

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of

Charles Lahti

Columbia Center for Oral History Research

Columbia University

2015

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Charles Lahti conducted by Cameron Vanderscoff on July 10, 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: Charles Lahti

Location: New York, New York

Interviewer: Cameron Vanderscoff

Date: July 10, 2015

Q: Today is Friday, July 10, 2015 and this is Cameron Vanderscoff here with Charles Lahti for the Robert Rauschenberg Oral History Project. We're here at the [Robert Rauschenberg] Foundation at 381 Lafayette Street [New York]. One of the interests of this project is learning a little bit about people's contexts before they met Bob Rauschenberg, given his interest in collaboration. So if we can learn a little bit about the context that you brought with you, particularly if you would just mind stating for the record when and where you were born and if you could walk us through the evolution of your interest in art. Bob talked a lot about *The Blue Boy* [Thomas Gainsborough, 1770] moments and all these very different sort of key experiences that happened, so I'm wondering if you would mind walking us through your own sort of development in that regard.

Lahti: I was born May 19, 1954, in Brunswick, Georgia. Both of my parents were in the Navy, mother and father. I was born while they were still in the Navy and then my father subsequently went to the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor to study electrical engineering. In the late fifties he went into the computer business so technology is something that's always been around me and hence I can be the shoemaker's son and not really care about it, much to my dismay now, but that's life. We lived in several places because the technology was always changing. We moved from Chicago after Ann Arbor, and to Phoenix, Arizona when it was a burgeoning place

and all the people who became well-known in the computer business—like Seymour [Roger] Cray and the guy who invented fiber optics—all those people were people I knew about when I was a kid. And funnily enough the other thing was that I also knew Steven Spielberg at that time because his father and my father worked together. I remember my father coming back talking about what kind of movie camera these engineers were going to get for this kid. But anyway, that's that part. I guess I bring that up not so much as a—I don't know, I've always kind of been available to lots of different extraordinary people over my life just by saying yes and just being around. Circumstances have always provided. I don't know whether it's like Mr. Magoo or Forrest Gump or whoever you want to talk about, but it's a bit like that.

From there we moved to a small town in Wisconsin where my father was making memory systems for computers. Then we moved to Minneapolis, then we were in Glasgow in Scotland for a number of years, and then we went back to Minnesota where I did my degree in studio arts. So that's that background, basically.

When I was a little kid, I was always drawing and I was always making things and I was always doing prints. I remember in Chicago asking my mother to help me make a shamrock on a potato to make a potato rubber stamp kind of thing on a design. At the time because my parents didn't have a lot of money, we used to be taken out to all the museums of Chicago, which is a great place to be. I remember going to the Art Institute of Chicago and saying, "Hey, I want to do that." I would see the [Georges-Pierre] Seurat that was there. I never said his name, but there was a great painting that's in Washington [D.C.] now by [Gustave] Caillebotte of a street scene in Paris of two people walking under a parasol [*Paris Street; Rainy Day*, 1877] and I remember that

hitting me like a ton of bricks. Then after that, when I lived in Arizona, I used to be able to go around on the bus as a little kid and go to visit the Phoenix Art Museum and see things there. I remember seeing a Frida Kahlo painting of the woman who jumped out of a window that Mrs. [Clare Boothe] Luce gave to the museum [*The Suicide of Dorothy Hale*, 1938]. I also remember there was somebody there who was talking about a Karel Appel painting that was already ten years old and they said he painted the eyes with his fingers and that the paint underneath was still wet. I thought that was an amazing thing—to have a painting on the wall where the paint was still wet. So I felt like it was alive.

I hadn't thought about it prior to now, but I think from all the people I've known and what we've talked about, paint is really a living thing. You touch it and it turns to life, and I think that when I saw that Appel painting and the woman was talking about it, that it was something that was still alive and that it was breathing and living on the wall. And that's that part; that's kind of how I got into the art business.

I always worked on painting and printmaking and silkscreen at an early age. I would cut paper stencils. When I was living in Scotland, I was taking art classes, but you're not allowed to have an art class just for art. You had to have a practical application so you could pass the standard exams in the country, so I would have to take these tests once a year where you would have to do a four-pattern repeat silkscreen with paper stencils. The assignment one of the years I remember was you have a babbling brook. You have a hotel by the babbling brook. Make the curtains for the dining room. And so that was that. That's how I started making multiples on my prints.

As time went by I went on to the University of Minnesota [Minneapolis] and I studied printmaking. It was a really great time because there was a fellow there, Malcolm [Haynie] Myers, who came out of the [Mauricio] Lasansky school [note: Lasansky established the printmaking workshop program at the University of Iowa, Iowa City]; it was etching and engraving and all of that. I had as my painting instructor Mary Abbott. It's very interesting for me to look across the book and see Mr. [Willem] de Kooning's book [note: referring to a de Kooning book with a photograph of Abbott and Rauschenberg]. I know that Mary's in there and Mary's still a friend of mine—I visited her last week and I'm going to go to her birthday next week and there's that famous picture of them all sitting on a log out on the beach and Mary's there. Also it was through Mary, visiting her out there, that she brought me to de Kooning's studio and I got to visit de Kooning and the whole thing. She said, "I'm going to visit him. He may want to just spend time with me, but you can go into the studio and move everything around and do what you like and let him come and talk to you." And that's what happened. So that was that whole thing.

Q: And so was she then your introduction to this world of the Abstract Expressionists? Of that New York scene that was going on?

Lahti: Yes and also, at the school, there were a lot of Abstract Expressionist teachers who hadn't quite gotten to where they wanted. They all seemed—I can't say they were bitter, but they also felt like they were not gladiators in the arena anymore and that kind of bothered them. Not in a serious way, but that's the best way to describe it. People who have to give up their dancing

career, their fighting career, or whatever kind of thing, because life just goes on. It was more like that.

The other more important thing was that, in the lithography department, we— I’m actually getting goosebumps thinking about this guy. His name is Zigmunds [“Zig”] Priede. He was the fellow who printed out at Universal [Limited Art Editions (ULAE), West Islip, New York] with [Tatyana] Tanya [Grosman] back in the old days. He was there from the very beginning. I know he printed Jasper [Johns]’s early *0 through 9* [1960]. He was there printing with Bob when *Accident* [1963] cracked up as they were going on the print. He talked about how everybody flipped out and Bob thought it was funny, said, “Piece it back together and let’s print what we’ve got,” so they kept going on until it finally fell apart completely. I don’t really know quite how—



Robert Rauschenberg
Accident, 1963
 Lithograph
 41 1/4 x 29 1/2 inches (104.8 x 74.9 cm)
 From an edition of 29, published by Universal
 Limited Art Editions, West Islip, New York

Q: It broke multiple times, I think.

Lahti: It broke multiple times, so they just kept going until it was no longer possible. In that standard Universal thing, the edition was determined by two things: one, what paper Tanya had on hand, like there's that famous *Tea Pot* [1975] of [Claes] Oldenburg's that there's only six or ten of because she had six sheets of that Balinese paper [note: edition of 34]. Then there were others with Bob that had a special [J.] Whatman paper that was antique—antique meaning only forty years old, but still antique so far as paper goes. So he was the guy who did all that printing with them. So—

Q: With ULAE?

Lahti: ULAE. If he [Priede]'s not been interviewed for this—whoever hears this—I think you should get your hands on him. You can find him on Facebook. He's got the dope on how Bob learned how to make prints. Anyway, I was studying with him and he was notoriously rigorous. He would say, "If you're going to be in my class you have to work at least forty hours a week. I don't want cute pictures of clowns or cats. It's just a personal preference. If you do that, watch out. I'm not going to stop you, but I'd rather not see that." He said, "You're going to have to work really hard because I've worked with people who know how to work really hard." If you also look at the other prints he printed out at Universal—he printed the Barnett Newman prints, also along with Marisol [née Marisol Escobar] and Lee Bontecou, and I'm not sure if he printed with [Larry] Rivers. This is all well documented. You can find that out. But he did a lot of prints and they were always amazing.

Just as another aside, I remember he had a copy of *Watchman* [1967] of Jasper's in a portfolio he showed us in the class and there was this thing with the litho white line around the whole of it. He said it was the one time that litho kind of failed them and that we probably should have silkscreened that little white line around it instead of just lithoing it because when you put litho white it always is transparent; hence those very pale white flags of Jasper's on black paper. They look like they're gray or more ghostly and that's not really how it is, but it's just how the litho ink reacts on the black paper.



Jasper Johns
Watchman, 1967
 Lithograph
 36 x 24 inches (91.4 x 61 cm)
 From an edition of 40, published by
 Universal Limited Art Editions, West Islip,
 New York

I say that because also, if you jump over to Bob, I know Bob through Styria Studio, and Styria Studio—if my recollection is correct—started out in L.A. and they were—

Q: In Glendale [California], yes.

Lahti: —part of the Gemini [G.E.L.] series, the *Stoned Moon* [1969–70] and the rocket ships that Bob was doing, and they were the silkscreen kiss plate on top of it, of a chart or something like

that. They came out of a background of making blueprints for the Air Force and the aerospace industry out of silkscreens. So they couldn't make the blueprints big enough, but they got blue paper and they silkscreened white ink on them so that they could make their parts. I think that's how Gemini or Bob or somebody found them and connected the Rischners [Adi K. and Adolf Rischner] together.



Robert Rauschenberg
Sky Garden (Stoned Moon), 1969
Lithograph and screenprint
89 1/4 x 42 inches (226.7 x 106.7 cm)
From an edition of 35, published by Gemini
G.E.L., Los Angeles

Bob already knew how to make the lines stand out. The other thing Bob always used to say is, you could save any painting with a single line. Hence, that's why if you see a painting that has a little balance—it just has a line that doesn't go all the way across—it was a painting that was in trouble for Bob, but he fixed it with one line. I see it over and over and over again.

Q: So you meet Bob at Styria Studios and I'd like to go into that. But first, if you could sort of connect the dots for us from Minnesota to there. You talked about the sense of discipline, that

you were expected to put in forty hours a week and there was this sense of seriousness in the work; you weren't making clowns, that sort of a thing.

Lahti: Yes.

Q: And so I'm curious then, because of course a lot is written about say, Bob and Black Mountain [College, North Carolina], that sort of thing. And so these lessons and a certain iconoclasm that he had there, the idea that what he learned there was to go against a lot of what he had learned prior. I'm curious if you can take us to that moment of emerging from school in that way and what it is you think you got from that experience. What was your momentum? As a way of sort of guiding us towards your ultimate association with Styria.

Lahti: Well what happened was, is that I think my relationship with Zig Priede was much like the one that Bob would allude to with Mr. [Josef] Albers. It was very much the same kind of thing, where you had somebody who was really good at what they did and they expected as much from you, as a kid, as if you were a master. They just expected it from you and they wanted you to go to that space inside yourself to make something happen.

