

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of

Lawrence Weiner

Columbia Center for Oral History Research

Columbia University

2015

## PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Lawrence Weiner conducted by Brent Edwards on May 6, 2015. This interview is part of the Robert Rauschenberg Oral History Project.

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

Transcription: Audio Transcription Center

Session #1

Interviewee: Lawrence Weiner

Location: New York, New York

Interviewer: Brent Edwards

Date: May 6, 2015

Q: It's May 6, 2015. I'm Brent Edwards and I'm happy to be here with Lawrence Weiner, who's agreed to talk about Bob Rauschenberg and the downtown art scene in the sixties and seventies. We can be freewheeling and go in any direction you'd like to go in. The idea behind the project, generally, is not solely to provide a biography of Rauschenberg, but to think about the worlds of Rauschenberg. It's obvious enough that one of the first things to say about Rauschenberg is that he's in some ways the preeminent artist of his generation who moved in multiple networks. So that's the idea.

Weiner: It's about ambiance and about the mise-en-scène that he dreamt of making and made.

Q: Right.

Weiner: The major problem was that Rauschenberg was one of the few people who could maintain his own romantic sense of where he came from and at the same time be totally aware of where he is. I'm not a great fan of ethnic culture.

Q: Of ethnic culture?

Weiner: Ethnic culture, things that are ethnic. I grew up with it; this is my culture. You have the culture that you've assumed yourself to be in. But Bob was able to deal with that. He was able to deal with Janis Joplin and deal with the idea of the delta. At the same time, he was a New York City artist. Complete.

Q: Can I ask you to talk biographically and can I give you a quote?

Weiner: Yes.

Q: It's from an old interview you did with Benjamin [H. D.] Buchloh [in *Lawrence Weiner*, 1998].

Weiner: Oh, that's a long time ago.

Q: I was looking through a lot of your work, your writing and interviews with you, and there's not a huge amount where you're talking in-depth about Rauschenberg. This was an interesting moment which I wanted to use as a launching pad to get you to talk about your sense of an older generation of artists and the New York scene and your entry into that scene. So let me read it to you. The third paragraph I think is very well known, it's been quoted a number of times, but not the second paragraph. You're talking about [Jackson] Pollock, [Franz] Kline, [Willem] de Kooning, that generation of artists who are a little bit before you.

Weiner: A lot, yes.

Q: You say about Cy Twombly, “I have always considered Twombly a beautiful painter. I thought that his work was absolutely exquisite: this was the life of a human being. This was class, without placing it within the context of modern art, without making it look important, but making it the way it was supposed to look. This is what made [Robert] Ryman also such a fabulous painter for me: he was able to make it look the way it was supposed to look. Jasper Johns was doing that too. He did not ask me to be transcendental . . . he did not have to tell me that his found objects were a bridge. I think that Rauschenberg in the end will turn out to be a far more important artist, because Rauschenberg did prat-falls, he took chances; Johns never took a risk in his life. What if we step aside for one second and then substitute one word ‘lifestyle,’ public placement within society, for ‘narrative.’ You are talking about 1955 and narrative was not the problem, the problem was lifestyle. I did not have that advantage of a middle-class perspective. Art was something else; art was the notations on the wall, or art was the messages left by other people. I grew up in a city where I had read the walls; I still read the walls. I love to put work of mine out on the walls and let people read it. Some will remember it and then somebody else comes along and puts something else over it. It becomes archeology rather than history.”

Weiner: Did I really say that?

Q: You did.

Weiner: Wow.

Q: Very eloquent. I've seen the passage about it becoming archeology rather than history, that writing on the walls passage, quoted a number of times. But I wanted to put that with the passage right before it, where you're talking about that earlier generation, your sense of Twombly and Rauschenberg and Johns, especially the idea that Rauschenberg may be the most significant of that earlier generation.

