I think it's pretty well documented that in the design department, which was responsible for installing all the exhibitions, the head designers had a fairly jaundiced view of the importance or necessity of contemporary art for the National Gallery, even though they had the East Building. They were reluctant and grudging in many ways and really never got enthusiastic about anything that was post-1960, even when I was there. There were some personalities there that were very strong and they were able to inflect their opinions onto the senior management of the museum. Many of them were exhibitions by design. So you ran into these issues; they couldn't see anything to design yet, there was nothing to build yet. There was no castle to recreate yet. There was no Tibetan mountain to build or anything else. So this, to them, was just stuff and it wasn't deemed necessary stuff.

We saw it as a bigger picture because it laid out a whole collaborative agenda for the National Gallery with contemporary artists. It was a collision of wills, but a lot of it had to do with the command and control system of exhibition by design and what constitutes National Gallery quality. We were dealing with an artist who said—I think it's been published that Bob said, “I

make it, you figure out if it's any good, and how to keep it together," because it's all mixed materials, you had no idea what it is. That amount of honesty—I'm doing this, you figure it out—rather than being a curated exercise and knowing that we were not in a kind of curatorial control system, but we took it on faith. That was not the way the National Gallery tended to operate.

Q: Yes.

Cowart: That's how things can get sent off to the gulag, simply enough. So you had to build a support group that continually spoke about the importance of the big picture, of ROCI, and didn't obsess over those little bits. As I recall, we ended up taking over the entire East Building, or substantially as much as we could get, and the show basically became an all-museum installation.

[Laughter]

Cowart: Which was equally upsetting to all the people who had to install it because it grew and grew and grew.

Q: Right.

Cowart: It was a fiesta.

[Laughter]

Q: What did you think of what it ultimately was and what it had become?

Cowart: I'm biased of course. I thought it was great. Not all parts of it were as good as other parts, I don't think. But that wasn't the point. The sum was better than its parts in this case. The totality was fascinating. I was exhausted by it so I don't think I ever really enjoyed the exhibition as it was. But I enjoyed that it had come to a conclusion. I enjoyed that it had sent so many good signals and that the National Gallery maintained its good grace throughout, as far as I recall. I don't know if other people heard other things. We didn't live and die by critical reviews, but I think people were still making up their mind about the range of Bob's current work and whether it was just an indulged sense of, "I want to see the world and I'll make some art and raise money from others to go around," even when he self-funded it at the end. I know he had asked people for money and they were like, "So why should I give you a free ticket to go because you want to do something? Go ahead and do it, if you're going to do it, if you believe that strongly in it." There was divided opinion about the mechanics of ROCI, as I recall, about the quality of the production, and also its parts. But the *Gesamtkunstwerk* of the whole thing together, I think it was fascinating. I have no recollection of what the audience view was. I don't remember the reviews anymore. I remember the fact that we did it.

Q: Right.



Cowart: I remember that the twelve or so works that came to the National Gallery that we got through the opening and that there were some unauthorized speeches—

Q: What? What happened? [Laughs]

Cowart: Somebody hijacked the podium. It was one of those things. At the National Gallery, the opening dinner sequence of speakers is canonical; it's religiously observed. The director has words, the corporate sponsor has words, and the chairman of the board has words. The curators don't speak. They hadn't had enough artists around to know whether artists could speak or not.

Q: Right.

Cowart: The only thing I do remember is that somebody forgot to turn off the mike at the podium. I don't know if Bob spoke, he may have, but maybe not. But I do recall that [Antoinette] Toiny Castelli, late in the day, after a few drinks, came up and started to make an address from the mic. Memo to the file—always turn off the mic!

[Laughter]

Cowart: She hijacked it and that's the only time I've ever seen that at the National Gallery, that somebody would spontaneously get to the mic and say, "I've got to tell you." It's just one of these things.

Q: What did she want to say, do you remember?