How I got involved in all of this is yet another one of those, as people say, a Charlie story. I had been working on my prints. I was putting myself through school by working at the Coca-Cola factory on the late shift and getting off at two o'clock in the morning, and then I would come and go work in the print shop at the university, where you had twenty-four-hour access. I remember I was finishing up this one print that I had worked on all quarter and it was about seven o'clock in

the morning and Zig Priede walked in and he said, “Oh, you’re here, eh?” I said, “Yes.” Then he said, “Well, Charles, I have a question for you.” In all the years I had taken a class from him, he had never referred to me as Charles, even though the classes were only six or seven people. So I said, “Well okay.” I was twenty-two and said, “Okay, he’s using the word Charles. I should at least pay attention at seven o’clock in the morning.” He said, “How tied down in Minneapolis are you?” I said, “Well, not at all.” In fact I was. I was in my first love affair. I was six months from graduating. I was making money. I was actually paying off a Rauschenberg print that I had bought on time, which was called *Treaty* [1974]. I had bought it from a local doctor whose wife didn’t like it so I made an arrangement to buy it from him at two hundred dollars a month. All of that and I was not in a position to leave my job or what have you, and my family was there and all of that. So he said, “Okay.” And he came back and five minutes later he said, “Well, there’s a job for you in New York as a printer. I’ve accepted it for you. They’re sending you an airline ticket here via express mail. They want you there next Wednesday.” So I said goodbye to my lover, I said goodbye to my family, I quit school, I quit my job, and I got on the plane the next Wednesday and moved to New York.



Robert Rauschenberg
Treaty, 1974
Lithograph on two sheets of paper
54 1/8 x 40 3/16 inches (137.5 x 102.1 cm)
From an edition of 31, published by
Universal Limited Art Editions, West Islip,
New York

Q: So why did he pick you? There are six or seven other people—

Lahti: I don't know. Why does anybody pick anybody? You could say because I was good at it?

I don't know. I never thought about it. It just didn't occur to me. It was just like, he said,

“Charles, do you want to do this?” And I said, “Why not?” I do have that capacity. Maybe it's

because we moved a number of times when we were kids or my home is always where I'm

sitting. At this moment I'm sitting in a chair here on Lafayette Street and it's my home. I've been

at home here before and that's just what it was. It didn't occur to me. Maybe I'm a dope, but it

didn't occur to me. I just said, “Okay, let's go do this.” What happened was that I came to New

York and I started working in Styria.

Q: And so do you have a sense then of what it was that was at Styria that attracted you? What

was happening or what seemed like it could be happening there, that wasn't happening in

Minnesota, given that you had all these sort of—

Lahti: I didn't think about that. It's like if somebody just comes to you and says, "Well, do you want a job in Anchorage, Alaska?" And you feel like going to Anchorage, Alaska, you get up and go. I didn't have a dream of coming to New York. I didn't even really think about it. I was just content to make my art and do my thing and I guess to try to be available. When I was living in Scotland I was fifteen years old. It was the first time they had rail passes throughout Europe. I asked my father for forty pounds to get on the train and go away for a month. I just did that stuff. I don't know. I don't make real goals, I just make myself available and try to do what I can in a given moment and see what happens, and just say yes to things as they come along.

Q: So you come to Styria. What happens then?

Lahti: Well, I came to Styria. They were working on a Chryssa [née Chryssa Vardea-Mavromichali] portfolio and a couple of other things. Essentially that was the time of the Singer brothers [note: referring to Sidney Singer] where they were doing the tax shelter prints—that's what they were called—and we may not get that into print, but that's what they were all about. Rubin [L.] Gorewitz had managed to figure out how this thing would work. It was all legal, but it was just that they were tax shelter prints. That's what they were. So Styria was making a bunch of these prints for [James] Rosenquist, Rauschenberg. I don't know if the ones that they made for [Donald] Judd were, but the ones for Chryssa were supposed to be there and all of this.

The other thing that might be known, which I think has always been really the most hysterical part of all of this, is that in the backroom they had a silkscreen setup and LeRoy Neiman's prints

were all made there from Hammer Galleries [New York]. They would send 510 sheets of paper that had the LeRoy Neiman watermark in them and we would print them, and we did two editions a month, which sold out immediately at the Hammer gallery on Fifty-seventh Street. And because LeRoy Neiman was providing all of this, the front space where we did all these prints with Bob and [Richard] Lindner and all the other people that we did them for, were able to survive. That was the balance.

Q: By virtue strictly of that relationship with LeRoy Neiman and the popularity of his work?

Lahti: Yes. People don't want to say that they were able to make those prints because LeRoy was selling big time. The other thing that I find really very funny was that he was the one who gave all that money to Columbia [University, New York] for the print studios. I also had the pleasure of—when I was invited to a party for [Barack] Obama's inauguration originally, and there was Mr. Neiman. He always did it by sending the paper down and sending them back. We never saw him. He only came down there once and I wasn't there when he came in, and he would sign the pieces. And so I met him at this party and he just lit up like a birthday cake and his wife— They were so thrilled to have somebody that knew that he was making the prints and that I'd helped. When it was slow in the front we'd help on the prints in the back because you could work on a Rauschenberg in the morning and go work on a Neiman in the afternoon if they had a deadline or something had to happen. So I told him about that. Neiman was really thrilled. He was, in his way, as generous as Bob was. So it was kind of funny, that whole thing was balancing out with all that.

So I have this job. I'm in New York. I'm working in printing and they were just finishing up the *Chow Bag* series [1976–77]. Ninety-nine percent of it was done. There were some small editions that needed to be made by hand and that was happening.

Q: So it was the very tail end of the *Chow Bags* then?

Lahti: Very tail end.

Q: This was '77 we're talking?

Lahti: Correct.

Q: Yes.

Lahti: I can take no claim on making anything on the *Chow Bags* other than helping count them and put them together. I can't say that I knew all the people who made them and how they made them, but what had happened is that I was staying until I got my apartment around the corner here on Mott Street. I was staying with the lead printer from Styria in the first month. It was the fourth of July weekend. Everybody was away. But then I got a phone call waking me up on, I think it was the third of July, that I needed to get down to work because Bob was coming in to sign the *Chow Bags*. They had just decided to do it at that time rather spontaneously. So I ran down there. I was there. We were waiting. We got the prints ready. In comes Bob and I think [Robert] Petersen was there, as well as Rubin Gorewitz. I was standing in there and I was the

only one in there. Bob came in by himself before everybody for some reason and Craig [O'Brien] wasn't there, and he said, "Hi, Bob Rauschenberg here." I thought that was kind of hysterical because I had four payments left on my Rauschenberg sitting in Minnesota.

Q: So before we go further into that encounter, can you say a little bit more about what you knew about Rauschenberg? Clearly you had some sort of interest in his work, enough that you were going to do this sort of layaway payment system for this print of his.

Lahti: Well I knew about him. I had seen his work, obviously. I was in Minnesota, where *Barge* [1962–63] was a standard resident for many years at the Walker Art Center [Minneapolis], so I knew that. Then there was also, I believe, *Trophy II (for Teeny and Marcel Duchamp)* [1960] was there among other things. Those were the major paintings that I was familiar with. I'm going to put this respectfully, but *Barge* was like wallpaper in my logic. You go there and walk through the room and you could look at it out of the corner of your eye and it would be there; it was always a presence that I would revisit over and over again. I didn't really think about it as anything other than it was. It was just the thing there that had a life and it had some kind of energy to it that I responded to. I didn't analyze it. It's like if you look at somebody, why do you think you like them? They're handsome or attractive or whatever, and they may not fit standard forms of beauty or whatever, and you've not said anything more than one word to them, but they're there and it's a presence that you interact with. I guess if you want to be corny about it, you can say that the painting had an aura that my aura reacted with very well, or that attracted my attention. It sounds—but that's it. That's all.



Robert Rauschenberg

Barge, 1962–63

Oil and silkscreen ink on canvas

79 7/8 x 386 inches (202.9 x 980.4 cm)

Guggenheim Bilbao Museoa and Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, and with additional funds contributed by Thomas H. Lee and Ann Tenenbaum; the International Director's Council and Executive Committee Members: Eli Broad, Elaine Teer Cooper, Ronnie Heyman, J. Tomlinson Hill, Dakis Joannou, Barbara Lane, Robert Mnuchin, Peter Norton, Thomas Walther, and Ginny Williams; and funds from additional donors: Ulla Dreyfus-Best, Norma and Joseph Saul Philanthropic Fund; Elizabeth Rea; Eli Broad; Dakis Joannou; Peter Norton; Peter Lawson-Johnston; Michael Wettach; Peter Littmann; Tiqui Atencio; Bruce and Janet Karatz; and Giulia Ghirardi Pagliai

Q: And what in particular about the piece that you were paying two hundred dollars a month for?

For that—

Lahti: Well what happened was—I have to back up a little bit, because when I was living in Scotland my mother was going to buy me a suit for my birthday and then I said, “Well there’s this print that I saw in the newspaper.” I’d always collected art. I would go to flea markets or craft fairs and I would always buy what I thought was the best thing at my price point, whether it was fifty cents or a dollar or five dollars or, in the case of the Rauschenberg, \$2,500, which was a huge fortune at that period for somebody who was twenty years old. I saw this picture in a newspaper. I said “Aw, that’s really beautiful.” They’re selling this print. And I asked my mother if she would buy it for me instead of the suit. She said, “Okay.” We bought the print and it came. I didn’t even—it was by an artist and it was just an image that—I get a click in my chest or my stomach or my gut. It’s somewhere on the inside that I get something and I guess I saw that about *Barge* too. And when I get that feeling, I don’t really analyze it, I just sort of go with it.

So I liked the print. I got it, it came, and then we heard on the news the next day or something that a world record painting for a British artist was achieved today and it was the David Hockney swimming pool painting; it was a David Hockney print that I bought for twenty pounds in around 1971. So that was that. I kind of always would look at things and I didn't really want to accumulate a lot of possessions, but I always liked to have something on the wall that I could react to. It's sort of a touchstone. That's too heavy. But just it's important to me to have art around me. It always has been.

This print I saw in the doctor's house just suddenly was magically there. The print of *Treaty* was never particularly popular, but I always thought it was amongst the most beautiful of any of Bob's prints. It was big. It was magical. It had this red handkerchief in there and what looked like a T-shirt but wasn't a T-shirt but was a T-shirt, and it was the balance between the two things. Then you can see that there's a line in the print. It's basically a black line, but Bob did a scribble over the top of it in blue to fix his line. His black line was too heavy, but you put the blue over it and you couldn't really see the blue unless you really went up to look at it.

I was working in a Coke factory. I could only pay for part of it, but I did go—no actually, what happened was that I went to the local Farmers and Mechanics Bank, and I walked in and I said, “Can you give me a loan for \$2,500?” They said, “What, are you crazy? You're twenty years old. What are you doing?” I said, “I'm working in a Coke factory. I make this much money,” and everything else like this. The bank president walked by just when he heard me asking about this

and he said, “Do you think this print’s worth it?” He interrupted the whole thing. I said, “Yes, it’s beautiful.” He said, “Please give him the loan.” And that was that.

Q: And so that’s—

Lahti: I was in hock to the bank for my Rauschenberg before I got to go to New York and work on a Rauschenberg print.

Q: Yes, because I’m just curious—so you hear that Bob Rauschenberg is going to be at the studio and then what sort of a ping that makes.

Lahti: It didn’t make any ping. It was just, “Well I’ve got to get a job done. Let’s get the prints up, get them on the table and do this.” Bob was never a god to me. He was just a guy I knew. I think that’s why our friendship was as great as it was because I really didn’t care about the public Bob. He didn’t really care about it that much either, which you might not believe because he was always in the public eye, but he didn’t really like it. And so I had the good fortune of seeing him not in the public eye.