Weiner: I still believe that. I still believe that if you stand still, Robert Rauschenberg turns out to be a pivotal force in American, European, New York culture. He was the only person, besides [John] Chamberlain, who was more than willing to throw their entire career on the line for an intuitive feeling. When it didn't work, they moaned and groaned, but they picked themselves up and they went ahead and continued what they were doing. Every once in a while some brilliance would come out. Literally with Chamberlain, with Rauschenberg, out of nowhere, suddenly out of this mess there was the wheels. The wheels, when you look at them again, are absolutely prescient about what we understand about perception and about doing things. That is what artists do; they're prescient. [Note: referring to Rauschenberg's *Revolvers* (1967)]



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

Q: It's obviously a bit of a fanciful exercise to try to date something like this, but your first encounter with Rauschenberg, would it have been the Combines? What would you have seen by Rauschenberg first?

Weiner: Let's say the first time that I thought that Rauschenberg might be somebody I would like to hang out with, because that's the way one thought, I think I was living on Duane Street [New York] and it was at a Martha Jackson show. It was just the chair on the canvas. It was that simple. I looked at it and there was something so eloquent about the fact that he had remained and retained a simplicity. I thought, "Oh, I'd like to meet him." Then somehow or other, the way New York works, you found yourself within that sphere.



Robert Rauschenberg  
*Pilgrim*, 1960  
Combine: oil, graphite, paper, printed paper, and fabric  
on canvas with painted wood chair  
79 1/4 x 53 7/8 x 18 5/8 inches (201.3 x 136.8 x 47.3 cm)  
Private collection

Q: How did that work exactly? That sounds like such a romantic idea for somebody of my generation.

Weiner: I just had to write the preface for *Unforgotten New York[: Legendary Spaces of the Twentieth-Century Avant-Garde, 2015]*, a book coming out about the clubs. It's all about ambiance. It's really funny; this is, timing-wise, sort of strange. It was about rumors. You heard where somebody went and then you went there. If you were either interesting enough, pretty enough, or something, you got into a conversation, and if the conversation grew into something, you ended up in that scene. If not, it petered out and you were out. Why can't we keep it that simple? That's the way it was. Or somebody knew somebody who knew somebody and said you would get along with so and so and introduced you. Of course, usually the person would say, "What the fuck are you doing here?" Or, "Who the fuck are you?"

Q: Well, you grew up in New York.

Weiner: I grew up in New York.

Q: And you had gone to Hunter [College] for a little while.

Weiner: No, I went to Stuyvesant [High School].

Q: You went to Stuyvesant for high school.



Weiner: Yes, and I went to Hunter for a little while.

Q: Yes, I thought you had done some college work too.

Weiner: Yes, I did. I started and I did the whole leftist thing of children's education. I didn't think that they had enough males teaching kindergarten and things like that. I come from an American Socialist background where doing those things was not considered demeaning.

Rauschenberg didn't think those things were demeaning either, as a natural thing. There was something about the man naturally, that for a loud-mouth firebrand kid you felt okay around him. The same as you felt okay around Chamberlain, because there was something okay. You felt okay around de Kooning. Kline you kept a very formal relationship with, you talked about special things, and he read and you talked about reading and writing and arithmetic, basically.

Q: What about Jasper Johns?

Weiner: I don't know him at all.

Q: Or Cy Twombly.

Weiner: Cy was something else. Cy was a very open guy. Cy was okay.

Q: [Robert] Bob Petersen was telling me about Cy cooking hot dogs.

Weiner: Yes, Cy cruised. He would look at a table and if you could eat that, okay, and if you didn't eat that, you're fine, you can eat that. He always found something. I told him he was a very generous, open person. So was Rauschenberg. They were not frightened of their dignity. They were both shy and shy people have a tendency to be really overwhelming when they're coming through.

Q: In a social setting?

Weiner: Yes, I have the same problem. I can do things publically, but I really have a lot of trouble doing one on one.

Q: I know what you mean.

Weiner: Well, I think many people do. Especially people who are lucky enough to find themselves in an endeavor that seems to be useful for other people.

Q: When you said that, it made me think of teaching.

Weiner: Yes, teaching is one thing. I can't teach. I don't and I have my reasons.

Q: Going back to the scene in that moment and the rumors, when you came to New York and started to establish yourself—

Weiner: I didn't come to New York. I was in New York.