Cowart: No. She wanted to thank Bob, she wanted to give an homage to Bob, she wanted to talk about this thing. She was expressive and motivated, thinking that it was like open mic night. After going through the very carefully choreographed kind of things, people went back to their seats, we were all sitting down, and all of a sudden, we hear somebody else speaking impromptu, which was not the National Gallery way. I know that didgeridoos and those kinds of musical things were great and [Richard] Dickie Landry and all the people who were there doing this thing, which I believe I had suggested to Genevra [O.] Higginson. She was a brilliant and relatively starchy special events coordinator, who engineered these things to a fare-thee-well. They were just the most beautiful dinners I've ever been to any place, putting New York in the shade by comparison, in the way that they were orchestrated and the beauty of the settings in the East Building. I had suggested to Genevra that we should maybe get a reggae band; that would be much more fun. She, as the wife of a diplomat who used to be running Number Twos in the Luxembourg embassies, somehow thought, "Dear lad, I really don't think—do you know what this is all about, this reggae stuff?" "Yes," I said, "Well, that kind of fun is what we should be having at the National Gallery." Well, that was thumbs down.

But not all the stuff that happened at that opening was cleared in advance through the special events office, which we were, again, rigorously controlling.

Q: What else happened?

Cowart: I think that there was stuff that just wasn't made much of; if it was going to be Dickie Landry or it was going to be didgeridoos or it was going to be other musicians, there were going to be other performances, other events. It just happened. Some of us knew that this might happen or might not happen, but I think there was probably some underground activity from the Rauschenberg side: "We're not going to trouble the National Gallery, we're just going to do it because we want it and it's going to be a blast." We were trying to just damage control the situation and mention with a very soft voice that this might be happening and we'll see what happens. It was as close to, I think, an artist Happening that the National Gallery had seen for a long time. The Gemini opening had been pretty square and other things were orderly. But this was a party.

Q: So it was a blast.

Cowart: I recall, it was, again, very outside the style of the National Gallery, closer to the kind of blasts and parties that happened at the Corcoran or the Hirshhorn or elsewhere. But this was at a gallery where we still had white tie dinners at times and three hundred dollar dinners—a place which prided itself on its reserve and formality. So it was wonderful to see this full conversion. I would say that the Trisha Brown dance event that was staged during the exhibition was—even the special events planner and those for whom the scales were slow to fall from their eyes, they used their full energies to make that possible. And it was astonishing. I had no idea, A, the cost or B, the complexities or C, the logistics it would take to get that set up. It was *Astral Converted* [(50"), 1991], I think. To do that and on the mall, on the steps of the National Gallery—it was super significant embracing by the National Gallery for this project. When all is said and done,

they came around, and with enthusiasm and elegance and support. I took it for granted at that time that we were going to do it true to performance.



Rauschenberg's set design for premiere of Trisha Brown Dance Company's *Astral Converted (50")*, National Gallery of Art, May 1991. Pictured: Diane Madden and Trisha Oesterling. Photo: Phil Charles. National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C. Gallery Archives

Symbolically I think largely, ROCI at the National Gallery was eighty percent symbolism and twenty percent art, and a hundred percent progress and two hundred percent developmental leverage to develop inherent flexibilities with the way one can approach a living artist. Bob had so much scope that it paid off. At the same time, I think it was a celebration of Bob's rangy creativity that could find this amount of canvas, of gallery space, and a desire to do it well. They still did it very well, however grudgingly the design team was. The lighting team was great and the installation team was great. Everybody performed professionally.

Aside from all the interior intrigues, it ended up as an astonishing array that all of us had to walk through every day on the way to work because you had to get through the atrium and the galleries to get to the East Building administrative wing where everybody was, from CASVA

[Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts], to the event planners, to the researchers. None of us said, “Well, I told you so,” and none of us said, “This was good for you, shut up and take your medicine.” We didn’t take hostages and we didn’t preen and say how it was. It was just part of a life-changing event as much as my going to Captiva was way back in 1973. It had this interesting twenty years later symmetry, which was fascinating; and then you move on to the next projects.

Q: How was it a life-changing event for you?

Cowart: I think we felt empowered. For me, personally, it was that we had brought it off.

Q: Okay.