Q: If we could go back to that moment. Bob Rauschenberg walks in and— You were in the middle of that story and I’m wondering if you could—

Lahti: Oh and I said, “Hi, how are you?” He came up and he just was chatting and he said, “Are you the new guy here?” He was friendly and all of that stuff. I just said, “Yes,” and he said,

“Well I’m sorry I brought you in on the holiday,” and I said, “I don’t care. I wasn’t doing anything.” So it’s fine and then we started to sign the prints and he was, being Bob, trying to keep the whole thing going. Just as he talked about that when they were out at Tanya’s, every project had a high, a middle, and a very low, low. He used to talk about how Tanya would put on this skirt made out of scarves from Russia and at two o’clock in the morning would dance for them to make the print go through and that always worked out okay. He told me about that story. He, like Tanya, had his moment of when to tell the story, when to keep it fun and keep it moving, so that’s that.

So we signed the prints on the first day. Then we all had to go back and sign the final six on the next day. We got through the prints and were finished somewhere about three or four o’clock in the afternoon and then he turned to me and he said, “Well, which one do you want?” I hadn’t even worked at Styria for a month. The other thing was that I had started at Styria and a week later they closed the shop for a week because everybody had to go out to Rauschenberg’s opening in Los Angeles for the big tour in ’77 [note: *Robert Rauschenberg*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; originated at National Collection of Fine Arts, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., 1976–77]. So I was given a paid week in New York on my first week here. Anyhow, so I went ahead and worked on the print and he said, “I want to give you one.” I said, “I can’t take one,” and he said, “I want to give you one,” and I said, “I already have something. I have my own Rauschenberg already. I don’t—it’s okay.” I wasn’t quite tracking with it and I said, “I didn’t work on this,” and he said, “You worked these last two days.” He said, “Which one do you want?” I said, “I don’t know. Why don’t you pick one then,” was my way of

avoiding. He said, “Okay, you have the calf.” So he went, “For Charles,” with the calf on there and they dedicated the other prints to the other printers who were there.



Robert Rauschenberg
Calf Startena (Chow Bags), 1977
 Screenprint and collage on paper with
 plastic twine
 48 x 36 1/4 inches (121.9 x 92.1 cm)
 From an edition of 100, published by
 Styria Studio, New York

Once we were done, he invited us all back here to Lafayette Street to have a little party. While the party was going on, the guys who actually had done all the work had heard about the fact that Bob had come in to sign and they came in and saw this pile of things and they saw this thing—print for Charles. Theirs were there too. They all had them. But this Charles was there and they were all sort of in a—I don’t think they ever forgave me for that, but I didn’t care. It was nice. I liked it. It was fun—and they sort of felt for a while that I had maybe snuck in on their thing and taken this whole thing and all that stuff. When I told them, “If you want the print, you can have it. I don’t really want to have animosity between us for something. I didn’t work on it. You guys can have it. If you need it you can have it.” And then they shut up after that, but I don’t think they were particularly happy that Bob gave me a print on the first day. I still have it. It’s still

framed. Hangs over a bed. I look at it every day and it makes me smile. So there you have that. That's how I met him. And we came here to the party and that's it.

[INTERRUPTION]

Q: So you come to Lafayette Street for the first time in '77.

Lahti: Yes. I'm here with Bob and then we're having a couple of drinks, there are a few people around. Bob says, "Do you want to see the house?" He takes me down and shows me the chapel and there's a few things going on there, but it wasn't really very full. I think there were a couple of black paintings [1951–53] hanging up on the wall downstairs and also Cy [Twombly]'s big *Panorama* [1955] was hanging up at the time and all of these other things. And so I'm looking around at this and I say, "Oh, okay." I knew that all this stuff was great, but it was like it was just ordinary to me at that point. It's like the special is ordinary for me on occasion. But we were just walking around.

Then he takes me upstairs and we go into the room below this one and he says, "This is my *Erased de Kooning Drawing* [1953]. What do you think about that?" So I'm holding that thing and looking at it and I say, "Okay, that's great." We put that down and he picks up *Alley Oop* [1958] from Jasper and says, "This is something Jasper gave me," and we were looking at that whole thing. Then I remember there was a drawing that was the outline of Bob's feet. It was a small drawing about maybe 15-by-15, it seems, where he had done an outline of his feet. It was on a gray piece of fabric or a gray background, and down at the bottom was a little swan [*Lawn*

Combed, 1954]. I remember seeing that and that was the thing that moved me the most. All of these things that I saw, but to see his two feet sketched out on this—I'm sure you can find a picture of it—that's the part—that's the thing—of all the stuff that was all around and that's the thing that moved me the most. That he could sit there and think that he could just trace his feet in that Bob hand and it would have a lot of magic to the whole thing.



Robert Rauschenberg
Lawn Combed, 1954
Pencil on found fabric
14 1/2 x 15 1/2 inches (36.8 x 39.4 cm)
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

That's what I remember. Then we walked over and looked at the [Roy] Lichtenstein, the enamel Lichtenstein on the wall sitting on the rack [*Vicki*, 1964]. And then the next thing is, he pounced, and that began a love affair that lasted on and off for more than twenty years. So there you go.

Q: And this is the same couple of days where you first met?

Lahti: Yes. I met him one day and then the next day a love affair started. And I guess I fit all the credentials. I was tall. I was blonde at the time. I had that look. That's not to say that it was

necessarily that cheap. It may have been that for him. I don't know. I don't think so, but still I fit the profile.

Q: So this love affair is happening. Are you still working with him at Styria? Because I noticed you didn't—

Lahti: No, I had worked with him at Styria. I worked at Styria and what had happened then, at that point, I was 6'2" at the time and they used a lot of heavy litho stones, the big ones that are 30-by-48, and the Brand brothers [phonetic] who were these two little Russian guys over here on Second Avenue or Third Avenue [note: near Tenth Street] made the presses. They were a little too low and any litho printer over 6 feet winds up getting hernias. I got three hernias in the space of a year and then I decided that no job was worth having an operation three times a year over the whole thing. And also, quite frankly, I got a little tired of being a pencil in somebody else's hand. I don't mean that as a resentful thing, but it was like I had done the prints, I made the editions, I did all of this. I knew that printmaking was my calling, but making a bunch of prints for other people was never—I said there are other people who can do this better than I can.

I liked to change the prints as they go along. My own prints, each one is different, so it's maybe like the story about *Accident* and the fact that they changed. That's what informed me, in that my prints needed to change from one to another. Even now, when I'm printing an edition, I'd rather print it myself. I also make it clear that they're not a hundred percent matched, so if you want a hundred percent match you're not going to buy one of these. They're very similar, but I always liked to change it around. So as it turns out I was not cut out to be an edition printer for the rest

of my life. And that wasn't from an arrogance or it was snobby or whatever. I did it, I had a really good time, I met some wonderful people. The people at Styria were great, I enjoyed it, but I needed to go out onto something else.

Also, to tell you the truth, what happened at that time was that the hernia came along and I had been six months away from graduating. So I decided to upend myself and go back to Minnesota for the two classes I needed to take, which were freshman English and an art history class on American art, contemporary art and all of that stuff. So I went back to finish up school.

During that time, it was 1979 and then it turns out that they were going to have the out-of-town tryout with Trisha Brown and *Glacial Decoy* [1979]. Somehow or another—I don't know how he got my telephone number, but Bob called me up and said, "I'm going to be in town with Trisha and we're going to work on this thing and by the way I could use your help because we're in trouble." So I jumped in my car and drove to the Walker Art Center. Fujiko [Nakaya] was there, Julie Martin was there, Bob was there, I was there, and there was some person from the Walker—I'm sorry, I don't remember their name. I don't really remember them being there so much.



Set, costumes, and lighting by Rauschenberg for Trisha Brown Dance Company's *Glacial Decoy* (1979). Pictured: Trisha Brown, Nina Lundborg, and Lisa Kraus. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Archives, New York. Photo: © Babette Mangolte

But there was a room that had all these light boxes on the wall and they had all these very large slides, which I was familiar with because my father was a slide-taker as opposed to a photo-taker on our family trips and things like this. So there was all this stuff up there and they were trying to figure out how on earth they were going to make the sequence to go through because Bob had the pictures and he wanted them to sort of drift across the number of screens. I don't remember how many screens there were, whether it was five, six or seven or even four. I don't remember. But anyway, so we were up there, arranging this, and we stayed up all night long. Bob eventually left because he had to do something with Trisha I believe and we kept staying up all night long, making the arrangements on the light board and we finally figured out how to do it. We put them all in the slides, we did a test, and it ran through and it all went perfectly. Two days later was the performance of *Glacial Decoy* at the Children's Theatre [Company].

We were there, hanging out with Bob. I was riding around in a twenty-year-old Volkswagen. We were driving all over the place. It was the seventies, I was a student, all this junk was in the car. We were driving around with Fujiko and Bob and Julie in the car.

Q: So you reconnect around *Glacial Decoy* and—*Glacial Decoy* being '79, you're back in Minnesota by this time. So you're at Styria then a year, a year and a half?

Between a year and two years. I don't recall exactly, but somewhere between that.

Q: Sure. And before we completely depart Styria, Styria sort of represents an interesting blind spot, a little bit, in some of the records that are here at the Foundation. There's not really contact with Rischner at this point. And so one area that I'm curious about is just whether you have any further comment about Adi Rischner, about that studio, the particular climate. Going back to *Currents* in 1970 all the way through '91, doing the *Shirtboard* series [1990], and then it ends at that point. So there's this long association, but there's not all that much documentation about it, relative to his association with ULAE or Gemini.

Lahti: Okay, I understand. I understand.

Q: And so, you're there?

Lahti: I'm there. We do the *Chow Bags*.

Q: The tail end of the *Chow Bags*.

Lahti: So then what happens is that—now Styria Studio, as we've talked about, was at 419 Broome Street and we've got the Neimans in the back room and we've got the litho and the

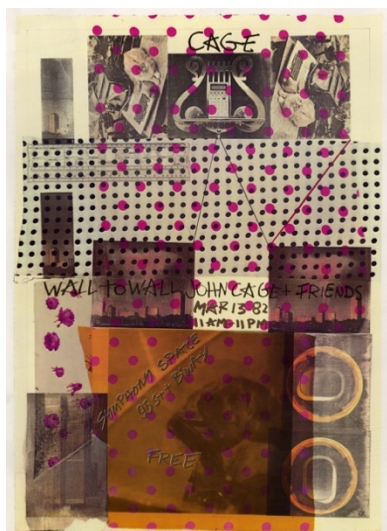
etching up in the front. A lot of that stuff had been the stuff that Rubin Museum of Art [New York] sponsored and then it was also where Marian Goodman and Leo Castelli had come in and had the [Andy] Warhol *Mao* series printed [1972], as well as the Lichtenstein still-life series [*Six Still Lives*, 1974]. There were lots of things. It's also where Petersen made his notes. There was a series of six or eight prints from about that same time that Petersen made there. I also worked on a Michael Balog print and Michael is associated with Bob too.

Basically, Styria was, for Bob I think, when he needed to have something that he wanted done quickly or was easy to do, they were just down the street so he could go down there. I remember that he came in to do his Christmas card. Each year he gave away something for Christmas and it was a little print based on a drawing. A horse, a magnifying glass, and hair are some of the images in the print [note: the image for *Untitled* (for the San Francisco Heart Association), 1977 was used to make offset lithograph notecards]. We did the color separations. We hand printed it. I think we did maybe one other little edition. I worked on that. He walked in and said, "Can we make a Christmas card of this? I need a hundred of them." And that was kind of it. I'm not trying to sound like it was a cheap Kinko's printing place, but it was that it was nearby and it was easy for Bob to get to.