Q: But you had left and had been traveling, no?

Weiner: Yes. New Yorkers all traveled. Everybody forgets, but [Allen] Ginsberg worked his way across on ships. Everybody worked. You lost a lot of your prerogative. If you were very rich, you could maintain some of your prerogative where you came from. But most of the people were middle class or lower class or ruling class, but they didn't have access.

Q: Right.

Weiner: Everybody was doing things. In order to work, you traveled. If you were interested in big tables, you went to Denver. It was also a time when you could hitchhike. People did it all the time. I used to hitchhike from uptown to downtown on the West Side Highway [New York], the old one when it was up there.

Q: Really?

Weiner: Truck drivers going downtown, you would just jump on the side and save yourself a subway token.

Q: I just meant that you hadn't maintained an apartment while you were traveling?

Weiner: No, I always found someplace to live in. That was much later on when I moved to Bleeker Street [New York]. That was in '61 or so. I maintained that until I moved here and only because I lost it.

Q: Where on Bleeker?

Weiner: Where Elizabeth [Street] comes into Bleeker; where CBGBs opened up. When I was there, there was nobody there.

Q: Over by the Bowery.

Weiner: Yes, by the Bowery. There was nobody there. I think Sidney Geist had a place there. But nobody, beyond Brian Potier. But it was a very bad neighborhood. It was the Broadway-Lafayette stop. It was not fun in the sixties and the early seventies.

Q: So I've heard.

Weiner: I raised my child there. I know.

Q: One person I interviewed told me it was the Wild West.

Weiner: The Wild West had some kind of basic rules.

Q: Alphabet City, no rules.

Weiner: This wasn't Alphabet City. This was out of it. Alphabet City was something else.

Q: Lower East Side.

Weiner: The Lower, Lower East Side. That's why one could meet a lot of people, after four o'clock, when the bars closed. I worked until about three o'clock on the docks as a kid and if you missed crossing, you spent the night sitting around talking in a coffee house until five o'clock, when the people were going to work to clean the buildings and things like that. The streets were not a place you wanted to be. Musicians were getting mugged. Everybody was getting hurt. So you just hung out for those two or three hours until there was more activity on the street and then you went back out again.

Q: Since you're taking about a pre-Internet age, pre-cell phone age, can you talk about how rumors circulated?

Weiner: I don't know how rumors work. That's one of the very funny things that I used to talk about sometimes with Bob. I like to drink and Bob didn't like to do drugs. I liked smoking dope and I liked to drink when I was a kid a lot. We would talk about how the hell did I know about somebody in Paris? I never got to Paris until '63. I don't know. When I went to the *Attitude* show in '69 [*Live in Your Head: When Attitude Becomes Form (Works—Concepts—Processes—Situations—Information)*], Kunsthalle Bern, Switzerland] how did I know enough to tell [Daniel]

Danny Buren I would help him post his things? How did he know about me? There were no facts, no nothing. I don't know how the rumors worked, but there were rumors. There were rumors of an artist who was doing this or an artist who was doing that. Somehow or other you tracked it down. Bob knew everything that was going on. He was literally a yenta. Total yenta. He would find out about things through all the worlds that he went through. He and [Johan Wilhelm] Billy Klüver could tell you who was sleeping with whom everywhere in New York City. Everyone.

Q: Well, that seems to have been a big part of it, as you'd expect.

Weiner: As one would hope.

Q: As one would hope. Do you remember any of those first points of contact when you got into his world?

Weiner: No.

Q: Or the first time you would've gone to [381] Lafayette Street [New York]?