Cowart: Curators get very territorial about building their collections and the legacies of collections. I do think that everything’s related; you can’t say that the dots don’t connect in a linear fashion. It’s a swarm of events which create an atmosphere of inclusion. The ROCI thing certainly made the Meyerhoff thing much more credible, in developing my previous and long-term relationship with Bob and Jane Meyerhoff, which began around Bob too and also with Jasper and Roy Lichtenstein and the artists they were collecting. That gave the National Gallery credibility in their eyes as a place where they could do stuff with contemporary art. So the Meyerhoffs were more relaxed about the massive agreement when their collection comes to the National Gallery.

To have gone through a ROCI thing, whether somebody liked it or not, was an opening for the persuasion that I was able to provide for the contemporaneity of the National Gallery, vis-a-vis the Vogel Collection. With [Herbert] Herb and Dorothy Vogel, who looked at that kind of blowout, well, it was not their taste at all, but may have been that they liked that the Gallery could do something. It's not about old masters; it's about new masters. Maybe our stuff, which is so esoteric, and in many cases, "What is this?" had made it arguably legitimate for us to talk to them about the bigger picture for the National Gallery of the future. This kind of collection-building developed that collection, which will be at the National Gallery forever and which will be part of the national patrimony forever. It was really that and then the fiftieth anniversary of the National Gallery, the developing gift programs of modern and contemporary art coming from people, artists, others; that was all part of a loosely-organized and relatively spontaneous and not terribly Machiavellian, but persistent and moderately aggressive exploitation of the capacities and the capabilities of the National Gallery.

Bob's patience—I'm sure he was probably getting a lot of contrary feed from other people, I imagine, who would always say, "Why are you bothering to try to have to play it their way? Why don't you just pitch, punt, and do something else, or go someplace else?" Subsequently, things like the [Solomon R.] Guggenheim [Museum, New York] and [Thomas] Krens and other things would happen. But I think Bob was essentially loyal because he never bolted regardless of what he might have done. I'm just imagining this because this is the way things happen in participatory democracies, even though it was a participatory autocracy where Bob is still the boss—we're going to do what he says. I think it was institutionally healthy. It may have been reckless in trying to move the institution pretty far pretty fast, but it was leverage; it was just a

lever point that was important. I think that the residuals of that artistic happening, of taking over the East Building as a grand culmination, and to be able to spin it that way—I learned a lot by it. Everybody learned a lot by it. Even those people who had been dreading that moment when it all came home to roost—I think they all probably benefited from the experience.

It shows you that with enough creative thinking in the room, you can probably work your way around a lot of problems.

Q: Sure.

Cowart: Bob and Roy and Dorothy and so many other artists, and Leo and Ileana [Sonnabend] have always been like working with a bunch of friends who know each other. And you have a commonality of points of reference, far more sophisticated than I was, because everybody knew everybody, at least in this tranche of artists and collectors and dealers and critics— But the thing that was so exciting for me about ROCI was that it was so unknown and that I did wait for the next installment from the field to figure out, “What are we going to make of this?”

Q: Right.

[Laughter]

Cowart: It usually was—“What is our coping strategy going to be when we see this? I hope that we can deal with it.”

Q: Right.

Cowart: God forbid that we don't have any deal breaker that comes up.

With our kids, we would go up to the studio and our son played Ping-Pong with Bob in Captiva and those kinds of things. We would take the kids up there, knowing that dinner was going to be about two o'clock in the morning, which was not at all our family schedule. But we would go up and try to work it into some reasonable thing, "It's only midnight, kids, don't worry." I remember my daughter was about that high and walked in and she said, "Dad, there's something very strange going on here." She was looking at a purple polka dot pig cast that was in the middle of the studio floor. I said, "Yes, but don't say that too loudly."



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

She was trying to make sense of it. I always saw that as my view of Bob—that there was something strange and wonderful, elusive, non-structured, and creative going on, and to let it roll. Every time we went to Captiva, the kids would say, "Are we going to go see Bob?" "Yes."



That was that same kind of pilgrimage. It was inclusive. Our children grew up knowing two artists, visiting them a number of times; one was Bob and one was Roy. So it seems funny to be continually involved with both.

Q: Right.

Cowart: So that's how they defined the living arts as well.

Q: Yes. I want to talk a little bit about the intro that you wrote for the ROCI catalogue.

Cowart: Yes, which I don't remember at all. [Laughs]

Q: Okay. Well, before we talk about what you did write, do you remember that you had originally written an introduction that Don Saff wasn't so fond of?