Robert Rauschenberg
Untitled (for the San Francisco Heart Association), 1977
Lithograph
12 1/2 x 9 1/2 inches (31.8 x 24.1 cm)
From an edition of 150 published by the San Francisco Heart Association, produced by Styria Studio, New York

Q: It seems he did these major series and then occasionally he would do one-offs there, like a poster for John Cage [*Wall to Wall John Cage + Friends*, 1982]—



Robert Rauschenberg
Wall to Wall John Cage + Friends, 1982
Offset lithograph on cardboard
42 x 30 inches (106.7 x 76.2 cm)
Published by Styria Studio

Lahti: Exactly.

Q: —or a poster for a different benefit or something like that.

Lahti: I think the thing was that they were his easy source. It was like his private source. It was a very easy thing for Bob to go down there and get what he wanted. I'm not saying it wasn't easy for Bob to get what he wanted anywhere, but— The thing that I think about Bob too, and this is having seen both sides of it, is that Bob was a private guy who wanted to get things done and then Bob was also this person everybody knew. I think of him as a private person. I don't really think about him as a person everybody knew. So then if he went out to Universal or to Gemini, it was always a big thing to travel and get going. He didn't really like to chase around that much all the time. Sometimes he just liked to stay quiet. So that was the relationship with Styria at that time.

Adi Rischner had been—as I said before, they came from L.A., and this could be all wrong, but this is the myth that I heard: that they came from L.A. where they were making prints for the aerospace industry. Bob used them on the Gemini thing. They moved to New York. Basically they opened in New York because of the relationship with Bob. I'm pretty sure of that. If it wasn't only Bob, Bob was a good fifty percent of it or more. I think that Bob had a really nice relationship with Adolph [Rischner] senior and I know that he also had a very good relationship with Adi. I don't know, Adi kind of disappeared. I don't have any idea why or how or any of that kind of stuff, but he just closed the business and left. But Adi was always a very generous guy. He was always a lot of fun to be around. He was very thoughtful. Maybe he wasn't a good businessman. I don't know. I was never really part of that whole thing. I think Bob just had a soft spot and Bob was also very loyal, so he would always go back to people. If Adi wanted to publish something, Bob would give him a print. These are opinions. These are not facts right now.

Q: So it's your sense that perhaps they came out here because of Bob Rauschenberg. Their main funding though comes from the success of the Neiman prints. So they developed—

Lahti: Yes.

Q: —sort of a client roster, if you will?

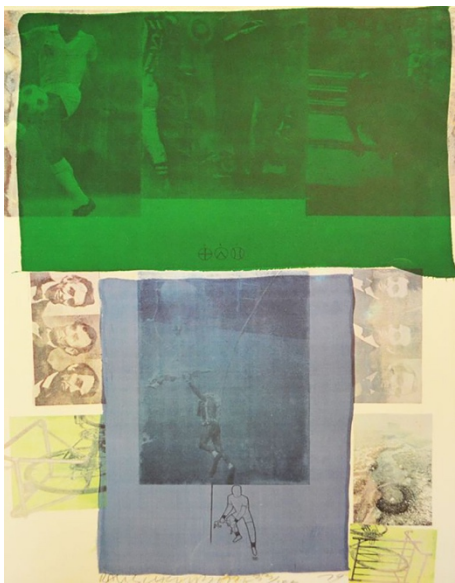
Lahti: Exactly. Exactly.

Q: Rather quickly.

Lahti: Yes and then I think that included Rosenquist, of course, with the silkscreen and the lithos in the front. I'm sure you know the list of people who published at Styria. They were also involved in that book that they did for the Modern Museum [Moderna Museet] in Stockholm, where there were like fifty or so artists who all did a little thing in there [*New York Collection for Stockholm* portfolio, 1973]. I know they did the project with [Öyvind A. C.] Fahlström. Then I worked on another project with Richard Lindner, which was the last print; he died while we were finishing it up. I remember they were all relieved that he had signed the b.a.t. [bon à tirer] because then they could at least make their money out of it. Not in a gruesome way, but it was just a lot. Lindner had been very demanding and very insistent upon things and he didn't really like making prints because he said they were like phonograph records. Why would you listen to a phonograph record when you could go and see the concert? He also thought any print that was

ever made was just a copy of something else, so why would you want to bother with it? That was his philosophy. But anyway, he was one of the customers there.

I knew it floated on. [Robert] Bob Blanton was there and other people, and they kind of went on. Then there were a few series and then there was a series—I don't remember the name of it—where they applied bits of silk onto paper or they were based on drawings. I think they were 1979. [Note: A series of nine prints by Rauschenberg, in deluxe and regular editions. The deluxe editions include fabric collage. All nine prints are based on original drawings.]



Robert Rauschenberg
Shoot From A Main Stem, 1979
Deluxe edition: silkscreen and collage
30 1/2 x 23 inches (77.5 x 58.4 cm)
From an edition of 100 published by Multiples, Inc.,
produced by Styria Studio, New York

Q: Right, because they did a bunch in '79. They did the *Arcanum* series [1979 original drawings, 1981 Styria editions], but that's a couple of years later.

Lahti: Yes.

Q: In any case, so you're there, '77 to '78, and then that's the end of your association?

Lahti: With Styria, yes.

Q: Or personal sort of experience—

Lahti: Personal association, yes.

Q: —of what's going on there.

Lahti: Yes.

Q: So you reconnect with Bob, *Glacial Decoy*, the Trisha Brown show. Let's pick back up there.

Lahti: Okay.

Q: You're working on that. He asks you to come down.

Lahti: So it went down. We're chasing around and doing all this and as it comes out—this is my American art history course. Also, in that week where I was in New York, I went to see *Annie Hall* [1977] and oh, I fell in love with New York. Finally, it dawned on me by seeing *Annie Hall* what I had gotten myself into. It didn't occur to me before that, so I was looking at that— I liked the little thing with [Herbert] Marshall McLuhan coming out from behind the poster at the movie

house et cetera. Then Bob asked me to help out some more and I said, “Well I have to go to the art class today and I’d like you to come with me because today is the day where she’s announced where she’s going to talk about Johns and Rauschenberg.” For a while he thought it was funny and was going to come with me to the class, but then after a while, something happened, and I don’t know what it was. He said, “Well, why do you need to go to school to learn about me? You’re here already. Let’s go.” So it was kind of funny. So we did that.

We did the final tweaks for *Glacial Decoy*. It got up. It ran flawlessly, I remember. It was really overwhelming and beautiful. I don’t know how many people were there. I don’t think there were lots and lots of people because I don’t know that it was overly publicized, but there were a number of people and it was really beautiful. Trisha’s dancing was amazing. Everything worked out really well.

I was thinking about whether I had any axes to grind or anything I would be negative about when I came to this interview. I don’t have any of that except for one thing, which I’m about to talk about now. If you know slides, there’s a clunk when they drop into the projector. One of the things that they had—and I’m sure people have complained about this—was that there was a clunk. You could hear the projector clunking like dancing Rockettes in the background, but quietly, while Trisha and her people were dancing in the front. I really liked the clunk. They talked about it and Bob said that he liked it as well—they may have changed their minds later. But today when I was just reviewing my notes, it said it was silence. But it was never silent. You could always hear the clunk of the projectors and it was a really nice balance between the two. And again, it’s Trisha’s work and Bob’s work and they may have changed their minds. It was

also another thing about the difference between technology. I also saw it when it was premiered in New York [Marymount Manhattan College Theater, New York, 1979]. I came back to New York after my six months in Minnesota and—

Q: You finished the degree in that time?

Lahti: I finished the degree and then I came back and I had some opportunity, I don't recall when, but I did see it in New York and I remember the clunk and all of this stuff. Then when it was reprised recently—it could have been ten years ago—out at BAM [Brooklyn Academy of Music], it was then transferred from slides to digital and it was video projection and there was no clunk. I looked at it and I felt like—my mind was there, my thought was there, my feeling was there, but the guts were gone with the sound going away. I don't know. That's just my opinion. But that's my only axe to grind about any of this. That it would have been nice to have—or even if they had to record—the clunk and let it go.

Q: Was the choreography responsive in any way to this punctuation that was happening or was this kind of incidental, this was something that happened after that had all been—

Lahti: I don't see how it couldn't have. At the beginning or for a certain phase, I don't see how it couldn't have been related in some way. Trisha maybe said no. Bob may have said no. I don't know who said no—but to me it was. It was just the way they were dancing and you hear this simultaneous thing. It could be no more than the fact that we hear machinery operating outside this window, but the music that machine is making outside the window is a soundtrack to our

conversation in this room. If that sound was really horrible it would affect our conversation. The fact that it's a low hum is kind of giving it an energy to move ahead. And just the clunk on the projectors—I can't disassociate it and I can't be reasonable about it because of my emotional connection to the project, to watching it and seeing it with the sound of the slide projectors going on in the background. It was just there. Maybe they found it a distraction later on and took it out, but to me it was a pivotal part of it.

Again, I don't know when they created the dance, whether they were listening to it when it was going on, I just know that it went up, they did a rehearsal, and then that's what it was. I was also parsing all of this between going to school and working at the Coke factory and working with these things with Bob and the crowd. I think I took the night off work to go to the concert. But anyway, that was the whole thing. That's my only axe to grind, is that, "Where's the clunk?"

Q: Right. So *Glacial Decoy* happened and at this point you've seen *Annie Hall*.

Lahti: And I said I want to meet that actress, and of course I met that actress at a party later on.

Q: [Diane] Keaton [née Hall]?

Lahti: Yes. And then I said well, I want to be a performer and I want to act in a Woody Allen movie. I stopped being a performer after a while and then one day somebody said, "Can you come to look at this premiere of this Woody Allen movie? You're invited to this." I'm there and I wonder what the heck I'm there for and then suddenly, midway through the movie, some of my

paintings are on the wall, people are kissing in front of my paintings, and then I see it again.

Then I'm sitting at the end and I get a credit at the end of the movie. That was in the days where you could do things without asking people for permission beforehand. I kind of like that better. I think it's silly now, but that's just life. So anyway, I got into a Woody Allen movie and I got to meet Bob, it was just that kind of thing. I sort of thought I was in there anyway. So anyhow.

Q: Right. And what movie was this?

Lahti: This was *Mighty Aphrodite* [1995].

Q: And so by this time you're back living in New York, is that—

Lahti: Over here on Elizabeth Street. Very nearby.

Q: So the first time you come, you come because there's a job lined up at Styria. The second time, you're interested in performance—

Lahti: I'm working in performance, I'm painting.

Q: —but what's your—

Lahti: I'm painting, I'm printing. I work with different people on different things. I worked on the first or second season of *Art on the Beach* [1980], which was down where they built the

current World Financial Center, and I worked on a project there that wound up having Tom Otterness in it and Kiki Smith and a few other people, Tony Feher and a bunch of other artists at that time. We just sort of—it was a different thing. You could round everybody up and they would just go do something. It was never very difficult to meet anybody who was famous. It was stuff that just happened all the time. For me anyway, it was in the normal course of events, or it was knowing people before they got to be well-known.