Weiner: No, I really don't know. I might've even met him sitting on the floor in somebody else's studio and somebody said, "That's Bob Rauschenberg," or something. I genuinely don't know. Or I had known him basically by sight and because I was around I was familiar enough that nobody even changed their tone. Strangers were something else, people you hadn't seen on the

scene. But it was all rumors. I don't remember the first Rauschenberg I saw. I don't remember the first time I met Bob or anybody else for that matter. I don't even know where I met Seth Siegelau. We went to the same high school. We graduated at the same time. We didn't know each other. Okay, I met him in '63, when I had come back from Europe. I was walking in Provincetown [Massachusetts], literally looking for a place to sleep under a bridge or something because I had just arrived. I'm walking down the street and somebody said, "Hello, Lawrence." I said, "Hello, Seth." He said, "You have time for a beer?" "Yes." "I'm opening a gallery. Can I come to Bleecker Street?" How did he know I lived on Bleecker Street? We talked about this until his death. About a week before he died, he had schlepped over to the boat in Amsterdam from where he was living. He wanted to keep moving. We tried to figure out how the hell we even knew each other or how we decided that I would make this show for him on Fifty-sixth Street, which is up on the wall. The Museum of Modern Art [New York] found photos of it. I don't know, these were rumors. Now, when you're looking at an oral history, everybody wants to tell you how it affected them. I think it was much more of an amorphous situation, where everybody was everybody. It sounds very romantic.

Q: Yes, say what you mean.

Weiner: Everybody was finding themselves on the same side of the barricade and the barricade was formidable. The middle class academic, cultural world was formidable. You would go uptown with famous artists to go to a [Barnett] Barney Newman show. You would get there and the artists you were with, like Twombly, you'd take the subway up together, all of your buddies would be excited. Everybody liked Barney. You'd get there and the people at the gallery were

acting like, well, “What are you people here for?” It was a different world. Which meant that everybody was part of that world.

Q: So there was a kind of solidarity.

Weiner: Not solidarity. It was organic. You didn't agree; you fought with other people about aesthetics, about politics. But it was an organic world. If you look in the early notebooks even, from the *Attitude* show, which they keep talking about, but that's really late. They never realized that the *Attitude* show didn't show any art that nobody knew. All those pieces were chosen and invited. Every work in there was invited—work, not just the artist. But his [Harald Szeemann's] notebooks said he can't deal with New York sometimes because everybody has slept with absolutely everybody else, been married to everybody else, and they give you the phone numbers of everybody. They were not doing that European thing where once it's over, it's over and you never talk about them. Everybody was still totally dependent upon whatever power that seemed to generate. It was intellectual and emotional power, and we all understood intellectual and emotional power.

Q: If you had to date that, we're talking about the entire decade of the sixties?

Weiner: I'd say from about sixties, yes, because I had my first show in New York in '64 on Fifty-sixth Street. So I'd say the sixties, but it went back to the fifties. When I entered that world, I entered it through this area of all places. James [Arthur] Baldwin and [Jack] Kerouac. I keep seeing these films and reading about it. It just seemed normal, that's where you went, these were



the people you admired. It's the fifties. It's Lenny Bruce being arrested. It's the cabaret laws. You put it all together, it set an ambiance that was much more amenable to letting people in rather than keeping people out.

Q: You would've been very young.

Weiner: I was very young.

Q: You would have been a teenager at that point.

Weiner: Yes, I was very young. I had to make a choice when I was young. I knew that I couldn't enter the world I wanted to enter if I did it their way because I didn't come from the right place. So I just sort of lanced in. I have no idea where people in the sixties, Bob Rauschenberg, could find the patience to be around somebody like me. I don't know if I would have that. I think I might. I hope. I wouldn't know. But I had no choice. If I didn't go to see the Watts Towers [Simon Rodia State Historic Park, Los Angeles] by putting my thumb up and going to L.A. without knowing a soul; going, seeing, doing, and finding a job as a bodyguard for a little while, and then coming back, I never would have done it. I would never have gotten in. There was no class trip.

Q: When you say you didn't come from the right place, you mean in terms of privilege, in terms of class background; what do you mean, from the right place?

Weiner: Privilege, class, background, and location. I didn't come from a place where many people got out.

Q: Right.

Weiner: I remember Linda Francis, the painter, talking about it. For her, I had no idea I was a hero. I was nobody. We're talking about the seventies and she was a younger person. But it was possible.

Q: It was possible to get out and to get into the world.