Cowart: I'm sure. It would have been consistent.

Q: [Laughs] So I'm going to read you his words. He saw the original introduction as problematic because—this is him—“he brought up this whole thing about the motive being questionable American imperialism, cultural imperialism—I couldn't believe that he wrote that. I read the thing and I went back to him and I said, ‘I don't understand why you're writing this. After all we've done and what this has been all about, why do you have to write that? Why do you have to exacerbate this issue?’ I asked him to modify it and he did. He modified his introduction.” [“The

Reminiscences of Donald Saff,” Rauschenberg Oral History Project, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, 2013] Do you remember that?

Cowart: I didn’t realize I was that blunt about cultural imperialism, but—

Q: Well, this is his take on it. These aren’t your words.

Cowart: Yes. All right, well, I remember it. This goes back to Untitled Press days, as I recall. I was always very awkward about writing about Bob anyway—about notions of Bob. By this time, I am sure that it was probably a first draft. I have no idea. But I did expect that eventually it would get beaten into compliance. I may have had, at that time, too much of a drone in the National Gallery system.

Q: Well, Saff—

Cowart: Yes and Don fancies himself as a writer as well. So we had a collision of views, no doubt.

Q: Saff used the word “exacerbate,” he said, “Why do you have to exacerbate this issue?” So had ROCI’s motive been called into question throughout? Were people calling it a form of cultural imperialism? Was that a criticism that was being directed at it?

Cowart: I think if I brought it up, I probably brought it up to then deny it. This is revisionism perhaps—

Q: Sure.

Cowart: But I don't think I would have left that on the table. It may have been that I proposed that as an opening argument and then would say, "On the contrary, it ended up being something entirely different."

Q: Okay.

Cowart: So it gave the appearance of what one was always hearing about, "Here's the American artist coming into a third world or second world country, let me show you how we do it together, boys and girls." It ended up being far more sentimental and far more engaging. But I do know that the argument that I had pitched the show on was a collaboration between the locals and the drop-in, and that that was a cultural exchange.

Q: Okay.

Cowart: In the end, it had gotten a little bit more one-sided. It got more Bob-sided for a ton of practical reasons. Bob is collaborative in many ways and he infuses a lot of collaboration from others. Eventually he ends up being the mouthpiece. So I think some of the other contributors may— It ended up all being Bob Rauschenberg work. With that many other hands involved. I

may have been frustrated by that and thought that it was a little too top-down. That's now, speaking twenty years later. I was probably setting up an argument that would then say, "But he absorbed—" I don't remember. I haven't reread the catalogue. I might have refreshed myself on this, I only have twenty copies of that at home, so why didn't I? But I didn't.

But no doubt, Don and I were always arm wrestling over something. That probably continues to this day, as he's one of the great arm wrestlers of opinions and also egos. He was the protagonist on behalf of ROCI and Bob, and I had to be the protagonist on the point of view of curatorial objectivity for the National Gallery. So we were inherently going to be in conflict with each other in a certain way. While I didn't want to exacerbate the international relations part of it, I thought it was still idealistic. If I had gotten somewhere, I don't know what I did write in the end, but I didn't want to be a pushover for the project and indicate that we had done this at all costs with no oversight and command and control, as the old federal good way is, that we hadn't lost our curatorial independence. Though in fact we had effectively caved and decided to go along with the ride.

Q: Okay.

Cowart: Certainly by National Gallery standards. As I said, they would review every show item by item and they would second-guess the curator and they would kick stuff out and they would tune it. You were very much at the mercy of another gang of other thought. In many cases, the exhibitions turned out better for that intervention of others. There were times when we, my department and I, personally, did stuff that was under the radar. But when you get to a

publication, you had to be a little bit crisper in setting up those stress lines. I think it was a stress line between how ROCI started and what we thought we were into and how it became—all of which was good. I'm sure that there were still some scars that I was feeling about having to defend the position.

Q: Sure.

Cowart: It may have been naïve to think that if read from the outside, that I wasn't a good enough writer, actually, to bring it off. But it just couldn't be a hundred percent homage to the artist.

Q: Sure.