But I was working on dance, performance. I thought I wanted to be an actor. It turns out I didn't want to be an actor after a while. I did plays at Theatre for the New City [New York] and other things like that. I guess a lot of this was instilled from talking to Bob about when he wanted to make performances and do that kind of thing. It just seemed like, "Okay, well let's go do a performance. Let's go put the flashlights on the turtles' backs and let's go walk across the stage in tires." You just sort of made it up. I think Bob was a bit like—when you talk about [Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad] Rumi's poems, where Rumi would go walking around with this scribe and he would incorporate the things he saw during the day into his poems, whether it was a donkey drinking at a well or a bird flying above or whatever. It was like Bob would take those things that came to him during the day and put it into his art. I think that's what I appreciate about that and that's why I like Bob's work and that's why I like Rumi's work, because it takes into account the chance and what comes into your day.

Q: Right. And he wrote a note once—I'm trying to remember what this was—and he was writing about art and he interspersed it in the middle literally with things that he saw as he was going

along, like a gas station or something like that [Rauschenberg's "Note on Painting, Oct. 31–Nov. 2, 1963"]. So what you're talking about was quite literal in some situations.

Lahti: I remember there was another time when he—just after there was the issue with the swimmer and the *Hoarfrost* [*Edition*, 1974], eventually how that all came out—that he wanted to take his—

Q: The lawsuit around using—

Lahti: Yes, which I just knew existed.

Q: —the photograph of—yes.

Lahti: Yes, the diver.

Q: Right.

Lahti: Then what happened was that Bob kind of thought well, he should take his own pictures. It was when he was first starting to do that, which I think was about the time when I was here in the house a lot and I remember that he would say, "Can we go out and walk through the East Village and take pictures?" We would wander around and he would take Bob pictures. I don't know how to describe it any other way than Bob-type pictures. You look at nothing and there's something there. You could take a pile of dust and you could see fear in it or you could see all

the beauty in the world, and Bob could do both at the same time. I think possibly through all of this, I picked up this way of seeing. I already was available to say yes, and seeing Bob and talking to him and having those conversations, the answer was to have to say yes after that and that's how that happened.

Also, from the slideshow that I did with them, eventually somebody said, when I came back to New York from '79 or whatever, I was here working on different things and I would sometimes be over here doing odd jobs. One day somebody said, "Well, you have a background in prints. Do you want to come and work at Sotheby's?" I went up to work at Sotheby's. The reason I got the job was the fact that I had worked at the Coca-Cola factory and I was a teamster; they needed somebody to make sure that the exhibitions went right and there was friction between the teamsters hanging the pictures on the wall and the experts. So I was put in the middle. And again Bob's famous thing about operating between art and life, I always think I've been in the middle of those cracks too. So that was where I was. I skated down the middle of that. For a couple of years I worked in the print department and we did all these prints and did all this stuff, so I was also able to see all of Bob's—any print that came up to auction in the early eighties I was able to see them all, so I got another wider appreciation of printmaking.

Q: And so you have a little bit of a pulse then as to these works, as to what they're going for?

Lahti: Yes, exactly.

Q: And a sense as to what's coming up for auction, that sort of thing?

Lahti: Exactly. And it was a small enough place at that time where you could see all the work that was there. You might be asked to move a [Pierre-Auguste] Renoir out of the way or something like that. It was just there and that's what it was. Then Sotheby's had a famous blowup when they built the building that they couldn't afford and I was in the last group of people who were hired so I was the first person to go, which was fine. Shortly thereafter I wound up getting a job in the slide mounting business in New York City. So all the work that I had done in Minnesota was there, so I wound up doing these slideshows that would be sometimes twenty, thirty, forty, fifty, sixty slides going from all these different projectors; but because we had started that with Bob and Julie and Fujiko in the Walker, I was able to do this. So I showed up at this place as a freelancer for a weekend and I didn't leave for twenty-five years. In that time they never asked me to do anything. They just hoped that I would show up and help them out and we went around the world and we did a lot of things. I went to South Africa, to Bali, and all of these places, to do slideshows for all these corporations or other commercial sponsors and everything else like this.

Curiously enough, that job came to an end the day that Bob died. I had worked for these people for twenty-five years and I was getting let go on that day and then I also found out that Bob died on that day, and it was the week before my fifty-fifth birthday, and so all of these things all came crashing down at one time and it just went boom. So that's what happened. But I had gotten a job as a slide mounter.

Q: Right and that's starting about '83 or so?

Lahti: Yes. '83 up to 2008. That's how long I had that slideshow thing. Through that time, I would see Bob, as much as he was in New York.

Q: Yes, I'm curious about that. You said that your relationship with him went on for twenty-odd years.

Lahti: It went on for longer than twenty-odd years, but the physical part of it went on for about twenty years.

Q: Right. So I'm curious about the arc of your relationship with him. I looked through the files here and these are the two photographs that I found of you on file here. This is at Tatyana Grosman's memorial in I think '82, just out on Long Island. Then there's this and then there's the two of you. So I'm curious then about—you said you were here. What sort of spaces are you meeting up in? Clearly you're at this memorial together for this woman who was instrumental at ULAE and a lot of Bob's work there. So I'm curious about the scene. What are your points of intersection? After Styria, you've had this point of intersection in *Glacial Decoy*.

Lahti: Well I have to say I'm a little overwhelmed to see these pictures. I didn't know they exist. It's like you've managed to give me a nice sock in the plexus. That's an okay one and it's welcome, and I'm glad we're smiling in the pictures, that's for sure.



Charles Lahti and Rauschenberg at Tatyana Grosman's memorial celebration, West Islip, New York, October 1982. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Nancy Crampton



Unidentified woman (Caroline Kennedy?), Rauschenberg, and Charles Lahti at Tatyana Grosman's memorial celebration, West Islip, New York, October 1982. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Nancy Crampton

Q: So talk about the pictures then. What do they evoke?

Lahti: Actually, strangely enough, they sort of represent the whole relationship and my friendship with Bob. In this one I'm in the back. In the background, you don't know who this guy is, walking around there, and you may not know anything— And then it was this direct one. I remember that he would always make him smile and laugh and he would do the same for me. It was never anything but smiling and laughing all the time. I have only the warmest of feelings about him.

Q: So what were those two sides then? If one's represented by this picture of you two smiling and laughing and engaging in this way.

Lahti: Yes.

Q: And then this other one is represented where he's speaking with this other individual.

Lahti: Is that Caroline [Kennedy] there?

Q: I'm not sure and neither is the Foundation actually. So if—

Lahti: I think it's Caroline. She was there with Edwin [Schlossberg] at the time. The other footnote on this whole thing was, this was one of the times—I don't know how many have happened, but I definitely knew that it happened here—when Bob and Jasper actually went off to have a conversation on the side, and they were talking and having a fairly—they were happy with each other. Of course you don't go over—but the person who snapped these pictures—I don't know who it was—went over to take the picture of the two of them and then it chopped and stopped. They didn't really want it recorded. So they were having what, to me, looked like a private moment—

Q: At the same—

Lahti: At the same thing.

Q: At the memorial.

Lahti: Minutes on either side of these pictures or in between them, I don't know, somewhere through there. But they were talking off to the side and it was obviously one of those things,

okay, there's Bob and Jasper having a conversation. That's nice that they're talking. It's good to see them talking. Stay out of their way. And then of course somebody wants to document it and finishes it off instantaneously. I thought that was sort of significant. But in any case, to move back to these pictures.

Q: Right. The question of these two sides.

Lahti: This side would be that, I would always be invited to openings or parties or this or that or the next thing, and I would always see Bob. And if he was in a crowd of people I didn't really go and talk to him too much, but if he was alone I would go and talk to him because it was the private Bob that I knew, if there was such a thing. But it was. I would never really—I didn't go out to dinner with Bob. We didn't do things out. It was always here or in some smaller thing and if it was a public function, like this one was, I would hang in the background. Eventually we would have a moment together and it would last for a moment or two, and then it would come back and then usually—sometimes it would be that we had seen each other the night before or the next day or this or that or the next. It was just a very quiet thing.

I was aware at the time that I was friends with a very famous person, but he was a very ordinary person to me. I didn't really want to be associated as being the—I thought it was a private thing, so maybe I didn't want to have my picture taken with him all that much or be around all that.

While it was going on, I don't know how many people actually knew that we had a story going on. I'm sure people did. I know [Hisachika] Sachika [Takahashi] did and other people did—it

was in the house and there was always a very few people around. I'm sure people made assumptions, but that's another thing.

Q: It was something that was truly between the two of you?

Lahti: It was very—it was a private affair and I think it was really great because of that. He would call me up when he would come to town and he would either come over to my house, which was very close by here, or I would come over here. It would depend on the situation. He would either run off over to my house because I was the secret, if it was convenient because the house was too full of people, or I would come over here. We wound up carrying on like that. So that's basically—if you had to pick two pictures about what it was like, there you go.

Q: That's it.

Lahti: That's it.

Q: And I'm sure we could have copies made if you'd like.

Lahti: If that can happen, that's fine. That would be good, but I have—I look at them and I'm reminded what a gift I have in Bob or with any person I've ever known. I've known many people like Bob and they're not all here, but they continue to go.

There was another time we were talking here and I was always around for all the conversations about ROCI [Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange, 1984–91], the beginning, the middle, the end, the difficulties, how you're going to make it go, what's going to happen, all this kind of stuff. He said, "How come you don't go to any of the ROCI shows?" I said, "Well, I haven't been invited," and he said, "Well you need to go down to Mexico and see it." So he made arrangements for me to fly down to Mexico, stay down there for a couple of days, see the show and then come back. He wanted to know what I thought about it at the time and I remember seeing [Charles] Charlie Yoder down there for dinner and stuff like that. It was really great. The ROCI show [*Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange: ROCI MEXICO*, Museo Rufino Tamayo Arte Contemporáneo Internacional, Mexico City, 1985] and the pyramids in Mexico City. Not bad. So that's how that happened.

Q: So you would see him—so your encounters with him were all after 1977. The entire time you know him he's based in Captiva [Florida].

Lahti: Yes.

Q: And so you would see him here as opposed to there and then occasionally you would—

Lahti: Yes and the thing—

Q: So you went to Mexico, for instance?

Lahti: Yes. And what had happened is that I was invited down to Captiva, but I just never went there because I didn't really want to feel like I was a bump on a log or any of that kind of thing. I also think it wouldn't have made it harmonious to whoever was down there at the time. So that never happened. I was just basically a private or secret story or whatever. I don't know what you want to call it, but it was just—he would come to town and he would call me and we would see each other or not. For example, you could chart the number of times he came to New York and I would say well, we saw each other that time and sometimes if I wasn't here I didn't see him. But I remember sitting here.

I do remember one other time that was really kind of interesting. One day I saw Bob go into a panic when he was making the *Gluts* [1986–89/1991–94] and it was the first one. There was one sitting in the front room with a car door leaning on something like this and they were all over there. I also think it was—they kind of blur together but I could be making a mistake—but then there was the other one of the two chairs back-to-back with something on top of it [*The Ancient Incident (Kabal American Zephyr)*, 1981]. Ileana [Sonnabend] was coming over to take a look at the new sculptures and Bob was in kind of a tizzy about the whole thing. I had never seen him like this. I had known Ileana beforehand and Ileana liked me and we got along very well together. So I didn't quite see this side of her. I knew it existed, from other people, but I always got a very sweet side of her. And he was sort of all over and she came in and she looked around and kind of looked over and she said, "Here's the food I'm eating," and she had a can of consommé and a can of hearts of palm, which I thought was the wildest lunch that you could ever have and that she was bringing her own food to Bob's house. Antonio [Homem] was here. Then she looked at him, he brought up a loose-leaf binder of photographs of some of the stuff

that was still down there. She said something along the lines of, “Well, you have always been a great sculptor.” [Laughs] In the nicest possible way. Bob was really, really pleased that she liked the beginnings of the *Gluts* or whatever they were. I don’t remember what the series was, but there was a lot of smashed up metal around in those days. She was really happy to see them and he was pleased that she liked them.