Weiner: To get out and be seen. So my background really doesn't come into the whole thing. What Rauschenberg had was another scene, people who were able to collate some people of privilege, some money, some here, some there, and to build this structure. It was open; it was obviously open enough for me to get into it.

Q: Do you think it had something to do the particular flavor of that atmosphere, with the fact that it was pre-Internet, pre-cell phone?

Weiner: No, it had to do with the fact—

Q: Even pre-answering machine I guess.

Weiner: Oh yes, pre-telephone. Most people couldn't afford a telephone.

Q: But some of what you're describing sounds to me like a village-oriented conviviality, with people used to seeing one another in the street.

Weiner: It wasn't convivial. It wasn't convivial.

Q: It wasn't necessarily convivial.

Weiner: It was necessary. If I couldn't take a shower at Lee Lozano's, I didn't get a shower. I didn't have any hot water. If you couldn't hang out at the Café Figaro and get warm or in Mickey Ruskin's old place, the artist's café, you didn't get any warmth that day because you didn't have anything to eat. Some people had something, but other people didn't. Everybody sort of functioned.

Q: So it wasn't necessarily convivial. But the intimacy of that atmosphere had something to do with it.

Weiner: You were pegged as being the wrong people. I don't know if anybody has told you that in the area where Bob and I were living, the people on the street used to jump out with chains and tire irons, beating people up because of the beginning—remember, the Vietnam War started in 1954.

Q: Yes.

Weiner: There was such a division between what they call philistines now. They wouldn't even know what that meant. People on the street knew that you were part of a community and it didn't matter what you looked like because nobody looked the same. It wasn't like the hippies, everybody looking alike. But they smelled it on you. I grew up around a lot of violence. I can be violent, but I don't like it. I can remember slipping a knife in my pocket before I went into a checkerboard club on the Lower East Side. They didn't like black people and white people to be dancing together. It was so innocent you couldn't believe it. The black people were being rejected by their own community for doing this and the white people were being rejected by their own communities. So what happens? They made their own community that didn't have anything to do with it. The checkerboard clubs were the first on the scene, those bars. The Frog Pond and places like that. I'm refusing to get into giving a chronology. I was a kid. I guess I was okay. I don't know. I seemed to manage.

Q: Was part of the character of the scene that it was multimedia, that you had not just painters hanging out with painters?

Weiner: Oh yes, filmmakers, you had—

Q: Writers, dancers.

Weiner: [Phill] Niblock doing screenings. Bob was part of all of that.

Q: That's why I'm asking, yes.

Weiner: He was totally involved in that. He saw art as art. For some reason in the back of his head he knew his place in it from the beginning. That's probably what makes him such an important artist. He woke up one morning and realized he had a place in history. It happens to some people and it doesn't happen to others.

Q: Were there musicians or dancers in that scene who you were close to early on?

Weiner: Yes, more or less the same as everybody else, from Simone Forti to this one to that one. These were all people who had taken a step outside. We were all outside. It was almost like sumo wrestling; we were all outside the center trying to decide if we really wanted to be in the center. We wanted the rewards, but nobody was quite sure how much they wanted to be in that center. They would constantly keep shooting themselves in the foot on purpose.

Q: I don't know if you get into that center, but there's at least an alternative center that is established. That is another thing that the oral history project has been focusing on or trying to suss out, is that sense of not just where a scene comes from, but where a market comes from and how a market affects a scene.

Weiner: Let's not call it a market; let's say a means of existence.

Q: Okay.

Weiner: That might be a more interesting thing, a means of existence, rather than what we perceive as a market.

Q: Well, a means of existence through one's art.

Weiner: Well, because of one's art. Remember, a lot of the people we're talking about were being helped by other people, but it wasn't creating work and this and that.