Cowart: It had to show some kind of tensions.

Q: Okay.

Cowart: I'm defending myself, I think. But I'm defending the process and the curatorial objectivity that was supposed to be there.

Q: Fair enough. Okay, well, in the introduction that was then published [in *Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange*, 1991], you wrote that, "ROCI institutionalized Rauschenberg's need for dislocation and the collaborative process." So having known Rauschenberg and having

seen him at work in Captiva and then seeing the work that he produced throughout ROCI, what do you think he derived from this sense of dislocation?

Cowart: Working without a net. I think Bob was always taking risks. I think his enjoyment of working against obstacles was a part of his art. His visual juxtapositions of that are so chance involved. Though you look at it in the long run of things and for the catalogue raisonné you may find that there's some grand synthesis that's going on with Bob's aesthetic. As I said, he was inclusive. He was inclusive enough to include the National Gallery and to deal with all the crap that we were putting in the way. That was already a dislocation for him because it wasn't a relationship that he had had with the Walter Hopps kind of curators. He had a different kind of liberty through the National Gallery.

I do think that this sense of the dislocations are both physical and they're certainly cultural; they're communicative, the communications dislocations, the having to work through other fixers, rolling the dice—all of this seemed, in my view, to take ten to fifteen years off of his life, but add ten to fifteen years back to his creative life. It was exhausting, but it was creative exhaustion, which added to a repertoire of imagery which he then used in various ways. Things cropped up through this collage mentality—the world is a sampler of things—that he could reincorporate in future art. I really did feel that he was gathering materials for art not yet made. And wouldn't that be great?

It was up to him to then use this, almost a force feeding of exotica or stuff that you just can't find photographing in either New York City or in dumps in Captiva or in trash piles or in the

Outback. It obliged this getting out of a comfort zone where it's "Bob World" and everybody else is their world and having to interface with it. That works aesthetically and I think it works personally, and it was invigorating, if not scary. For the people who had to make it all happen, whether it's the Thomas Buehlers or the Don Saffs—how are you going to get the car batteries that were not going to be stolen in Russia or the Soviet Union, to be able to do this thing? It was a logistics nightmare. But he had people who also had drunk the Kool-Aid.

Q: All right. I'm going to refer to my notes for a moment. Something else that I read in that catalogue, the National Gallery catalogue includes the conversation between Bob Rauschenberg and Don Saff.

Cowart: Yes.

Q: They're speaking about attending the Venice Biennale in 1990, where Bob contributed a piece to the Russian Pavilion [*Orrery (Borealis)*, 1990] and Saff said the Russians didn't have a budget, "virtually a zero dollar outlay for the Soviet pavilion. Yet there was a kind of energy there that I did not sense in the glitz of some of the other shows. I spent some time in the Soviet Union with you meeting artists and it somehow reminded me of New York in the late 1950s where we got together over someone's kitchen table and argued ideas." As I'm reading about ROCI, I wonder if part of what appealed to Bob was that a certain moment had passed in the United States, and in the countries he was choosing to go and visit, there was a rawness, there was an engagement.



Robert Rauschenberg  
*Orrery (Borealis)*, 1990  
Acrylic and tarnishes on brass with  
brass objects  
97 x 181 x 23 inches (246.4 x 459.7 x  
58.4 cm)  
Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen,  
Düsseldorf

Cowart: Sure.

Q: Yes, you agree? Is that something that you observed?

Cowart: Well, I can certainly imagine it.

Q: Yes.

Cowart: He had become institutionalized in his own way in the United States, so he's a known commodity. So wherever he goes, it's the same deal. These were more off-the-grid places. He didn't go to Paris and the complexities of getting to Africa were another matter. But the idea that there were these places on the edge of things—I think going to Cuba was profoundly moving and profoundly indicative of exactly the situation where it was counter-conventional. He wanted to go with the belief that these communications between struggling artists could debate the natures of art as well. All this became political too, mind you. I was at the Havana thing and I know that it was complicated [*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]. He still did look like the reigning sultan who was coming in—the big guy from the West who was coming in; they wanted to meet him.