Robert Rauschenberg
Carnival (Glut), 1986
 Assembled metal with mirror
 50 x 73 x 43 inches (127 x 185.4 x 109.2 cm)
 Robert Rauschenberg Foundation



Robert Rauschenberg
The Ancient Incident (Kabal American Zephyr), 1981
 Wood-and-metal stands with wood chairs
 86 1/2 x 92 x 20 inches (219.7 x 233.7 x 50.8 cm)
 Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

I also think that that was an arc of Bob’s work. As with any artist, you kind of have moments where you’re rewiring yourself and going forward and basically by the time—I don’t remember quite how, they were simultaneous. I know there was all this stuff with ROCI and what I remember the most were the things made in Japan on the porcelain [note: ceramic], like the Napoleon [Bonaparte by Jacques-Louis David] [*Able Was I Ere I Saw Elba I and II (Japanese Recreational Claywork)*, both 1985] and the [Jean-Auguste-Dominique] Ingres [*Drawing Room 4 (Japanese Recreational Claywork)*, 1983] and the other things like this—and the [Edgar] Degas all going together [Untitled (*Japanese Recreational Claywork*), 1983, 83.037]. He said

they could withstand anything but a baseball bat. You can put them outside, you can do anything, but the only thing you can't protect them from is a baseball bat. So the Napoleon used to hang out here in the back, between the front and the back, from the chapel and the whole thing. That was the decoration outside of his window, which they always thought was a rather dreary view, so they decided to spice it up by putting that out there. And that was it.



Robert Rauschenberg
Able Was I Ere I Saw Elba I (Japanese Recreational Claywork), 1983
 Transfer on high-fired Japanese art ceramic
 106 1/4 x 91 inches (269.9 x 231.1 cm)
 Otsuka Chemical Company, Japan



Robert Rauschenberg
Drawing Room 4 (Japanese Recreational Claywork), 1983
 Transfer on high-fired Japanese art ceramic
 65 3/8 x 33 1/6 x 2 1/2 inches (166.1 x 84 x 6.4 cm)
 Private collection

Q: So you talk about these memories from here. So given that we're doing this interview in this space—we're here at 381 Lafayette and of course it's the Foundation today; it's full of staff. I come down here to do my research. And so I'm curious about what your 381 Lafayette was. When Bob was here visiting, what this space was. You were here with him the second day of knowing Bob Rauschenberg. And so I'm curious actually if you could comment on this space, the people in it, the scene a little bit.

Lahti: The scene was—okay, I remember one time when David Whitney was sitting at the table downstairs and I didn't know who the fuck David Whitney was. I thought he was a brat. The other thing was, he says, "Bob has no taste in furniture," and I'm saying, "What the fuck are you, sitting here at his table saying he has no taste in furniture?" And it was perfect. You have a mummy, a couple of pieces of sculpture, a painting, an old office chair, and then you have the table in the kitchen that has all these office chairs around it sitting next to the big stove, and all the action takes place around there. So they were talking about how he doesn't know anything about furniture and I'm going I know David did care about that stuff and I didn't know who he was at the time, so I sort of thought well—



Rauschenberg in the kitchen of his Lafayette Street home and studio, New York, 1968. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Shunk-Kender © J. Paul Getty Trust

There was also another time where Brice [Marden] was here and Brice was chatting with him here and there, but I thought Brice was a little removed from the whole thing. He could have been shy, he could have been—but he was very reserved, sitting back from all of this. But most of the time that I had here was with Bob and Sachika, cooking in the kitchen or drinking in the kitchen or watching TV in the kitchen or doing that kind of thing. It was all that kind of stuff or

if somebody came in— And then there was another guy that came in, David Bradshaw. The guy who was the expert marksman of the world and he made these pieces of art by shooting bullets into painted cardboard. He was showing Bob these things with the painted cardboard and that he had this ability to shoot on a small piece of cardboard—like yea big—from the side so that the bullet hole went through on the side like this and each one of them was equally apart and matched. So they were talking about that a little bit. But really, most of it was cooking here at home or that kind of thing.

I also knew David White in that period. That's where I met David, through all of that. At one point we went out to the Hamptons [New York] for a weekend. We went to David's house and Robert [Jakob]'s house at that time, and visited there. But Bob didn't really like the Hamptons. He really wanted to get home to his own table and be here. He really preferred sitting at his own table down there, which is why it was ideal when I was coming around that we could sit at the table and chat. So basically it was a very laid back thing.

Sachika was always full of a lot of energy. I think the other thing is that I don't think things actually went too well in the end, but I think Sachika was a very generous person and really kept the place going for a long time. I have only a great deal of love and admiration for Sachika because he was also— Let's face it. I was the outside man, but he always treated me like I belonged, as did Bob. So I don't have any pretensions that I was the great love or what have you, but it was like he—he was always—they always made it possible for me to come over and see Bob. And they knew Bob was happy so that was okay. Their life went better when Bob was happy. So that's what happened there.

I don't know; did I come a hundred times? No. But did I come fifty or sixty, seventy maybe?

Then there was the equivalent number of times I saw him socially at either museum openings or other things like that.

Q: And so for you, now, so we just came up here in the elevator together of course. So I'm curious then about your experience walking into this building now. Given that for you it's a place where you went to see Bob Rauschenberg over the context of this long relationship that you had.

Lahti: Right. Well I'll have to go down there again because you have to realize, I haven't been in this building many times since then.

[INTERRUPTION]

Lahti: I came into the room and I looked in the room, and that room downstairs where the reception is, that was always kind of a dead room. It never was a very life-full room in any of the times I was here. There was always something, art stored up there or things stored in there, but Bob never really spent much time in there. In my days when I was coming here, Bob never spent much time in the chapel. Bob maybe would go up to the floor below us on occasion or he would be in the kitchen or he would go down to his room, but those rooms on the ground floor—I don't think they were ever used in the times I came here. You would see things hanging up there time

by time and I know I remember seeing *Panorama* hang up there, as well as different things of Bob's that he was trying out and wanted to look at, but they were not particularly active.

Also this up here was Sachika's apartment at that time, and he and Agathe [Gonnet] were living up here at that time, so we didn't come up here. We would go up onto the roof time by time and there was a decomposing airplane up there of some kind or another. But it was like sitting around the family kitchen table. Really is what it was like. It may sound kind of extraordinary, but it was like going and sitting at a relative's or a friend's house at the kitchen table and that's really what the whole relationship with everybody who was coming here too. It all centered around that. And then of course Rocky would come thumping out every now and again and the whole show would stop for Rocky and Sachika would have his feeding with melon or watermelon, so Rocky was always the star when he came out.

Then again I was here with Ileana, but most of the time—and then also—I would always leave when it got to be too drunk or too carried on. There was always an arc to the time when there was socializing where it would start to take off, and that would be the time I would leave, just because I didn't like—it just got—people started getting crazy and it just wasn't what I was here for. Whether someone was doing too much drinking or that kind of thing. Then once people's states started changing and they started getting kooky, it was a certain kind of ambience I wasn't comfortable in, so I would get up and go home. But that didn't really happen very often. That was maybe a handful of times, where people got carried away.

But it was always an active house and things were always changing. The other thing that was always really the nicest thing about it, was that in the kitchen, on this wall on this side, which is the south wall, there was a sort of credenza built in the wall from the orphanage. Above it was some Homasote that was just sort of tacked up there and would be painted white occasionally, and he would always have a different piece hanging up there. He would ask for something to be put up there. I remember that there was an Yves Klein hanging there once, and there was a Joseph Beuys hanging there, and then there would be something of his own that he wanted to—there would always be sort of some odd piece that was a little different from everything else. It was always very beautiful, but there would just be different things that you wouldn't normally see from a series. I can't really describe it, but they were always very much Bob's work, but they were sort of atypical Bob's. In each of those groups. I would have to look through all the books to tell you what I mean by that, but I think you understand there are certain pieces that are a little bit separate from each series that he makes. I don't know if it's the golden piece or the unusual piece.

I remember the whole thing that Leo used to say—it's an apocryphal story, but it's altered—that in every show it's always the best piece and the worst piece are the ones that are the winners. Ofttimes the best piece is left over and it's considered a dog and it gets put back into the warehouse and then you pull it out years later and you find out it was the best piece of the show. That was kind of the whole thing. So maybe some of these were the ones that were the difficult ones, like the burr under the saddle or they were too pretty or they didn't quite fit—bits and pieces like that. That's my recollection and my interpretation of it, when I see them. It may not have been that at all, but that's how I looked at it. And it was like, "Let's experiment, let's look,

and let's see what we like." He would look at them while the television was on in the corner and go and watch the whole thing.

Q: And so over the course of coming to this building, seeing all these things that we've been discussing, what sort of a—because of course he was constantly doing different projects.

Lahti: Yes.

Q: New projects. That sort of thing. So I'm curious, when you first meet him he's working on the *Chow Bag* series and because of the nature of your relationship with him, what sort of a perspective you had on the arc of his work. You're here where he was working—he was working primarily in Captiva, but—

Lahti: And then it would be brought up here and we would see it here or if there was a print being made here I would see it here.

Q: So you'd see things primarily when they're being exhibited here at their opening here, that sort of a thing?

Lahti: Yes, at the opening or here or that kind of thing. He would ask me what I would think about it, which I would always, I think it's like how are you? Just great— They were always just great. But that's fine, I thought was always a cute thing. But it would be just different—and he would like to know what I think and he would say things like, "There's a lot of you in this

painting,” or this kind of thing. I’m a little embarrassed to say that, but he would say things to me like that and he would say things like, “You’re the nicest person I know,” and, “Why don’t you ask me for more things? Why don’t you ask me for paintings? And why don’t you ask me for this?” I said, “I’m here with you and we’re having a nice time. What do you want me to do? Do you want me to like Bob or do you want me to like Rauschenberg? You pick.” That was a conversation we had once, along the time. There are a lot of people now who think—who say they were friends with Rauschenberg and say well everybody got paintings from him and what did you get? You must be rich. I said, “No, I never got anything except that *Chow Bag*.”

Q: That *Chow Bag*.

Lahti: And I never really wanted all the responsibility or any of that kind of stuff. I got little bits and pieces from editions or things, but— The Christmas gifts that you would get, but I never really was like—you’re having dinner with somebody who invented the cathode ray tube. You don’t want—it’s like okay, they made it, they did it all, but you’re having dinner with them and you’re talking about the weather and stuff like that. So that was that whole thing.

Curiously the other thing I did with all the bits of things that Bob gave me, of artworks or Christmas presents or—the Christmas cards. Not specific presents to me, but Christmas cards. I had all of that stuff and shortly after he died I just donated it all to a museum out at Rutgers [University, Zimmerli Art Museum, New Brunswick, New Jersey]. It was just a few—it’s things that you have in abundance. Nothing of it was particularly special. But I just thought well, I don’t want to sell this. It’ll sit on a shelf for the rest of my life and so I gave it all away.

Q: After he passed away.

Lahti: After he passed away, yes.