Q: With the word market—although at a certain point there's an uptown/downtown split, there are museums and galleries that see you as outsiders, but at another point there becomes a downtown gallery scene—

Weiner: Oh, there was the Tenth Street scene. Tenth Street didn't want anything to do with what was happening. I remember once, the Artists' Club [New York] invited Siegelaub, myself, I think [Robert] Bob Barry, [George] Kubler, Joseph Kosuth, and some other people, [Frederick] Barthelme, to come and talk to them. There was almost violence, they were so angry. It was so violent that I can remember Ileana Sonnabend and Heiner Friedrich getting up and standing around Alice [Zimmerman Weiner], the woman I lived with. It must've been '68 or '69 because my daughter was born in '69 and they were standing around her, afraid it was going to get pushy shovey. The wives were angry and it was a male/female society that we were not. They had the

professional wife. They're fighting for [Theodoros] Stamos, this one and that one. And they were angry at what we had to say.

Q: What were you saying that made them so angry?

Weiner: I have no idea.

[Laughter]

Weiner: I can't speak for anybody else, but what I genuinely believed in at the moment was that there was a change in the venue of what constituted the object and what constituted art. Perhaps crudely expressed, perhaps eloquently, I don't know. I honestly don't. We're living in a nostalgia age and I can't bring myself any longer to listen to the radio broadcasts we all made on WBAI in the sixties and in the seventies. Jeanne Siegel. Why I'm remembering the names I don't know. I'm not usually good at names. I can tell you the quote and forget the name. But it was all out on the street and Bob Rauschenberg was one of the people who intellectually and educationally was capable of understanding what was going down. A lot of the artists were really involved, but they were not as equipped.

Q: Conceptually, theoretically.

Weiner: Or training-wise of privilege. Education, this, that, and the other thing. It all counts. It all helps to put things together. Hollis Frampton being such an [Ezra] Pound expert, Leo Lozano

being a Pound expert, out of nowhere. In fact, it didn't really influence their work at all. It was something that absolutely fascinated them and they were verbal about it. Well, then they found another person who had read [Charles] Olson and from Olson you met [Claes] Oldenburg, because he was involved with Olson. When you met this one and you met that one it was all about something. It was all about, as that silly quote said, I don't know where it is, but it was an interesting thing. It's so funny that you came in right after I had to write this. I didn't want to, I hate to write things. Finding one of those havens led to finding another and the next. And the quest to find a community where what was done was the subject. And these were people who were doing things.

Q: Can I get a copy of this?

Weiner: I don't know, it's not printed, it's not published yet. But if you let me Xerox the copy of what I supposedly said with Benjamin I'd love to, because I don't think I have a copy of that.

Q: Oh sure.

Weiner: That impressed me. I would like to meet that person.

[Laughter]

Weiner: It's funny when you hear something you supposedly said and you would like to have met the person who said that.



[Laughter]

Weiner: I don't remember saying it.

Q: Apparently you did, although it's been—

Weiner: No, no, no, Benjamin is absolutely, totally reliable. And I am capable of putting together a concise proper sentence.

Q: Would you describe somebody like Rauschenberg as a catalyst or a node in that kind of network?

Weiner: No.

Q: Did he play a special role?

Weiner: No, he was a catalyst to bring in people like Billy Klüver. He was a catalyst for people who were not making art. He had a way or a means or a demeanor or a charm that could bring them into the world. The strange thing is that if he thought they were worth bringing into the world, they also had another value. They did something. Whatever they did, they did reasonably well. Once you bring anybody into your world who does something reasonably well, your world gets stronger and stronger.

Q: So he was a network builder.

Weiner: He built networks because he needed people.

Q: Do you think he, as a practitioner, needed people around him?

Weiner: He needed people around him. He also needed a kind of a muse. Merce [Cunningham], [John] Cage. They functioned as a muse. They made it possible, when you woke up in the middle of the night and thought that you were mad because you were thinking this strange thing, that a stroke is this and a gesture means that. To be around other people who could understand what you were saying. They may not agree, but could understand what you were saying to the point of even disagreeing, instead of just rejecting. That's a muse. He understood the building of that. He tried to build a world. The problem was that the world became, in its success, closer to what was the reason he had begun to try to build another world. That's true for all of us. You open things up to such an extent and then you find yourself in another establishment. It's the standard joke that I made and has been thrown against me. Except it was used as a great thing when I got my honorary thing from CUNY [Graduate Center, City University of New York.] The point of the academy is to give answers and at the very least to provide solutions. The point of an artist is to ask questions. They are mutually exclusive.