It was kind of what happened to Georg Baselitz, who would be in Berlin and all the young artists, doing huge people like Julian Schnabel, would sidle up to Baselitz and say, “Oh, I love your work.” What can we do? That’s where the United States art was three steps ahead. Where something was going to be in China or Tibet or Havana or Chile or even Mexico, where Bob wouldn’t be taken so much as a grand personage, but as a communication hope. I think that kind of communication was Bob getting new material. He wanted to level the playing field again, which had gotten so hierarchical. It was a dumb luck thing, but he may have sensed it inherently from the very beginning, that: “I want to get back to basics. I want to make it difficult to make art and to make concepts and so I have to deprive myself of certain advantages that I have here in the States, and if I’m going for the reset, that these areas, however they’re chosen, put enough impediments in the way that making art wasn’t going to be easy.” It was like a Christo project negotiation with cultural agencies and visas and fixers and hustlers and workers and supports, and bring your own paint, all this kind of stuff.

At the same time, meeting people who lived that life as their daily life, where they just don’t go to SoHo and go out to swank restaurants and stuff, in the power system—it could have been a revolt against that status quo. It wasn’t a joyride. That is certainly where I would think that it was this return to basics thing and you had to leave the country to do it. You had to go into exile to actually find both more material, but more bedrock. So yes, both in retrospect and I think even at

the time, I thought he was newly sourcing, resourcing work. Maybe I had never thought about the personal need or desire to get back to a simpler time, but if you're traveling with some entourage, it's not a simpler time anyway; you're just not going to sit back and have a beer with somebody. You have to have a translator, a venue, and all of this. But I do think he liked to be as low to the ground as possible with young or upcoming or undiscovered or frustrated or other artists.

Q: And the audience reactions would have been very different as well.

Cowart: Oh absolutely. The notion was to give their culture back to them for their eyes as seen through his eyes—that's a little patronizing, but—not saying I've got the right view on the things that I have collaged out of your culture to make it a Rauschenberg, and Rauschenberging it, Rauschenbergizing it. But I think Bob thought this was really double hearsay, no-say—I'm just imagining this—that he thought it was probably better than nothing and that it was the start of a dialogue which couldn't have been had through other cultural emissaries. He had to be it. He was the vibrating mechanism that needed to go into these settings, however passingly, and then make something of it. That was a big challenge. It was crazy. Other artists would be very comfortable within their own system.

Q: Right.

Cowart: Except Bob's system wasn't about necessarily comfort. So I think it was entirely Bob's system he was very comfortable in, but you got to strip away the stuff, and we're going to go all on the road.

Q: Sure.

Cowart: If there was this established dialogue, that's what I think we felt, at least in the twentieth-century department, about these *Wanderjahre*, this wandering period of time, this grand tour, which was much more of this raw adventure in the sketchy places, and there would be ups and downs to be sure.

Q: Okay.

Cowart: But Bob lived through a lot of ups and downs. So I think it was consistent. I don't know how much we saw at the time. I looked at it as an institutional wedge, that I had enough institutional support to be able to do something that would have been unthinkable by the institution, if it was left to its own ways.

Q: Right.

Cowart: So it was a collaborative subversion and luckily, as I said, A, it came to an end, and B, it came to some consequence, which continued to look better in retrospect.

Q: Right.

[Laughter]

Q: Okay, thank you. So Dorothy said that when Bob passed away, you said, “Losing Bob is like losing a continent.” Do you remember saying that?

Cowart: Yes.

Q: And what did you mean?

Cowart: Well, I do think that Bob was a world, literally. It was always a dependable landmass. I tend to speak in metaphors, but I think this one was pretty much the way I felt. There was always Bob. There was always this island, whether it was Captiva or otherwise. But it’s “Bob Land.” For those of us who had been involved in that, in that case for decades—I wasn’t dependent, Bob had so many interdependencies, people depended upon Bob, like the same people who were dependent upon Roy. But if Roy was a state, Bob was a country within that state. I mean, Roy had a lot of people who were very dependent on Roy in his lifetime and he was always there. And it was abrupt. Bob’s slow decline made it more visible that this was going to end the game, where with Roy, at seventy-three, it wasn’t.