Q: And so—

Lahti: I was going to say I do have—I know that he sent me a postcard and then there was another thing he gave me for an article in a magazine or newspaper, stuff like that. So that stuff doesn't do anybody any good sitting in a box on a shelf in a warehouse. It's not a lot of stuff but it's five or six things. I would rather just put them in a sleeve like this and drop them off sometime so you can have them.

Q: Right.

Lahti: Because then it's just another minor fact in a long story.

Q: No, certainly, his correspondence, that sort of thing, those are all areas of interest.

Lahti: Yes. I can drop those off.

Q: Great. And so over the years that we're talking about, you're part of this New York art community. Your bio is on galleries now, talking about how you've been a part of the New York

art community for more than thirty years. And so I'm curious then if you can isolate what Bob Rauschenberg's place was, specifically in the New York art community. Obviously internationally he has this whole impact, but what I'm curious about is that given that he was in Captiva, you're seeing him when he comes here, as a way of sort of transitioning into a retrospective mode in this session—your sense of what his place was in that community. He sort of dropped in here. He dropped into your life and there might be some parallels there, I don't know. But that's what I'm curious about. Because part of this project is okay, so what was his impact? Where and where not?

Lahti: Well, his impact especially now is incredibly profound. I had a friendship with him and it wove into my life, it's altered my DNA and it's a completely different way of seeing—I see it over and over again with all the things I do. I went on to other things with performance and supporting performance and I can close with a little bit of that. But I can never explain why—and this is kind of another thing—where you would take a crumpled piece of metal that's red and white and has a T on it and you hang it on the wall, and it's one of the most exquisitely beautiful things you've ever seen. He could do that with everything.



Robert Rauschenberg
Tabasco Glut (Neapolitan), 1987
 Assembled metal
 25 5/8 x 17 3/4 x 12 1/4 inches (65.1 x
 45.1 x 31.1 cm)
 Private collection

He could take this stuff and it wasn't easy for him, but he could do that. He could take those things and invest a life in them. It's well known all the stuff that he picked up on the street or bought or that he would hang up and invest in. And they all became that aura—he could impart his aura onto them in a certain way or his energy or his feeling or, if you want to be more rigorous about it, his color, form, and line in space. But there was always a little bit of magic about it and it would go and it would place it there.

And you see now art all over the place, where everybody is picking up cardboard and trash and throwing it together—I go to the show that's up at the [Solomon R.] Guggenheim [Museum, New York] at the moment and I'm sounding like an old crony that should be thrown out of the window, but when you look at it—and I was in the Guggenheim when Bob filled that place up, when he had the three-museum show, or the Ace [Gallery, New York] and the other two places [*Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and Guggenheim Museum SoHo, 1997–1998; and Guggenheim Museum at Ace Gallery, New York, 1997]—and it just looks lifeless. I'll do it the nice way. It doesn't have any life or magic to it or no vibration. It just sits there and it functions as no more than a piece of cardboard. Somebody could take a piece of tin that has a T on it or aluminum that's bent and put it there. And it was not magical because I was predisposed to liking Bob. It's just the kind of thing. You can test it yourself. Go take one of the pieces of the *Gluts* and hang it on the wall and take the best of the accumulators or benders that you've got around nowadays and hang them on the wall and you can see, hands down—even somebody who doesn't know anything about either of these artists can look at it and take it that way.

I think a lot of people have been trying to walk in Bob's shoes or don't care about Bob's shoes, but they have to walk in his shoes and it's like he was everywhere. He was the artist of all of this— He started all of it. And he really informed the basis of a lot of things. Remember, he was the guy who made these cardboard works [*Cardboards*, 1971–72], which are ravishing when you look at them now and nobody wanted them. They said, “Bob, what the fuck are you doing here? This is just garbage from whatever. What did you—? You've lost your—” And they were among the most sublime of his works. Just think about it. He could take all of that stuff. He started from those blueprints [ca. 1950], he did the *White Paintings* [1951] and the black paintings and all of that stuff, then he goes through the whole explosion of all the Combines [1954–64], and then he has the arc where he starts taking it back and taking it back, and you've got this piece of cardboard on the wall. You've got this piece of gauze with a string with a rock tied to it. And somehow or another it captures that little bit of magic that floats around in your life and it sits there and it takes your breath away.



Robert Rauschenberg
Aero Shield / Melons (Cardboard), 1971
77 x 54 1/2 x 9 1/2 inches (195.6 x
138.4 x 24.1 cm)
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

And then, of course, the cycle changes and he comes back to the period of what I think is *Rodeo Palace* [(*Spread*), 1976], that whole period where he's looking back to look forward again. To me, some of the most beautiful work is the *Jammers* [1975–76] and that bag—which I don't remember the name of—the gauze bag that has all the empty paint cans in it that's tacked to the wall [*Coin (Jammer)*, 1976]. Or the prints that he made out at Gemini that were rags put into the pulp pieces that were there [*Pages* and *Fuses*, both 1974].



Robert Rauschenberg
Coin (Jammer), 1976
 Sewn fabric and tin cans
 89 x 43 x 19 inches (226.1 x 109.2 x 48.3 cm)
 Robert Rauschenberg Foundation



Robert Rauschenberg
Page 2 (Pages), 1974
 Molded natural fiber handmade paper
 22 inches (55.9 cm) diameter
 From an edition of 11, published by
 Gemini G.E.L., Los Angeles

Just very simple things. And also the stuff that he learned when he was in India. It was just a piece of cloth hung on the wall in a certain way and not much done to it. But I think it was too much for people. So then I think he looked back to start over again and then he did that, and then it came out that the ROCI tour came in and did all this, and then I saw the things with the—I think about the *Gluts*. That was my time here, seeing that stuff, and seeing the gasoline station

signs on the wall and the relationship to the oil in Texas at the time et cetera. He never stopped being a Port Arthur guy and southern Texas guy. Coastal Texas, I think is what he said.



Robert Rauschenberg
Regular Diary Glut, 1986
Assembled metal
85 x 116 x 24 inches (215.9 x 294.6 x 61 cm)
Private collection

I think a lot of people are taking the conversation that he started and I'm realizing now in this conversation with you— I didn't think too much about this because the only research I did for it was to look at *Glacial Decoy* and *Set and Reset* [1983] because I had some stuff to do with that as well, later on—and just see how that kind of changed. But I think now, lots of people are operating in his space between art and life and it's like it's a bookshelf. I think we're all born with a library in our head that's made of bookshelves. They're empty. And once a book gets up on that bookshelf— Why do I always like David Bowie better than anybody else? He got on my bookshelf when I was sixteen at the right time so anything else is compared from there.

Rauschenberg, for the type of work that he did, was the first person who got onto my bookshelf. So everything is measured against that. It's just an average thing. Or it's like why do you like *Madame Bovary* [1856] above all books? Or why do you like Rumi poetry or why do you like [Thomas Sterns] T. S. Eliot or why do you like *Annie Hall* or why do you like *Sunset Boulevard* [1950] or any of these things? Because they got there first and they moved you in a way. That's

what I think Bob did and a lot of people are trying to do that. They may be very good, but because my bookshelf is already full, I don't have—

[Laughter]

Lahti: I don't have room for the next great novel.

Q: So speaking of that gap between art and life and the people working in it, to look at a quote that I found of yours on the 856 G Gallery [Cebu, Philippines] page, you're one of those people in that space, where you say, "To paraphrase Bob Rauschenberg's quote of participating in the gap between art and life, I've always thought of myself as operating between the cracks, freezing, thawing, causing rocks to break—mostly my own rocks—between cultures high and widespread that I love. I draw inspiration, as many others have, from commonplace objects and experiences, to those of the sublime, all of which are recognizable in my work." And so thinking about you as one of these people who are in this gap between art and life, in that space, I'd like to ask you what you think it means to be in that space, to think of yourself in that space. In your work now, for example, and what sort of influence Bob Rauschenberg has on your thinking of what it means to be in that space, to operate from that space, to do art in those coordinates.

Lahti: I always did that. I'm thinking about something that moves me when you talk about that. I've never heard it read to me before, so that's really kind of startling to me, and it actually sounds a little better than— I always thought I was kitsch, but it doesn't. You read it very well. For the first time I don't think I'm a bit of kitsch or like [Gioachino Antonio] Rossini used to

say, “A bit of old Rococo.” But anyhow— And my Rococo is based on a Rauschenberg, by the way. And there’s nothing the matter with Rococo. I think it’s a lot of fun and it’s really good. I was thinking about how this is a thread that’s always operated in my whole life, along the whole way, and I started to think about this whole process after Bob died—and I wanted to tell the story of Porto [Portugal] and there was something else I wanted to finish up with.

So from the theme of performance and operating between art and life, I would always paint. I would make an edition from prints. I would say, “Okay well, the edition is going to be thirty.” I’d run thirty-five sheets of paper and I would start on the print. I would not know what the print was going to be. I know a lot of people do proofs and then they do the edition. Well I would do one image on all thirty-five sheets of paper. And I would say, “What comes next?” Then I would do the next image on all thirty-five sheets of paper. And I would build this print up and there would be times where it would go to shit and then times it would be not enough and times it would be like a lot of life and it would be perfect. So I would build the edition up like this and it would be a crashout, throwing a thing and seeing what would happen, instead of having something that’s all prepared beforehand and proofed and worked out.

I always wanted to print it and do it myself. So that would be something that I would always do. Sort of like, “What are we going to do today? How are we going to make a print? How am I feeling today? What is the space that I’m occupied in?” Et cetera. So I would just skate through that whole thing and just make it. The results were generally pretty good. I didn’t have many failures. Maybe two in all the whole time I did that. That’s kind of a brazen thing, now that I think about it.

The other thing is that because I have always been—this is going to come off awful when it's in the tape or the transcript because it'll sound snooty—but by my ability to be available, I've always gotten places sort of first. When I first moved to New York I went to the opening night of Studio 54, one of them, and I was there and it was a juice bar and it wasn't very exciting and it was just—it was kind of fun, but so what? That's a trivial story, but— Or I'm talking to Marvin Heiferman up at Castelli Graphics and he says, "What do you think about this?" And he hands me a notebook full of two hundred black-and-white photographs of this girl doing something different in each scene, wearing a different outfit, and saying, "Well what do you think we should do with these?" You know exactly who that was. That kind of stuff. I was there when he said, "Look at these crazy pictures of folded up foil," and it was [James] Jim Welling. Then it was Richard Prince and all of that kind of stuff.

So I would see all of these things moving forward and you would get there first and you would see it. Of course now everybody loves Cindy Sherman and Richard Prince and they're icons in the mold of Bob Rauschenberg. Not really, but they're pretty good anyhow, but not the same. It's like I've seen this whole generational thing and tried to compare it to that and I'm really kind of a square. I like Warhol, I like Lichtenstein, I like all those guys. I like Johns and also knowing de Kooning— They're the people. And then the next generation I also knew all of these people too, just by accident, but they would be there. And I think really, Bob informs all of that.

Because I was never really that interested in— Sure, I'd like to have a bigger art career. Sure, I'd like to have more gallery showings and all of that stuff, but I'm also a little claustrophobic and

every time I would get involved in having a gallery, somebody would say, “Well could you make it horizontal, could you paint it blue, could you make it green, could you not do this or—” That kind of thing. And my back would get up and I’d say, “Thank you for the input,” and then I would drift away because I never really liked— It felt like somebody was putting a wet overcoat on me when they asked me to change that stuff. Then I made a decision—and I think Bob also helped me with this—that I’ll always continue to make art, but I’m making it for myself and what it needs, and if it turns out that people see it later on and it resonates with them, then that’s great for both of us. If they don’t, then it’s too bad for somebody, mostly me maybe or maybe them. I don’t know. I can’t oblige them to look at it.