[Laughter]

Q: They oppose.

Weiner: They appose it, not oppose, or not opposite.

Q: With an A.

Weiner: With an A, they appose it.

Q: Would you say that you yourself needed a muse or a collaborator?

Weiner: Oh, I needed anything I could get. I was lost in space. I had visions that art was going to—I had to make a decision as a young person, between giving all of my energy toward organizing on the docks and doing civil rights, which I was involved in in the South, or trying to change the culture as a whole. I was guilt-ridden for years. There was a whole point when I came back from California the first time when I was not really able to make anything. I made paintings for children and objects, little David Smiths out of wood that I painted in bright colors.

Something to explain to kids that there was another thing. I just lost it completely. Then slowly it regenerated itself. You never know how that happens. But I was racked with guilt for not doing what I knew I did well.

Q: But part of what situated or anchored you was having collaborators and muses, or no?

Weiner: Without the generosity of all of these people, I probably would've gotten lost in space and become one of those angry people living in the country. I hate the country, so it wouldn't have been the country. Living someplace else. I would've been one of those writers sitting in East Harlem just angry all the time, if it weren't for the generosity and the openness of this entire scene. Rauschenberg was just one of the people who, at various times when I was really down, talked me through. I could name twenty-five, thirty people who have done that.

Q: But you mean actually had direct, sit-down conversations.

Weiner: Yes, direct conversations. Remember, these were times when you were standing in a bar and you were talking to somebody. This was not in a meeting or an arrangement or a greeting or a party even. It was like, oh, there's a party on East Third Street. You walk in, there's somebody there, and you find yourself talking to Merrill Wagner or you're talking to somebody else about something. Every once in a while, the subjects met. They didn't collide; they colluded.

Q: So yes, it would've been in a bar, not a therapy session.

Weiner: It wouldn't have been anything. It would've been someplace where, again, your presence was your passport. That's the same as if you wanted to talk with musicians: you went to the Five Spot. I did it as a kid. I was a fourteen-year-old. They let you in if you sat quietly at the bar and bought a bottle of beer.

Q: Really?

Weiner: So you sat and you ate and you drank boiled beer, because your hands were around it for as long as you could get away with the one bottle of beer. Every once in a while, they would say things like, “Ahem,” and you would say, “Well, okay,” and you’d buy another bottle of beer. Which very often meant that if you were living somewhere else you walked home, you didn’t take the subway or you didn’t take a bus, because you didn’t have any more money.

Q: So you did go to the Five Spot?

Weiner: Of course, from the time I was thirteen, fourteen. Are you kidding? Where else could you see [Thelonious] Monk? Where else could you sit at a table and talk with people— everybody forgets that that was the age when [John William] Coltrane and Monk and Elvin [Ray] Jones were quite articulate people. If you got Elvin Jones at the right moment. It’s just the same with Bob; if you got Bob dead drunk, all he wanted to do is fuck. Remember, he was not an aggressive person. He had a very good reputation in the world. He never took advantage of people and things like that. He never was a schoolteacher. No, concubinage was not his shtick. There’s so much I can say that’s so positive about this man. The man himself was the one who made all those decisions. Everything that would’ve been negative was open to him and it never interested him. He’d much rather get by on charm than on power.

Q: Well, I was thinking not just in terms of needing support or needing feedback, but in terms of collaborating, whether somebody like Rauschenberg would’ve provided a model for you.

Weiner: No, nothing. Not in my sense. For other people, obviously, but not for me. It was another world. I was not interested in making things like that. I think his putting up with me being around was, well, Dorothea Rockburne was working as his bookkeeper. He could sense something in somebody, that the direction they were going in made sense. I wouldn't say it was collaboration and I don't think it was any kind of collusion or anything. The great Robert Rauschenberg quote, which doesn't fit into the art world, was from the art, science, and spirituality thing in Amsterdam. [Note: Art Meets Science and Spirituality in a Changing Economy, 1990]. He was sitting on a panel and suddenly the Dalai Lama says to him, "What are you calling me Mr. Lama for, Robert?" Robert didn't like the idea of royalty. He was a real American. He didn't like religiosity. He turned around and said, "What do you want me to call you, Hello Dalai?"