Against all the expectations Bob would be alive because he was a hard liver. That he lived as long as he did was always some amazement, through the wonders of medical science and sheer

will, I guess, was able to prevail, by willfulness largely and with good support from a lot of people. But to the end, it's not maudlin or too sentimental, I do think that Bob's work indicated a whole lot of stuff. It meant a whole lot of things to many people whether they liked his work or not. It had been very present and convenient to kick around at times—about the new Bob versus the old Bob.

Even the old Bob, nobody understands, but beyond a few pieces that were critical in European art history and that are there in Moderna Museet [Stockholm] or in the [Centre Georges] Pompidou [Paris] or someplace, the critical view of Bob is still out, even early Bob. But early Bob's easier not to pay attention to. Later Bob, the old Bob, the seventies, eighties, nineties Bob is complicated. His existence took up a lot of just the architecture of speaking or thinking about it. The nomenclature—it was hard to define the rest of the world without Bob. The idea of making him a continent that had such a presence, you always had to navigate either over it or around it, at least in the New York art world. I don't know whether people in Italy would care that this is one thing or another. But certainly it was in the American art scene as one of the grand masters of both complication and energy and goodwill and cheer. I think that that was an important sense of the history of art or the history of modern and contemporary art, as both a personality and for a body of work.

Now the body of work hasn't gone away. That will always be the legacy. But the personality of Bob, infectious and frustrating and annoying and exasperating, and all this other stuff that, at least to me, made a lot of us better people for having to cope with that. Hopefully Bob could have said the same or the people around Bob. So that's not so much an homage, but I do think

that I felt that I lost a big acquaintance—if not a friend, a partner in crime, and one who made me a much more patient and complete person with a point of view and not so curatorial. So all of that was goodness and now having fifteen years at the Lichtenstein Foundation has certainly been—all of that was good raw material for us to think about how we've continued our life, and both Roy, who we know very well, but other artists and now foundations.

So it's been cumulative. Everything has been foundation, small F, building blocks that were significantly aided by these experiences. And Bob's one of the various ones.

Q: Right.

Cowart: So yes, that was something you could lean on, you could always lean on the fact that Bob was there. I don't have that crutch anymore.

Q: Yes. All right. Well, I've asked you everything that I've wanted to ask you today. Is there anything else that you'd like to share?

Cowart: Wow, I was surprised we got through my 45-minute monologue and there was still something left to ask, that we had met the needs. I can only say, I believe I must have said it by now at least once if not twice, I either said it in my mind or it was a letter I never wrote to Bob or I did write to Bob, someday they'll find it in the archives or maybe they'll not, it doesn't make any difference. But as I said, from the beginning, Bob was my first contemporary living artist. It's like your first kiss in a certain way. I'm so glad that it started there. Again this is all about

me, but I do think that what I would consider to be a totally haphazard experience, facilitated by Jim Elliott who, I'm not even sure at times knew that I worked for him, because he was from Pluto. Jim was great and so out there. But I felt that some of the best visual aesthetic training that I ever had was facilitated by Bob, by just being Bob, and by Jim's harebrained idea that we should go to Captiva. Those were very formative days, more than I knew. It really helped create a sense of even boy-to-boy dialogues about art, which are not great things. I don't ask a lot of questions. But Bob was very open-ended about that. So I thought that was always good and it just taught me how to be an observer in "Bob World"—which is not "Me World"—it's his world. It's not my style, but I think it was really tonic and inspirational to see that kind of daily risk-taking and the craziness that was going on because it ultimately was very responsible. Bob made it appear as if this was not important except to him, but I think he had a higher professional sense of his work and it may have appeared to others when he was doing it. So there's not even a benefit of the doubt. I think it was a real commitment to the craft. More is better in this case. Aside from rewriting things that I've written about him, by others for me, and making a go; at least I got the first chance of trying to figure it out. And then guys jumped in and they fixed it. So it's fine.

Q: Sure.

Cowart: I learned about co-authorship. Other artists are a bit more persnickety and they tell you what to write from the beginning and then you become basically a stenographer—

Q: Right.

Cowart: —but I never felt that I was restrained and it was all good for everybody. If it was good for me, it must be good for somebody else. So that's my P.S.

Q: All right, well, thank you very much!

Cowart: Great! Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]