So I really never had a big art career and through Bob I realized I didn’t need one. He taught me that I didn’t need to be on that greasy pole trying to get up and trying to get all those things. I moved to New York and I meet one of the greats and I can see the whole thing in operation, I can see the whole machinery and I’m introduced to the private parts of the whole thing—meeting Ileana, seeing the museums going, and I’m saying, “These poor kids—Bob included—they have to wait sometimes for a long period before they can put their art up on the wall and they can see the audience.” I think about, you look at some of these people, you look at some of the big galleries, and you pick a very famous artist out of their roster and you look and see how many times they’ve had a show over the last ten years. Two, three maybe? And they’re a great artist. Where does the rest of that go? Do they only get three months out of ten years? I don’t know. I didn’t really want that after a while. I wanted to keep making my work. That’s why I have the pop-up store. That’s also in relation to my work that I did with Bob and with Andy.

I had friends who had a paper store that was beginning to have some trouble because the chain stores were coming in. So they said, “Well Charles, can you help us out? Can you help print these boxes?” So of course, I made the boxes. I printed boxes that they fold up and they use them as gift-wrap at Christmas. They said, “Could you also start making gift wrap for us?” So I would do that at the end of the day with the guy I work with. We’d make these specialty pieces of paper and these boxes and sell them for twenty dollars or forty dollars and I thought this was a continuation of what Bob especially—I was not so much with Andy and those guys, I knew them but it was not that big a deal to me. And I can then get my art that I hand-made. Okay, it’s a commercial thing. I did it from a map. It’s things to sell and it would support the art studio and make my art happen, and I would make these wrapping papers or different prints for people who come from all around the world to buy a map of New York that’s been hand-screened on recycled paper in the middle of Bushwick, Brooklyn and it’s maybe a stupid, silly thing of a map from New York from 1920, but it then gets out there. The thing with Bob is that I can imbue each of those sheets of paper with that magic of the handmade—somebody cared about it, somebody made it, and off it went. You could say well, Charles, you didn’t paint a masterpiece. Well no, but I put my energy on a piece of paper and now it’s all around the world. That’s definitely an offshoot from my time with Bob. We both knew that too.

The other thing that I was going to talk about was that from the performance days and things like this, I wound up having to work at an advertising agency doing slideshows. Then after Bob died and all of that happened, I was at sea for a while. I was fifty-five years old and nobody wants to hire a fifty-five-year-old guy. That’s just how it happens. Nobody ever tells you, but if anybody hears this, make sure you’re prepared for fifty because by fifty-five they might come after you.

And nobody will ever tell you. I'm not being bitter about it because after that, I was thrown into a tizzy and I didn't know what to do. A month later, a friend of mine who works at another agency says, "Would you mind working for us?" It was the same thing with Zig Priede. He said, "Think of *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* [1994] and think about the Terence [Henry] Stamp role. You're Terence Stamp. I need you to do that for the summer. And you now have a job." I said, "Okay, let's do it." So the next thing, I was on a tour bus that was sponsored by Dell taking a geodesic dome and—also [Richard Buckminster] Bucky Fuller was here at this day when these pictures are, here [note: referring to the photographs of Tanya Grosman's memorial].

Q: '82 here, yes.

Lahti: And Bucky delivered the eulogy. Bucky was another thread through my life too, which was in there several times. And so—where was I going with this—so we had to take the geodesic dome across the country to six major rock festivals, assemble it at the foot of the stage, and have these activations inside, where people could come in and get their hair done, they could make pictures, they could make collages. It was really about bringing the art out to these kids at rock festivals and letting them have this. At the same time, we also conducted interviews with the performers, and they were making a legacy videotape that Dell had sponsored of the music scene in America in 2008. So that was my grieving period after Bob died; I was sent on a tour bus to manage all of these people across the country. We attended many smaller festivals and did all of this stuff. For about five months I went on the road and did that and it was successful. They expected thirty thousand people to come through the dome, but we got a hundred and two thousand, so they were ecstatic that we were able to do that. A lot of people came through.

But then the other thing that goes on, you go forward another couple of years and I get a telephone call that they have a Lady Gaga tour that's coming up and they asked me if I would go on it. I needed to represent the tour sponsor and the tour sponsor was Virgin Mobile at the time, it's a telephone company. Gaga has a song called *Telephone* [2009]. So it all morphs together. We have this thing where I run what's called an activation, where we set up the different things where people can come in and get their photographs taken and be their own superstars. That was when these kids were coming out and basically it was just at that tipping point for the gay world to change and I was there on the edge of that. I went on three or four tours with her. I was there on the arena on the outside, on the periphery. We never did anything inside the concert hall. It was all outside.

Q: Setting up these spaces, you're saying?

Lahti: Setting up these spaces and we were on a tour bus that had her picture on it. We were the decoy bus so everybody thought, "There's that decoy again," the bus that she was on, but they would get me coming off the bus and so they were a little disappointed, but that's okay. So we would set this—it was all about how you throw it back to the kids, "You're the superstar, not me. I'm nothing without you." That was her schtick through the whole thing and it's a true thing. What would happen is that we would then do a raffle where we would say, "Do you want to win a phone call from Lady Gaga, in the middle of the concert." Everybody would do this and I would set it up and then I would do the drawing, I would get the person, and you have to put them in the right spot because they'd have to have a light go on them. It was a real thing, but it

didn't happen in real time. It happened five minutes before so they could calm down so when they get out there they could do all that. So they needed a resident adult to run this.

What started happening was that these kids came out and they would start talking about how they were gay and they couldn't live, and it was the kind of thing that Bob and I—we were all from a generation where it was behind the screen, behind the curtains. We didn't hide from it, but it wasn't talked about that much. So what would happen is that we would have these kids up on the jumbotron talking about how she saved them and allowed them to express themselves and to be gay and she said—and then it would turn into this whole thing and it was this inspiration for— She would start saying in the middle of the concert, while she's talking to them, “Well, your parents didn't realize you were born this way.” So it would then turn out that subsequently she wrote that song. A lot of people got upset because they said that she was just glomming onto work that people had been doing for forty, fifty years, but it wasn't that. She just happened to help supply some energy to it that pushed it forward, like Bob supplied energy to push things forward. And we now all know what's happened since then. It was being able to be a part of that and seeing how that unfolded because through the phone call we would get twenty thousand people a night screaming and yelling for these kids who were gay and that even if they weren't gay, it's like you were born this way. You're supposed to be whatever you were.

I also think that sometimes Bob, when he was younger, they didn't know that he was born that way. I'm not talking about sexuality. I'm just talking about—that he didn't write necessarily the best or he didn't read very well, but he could make these pictures and do all this kind of thing. It was one of those things, to be on the edge of that. And nobody knew who I was. I was this guy

that made this thing happen, but at the end of the day I could step back and watch it. So that's another example of what I learned from all the performance and doing things like that. And that kind of thing still happens to me. I don't make much money from it, but so what.

Q: But again though, maybe going back to these engagements and sort of this watching in terms of these two photographs that we have here.

Lahti: You can see he's happy. You can see I'm happy. It's not—I don't know. I remember being here at this and I remember Bucky talking about Tanya—this long-winded Bucky story that you don't know what the heck he's trying to tell you and you wish he'd move it along a little faster. It would be like Tanya's people were Tartars. They came over the mountain. They conquered everybody. I'm sure there's a transcript of all of this and how he would weave the whole thing together and we were standing outside on the cul-de-sac outside of ULAE at the time and it was going on like this. It was good.

Q: So as we come to a conclusion here, I suppose I have one more question and again, pulling off a quote from you talking about— This was on a blog for the 188 Galerie [New York] and you talk about this idea, “It really being a shared energy and a conversation, both functional and a container of wonderful and imagined things.” So as a way of coming to a conclusion today, I'm curious if you could think about—if you want to engender this conversation, what was Bob Rauschenberg's role in that conversation for you? You've talked a lot about these ideas of his energy, of his aura, or of his technique, or however exactly you want to get at it. But I'm curious now, he of course passed away in 2008 and so we're now a little more than seven years later. A

big part of this project is thinking about his legacy as an individual, but then also his approach, I think that energy, that aura that goes beyond him in some way, that is just a way of doing things or an approach to things. That again being in that space between art and life. And so I'm curious if you could reflect on him in that sense. Where is he in that conversation for you? In your approach to things in your work?

Lahti: He's really— The whole experience with him is really in my DNA or it was a shared DNA or it was a similar part of the ballpark we came from or whatever and it really just informs everything, trying to be as available to others and inclusive with others as you can be. It's that whole thing where you used to talk about one plus one doesn't equal two. Sometimes one plus one can equal everything. And when you interact with people and talk with them—that's really what it was like with Bob. It never was one plus one; it was always everything. That was really the spirit that he had. It was hard for him to do it. It wasn't that easy magical thing that just could do. He'd have to recharge. That's why he sat at the kitchen table. That's why certain people were able to be there with him when he recharged. But I try to use that ability to be able to see part of everybody and include them in it because they influence your work. As we said before, allowing chance to come in and take its role at the table, so to speak. And that was that whole thing. I think that's it.

The only other thing I was going to tell you—and you can decide to cut this off at the end or you can release the whole thing, is that I'm in Porto with Anthony Gammardella and David White and Robert, and we're all there seeing the show in Porto [*Robert Rauschenberg: Travelling '70–'76*, Museu de Arte Contemporânea de Serralves, 2007–08]. One of the things that would happen

is that Bob always had business to do and so I stayed out of the picture in business. There were always people who wanted to be close to him so I would stay out of the picture. So we're at Porto, he's in his wheelchair, and it's just a mechanism. It's not a wheelchair; it's a mechanism that keeps him going. He's sitting there and this may have been—well, it wasn't the last time I saw him, but obviously it was not so far away from that—and I went up to him and he's sitting in this little antechamber outside of this house where the dinner is after the opening and everybody's there and the TV cameras are rolling. You would have to wait with Bob and there would always be a moment when it's time to approach him because people weren't in the way and he would look at me and ask me—I went over to give him—he's sitting there in this chair and the cameras are rolling getting ready to do this interview, and it's my moment to walk up and I go over and give him a kiss, which I thought was going to be a little thing, but it turns out that it was rather a passionate kiss. And nobody saw it and we were being filmed on the camera. So at the last minute, the rascal, even in his wheelchair, could slip you a little tongue.

[Laughter]

Q: That energy, right?

Lahti: So there you have it. I know that won't get into the newspaper, but that's—I tell you that just because that's really kind of one of the—that's my—after crying about him when I found out he was dead, I go back to that thing where, here's this guy who clearly still has affection and a connection to life and he's virtually immobilized, but he still keeps it going. That's the most

important thing for him. And that's my memory of it and I carry that around and it's always good to be available to that space between art and life.

Q: Beautiful. So unless there's something else you'd like to close with?

Lahti: No, I can't think of anything else. I probably talked too much, but that's okay.

Q: Well then, on my end, thank you Charles for sitting down—

Lahti: You're welcome.

Q: —for taking the time, coming down to the Foundation, and for now we'll close off this record.

Lahti: Okay. Thanks very much for having me. Bye-bye.

[END OF INTERVIEW]