Q: That's pretty good.

Weiner: This is at this thing with the economic minister of Europe. This was a hotshot deal. "What do you want me to call you, Hello Dalai?"

Q: He could be witty when he was in the right mood.

Weiner: Oh, he was very witty. Oh and he was so charming. We were eating lunch and we were eating and we were talking. Something happened and the Lord Mayor came and said, "Your Holiness." The Dalai Lama is sitting there. "Would you like to have a room upstairs to meditate?" He said, "No, thank you." Bob said, "We'd like to have a room." They were all witty.

They would like to have the room to pray to whom? Bob Rauschenberg stands up at one moment and says, “Hey, hey. Why do you always get up first, go out the door first? How come nobody else at this table gets invited to go out the door first? Me, I know I’m just an old drunk faggot. But there’s other people here.”

[Laughter]

Weiner: It’s not a joke. This was our Robert Rauschenberg. This was later in the day, when he was beginning to have a little bit of problems with alcohol. He still retained that American down to earth wittiness. It wasn’t vicious, it was witty, but it made its point.

Q: Yes, there’s an edge definitely.

Weiner: Yes. I really liked the man a lot. I liked the idea of the man. I think he’s one of the healthiest things that American culture could produce.

Q: When did you get an idea of it as an American thing? I think in that same interview with Buchloh you say something about Johns, [Roy] Lichtenstein, but also Rauschenberg, regurgitating the American flag through various kinds of effluvia Americanness. When did you start to think about it as an American quality, as a national quality?

Weiner: Well, it was much more that I used to mistake what was New York at the time as American, until I spent more time in America.

Q: A lot of us have that problem.

Weiner: I ended up not liking America terribly much. [Laughs] New York had its faults, but nobody ever asked anybody where they came from in New York. Remember, up until the influx of only the children of the middle class, when somebody had an accent, one thought they were from Brooklyn. They had no idea everybody had an accent. Everybody spoke with a different syntax. That was, to me, American. You never had the come on, come on, come on. It was always okay, yes, okay. But nobody knew where anybody came from and nobody gave a fuck.

Q: So in your New York-ness, there wasn't a sense of downtown Manhattan versus the Bronx? Your New York background didn't come into it at all?

Weiner: Well, I don't know about that. I left the South Bronx and I did the whole thing from Dylan [Marlais] Thomas; I walked across the Willis Avenue Bridge. I never went back. I never saw my parents again practically until they moved to Manhattan. My father had a job there or something. That lasted a little while and then they went to Astoria [Queens, New York]. But I never went back to the South Bronx except to take photographs of all the buildings they lived in. If you moved, you got two months free rent. The majority was not blown out. There were only two or three that were blown out. But everything was still there, exactly the same, and it didn't look all that bad. I don't know why I had such a horrendous dislike of it. It was okay. No, seriously. We're not talking about the downtown of Baltimore. We're not talking about *The Wire*



[2002–08]. We're talking about another kind of a situation. We're talking about what the Lower East Side looked like in the sixties. Mean streets. Mean streets.

Q: When you left the South Bronx it wasn't the South Bronx in the seventies.

Weiner: No, it was the fifties.

Q: Right.

Weiner: Yes, it just was not a place that was comfortable for me.

Q: But it's a different South Bronx from the stereotypical image of the bombed out South Bronx of the seventies.

Weiner: There was a lot of killing.

Q: Of killing?

Weiner: There was a lot of violence, yes. There was a lot of that stuff. But it was nothing like the Fort Apache thing. Where I lived was Fort Apache, but it was gang violence, intense. It was like living on mean streets. That was not an exaggeration. Where you'd get beaten up in the hall because you were friendly with the wrong person. It usually was political.

Q: Back to the Americanness issue, would you say that it had something to do with, not only that move toward establishment, but also the internationalization of the scene?

Weiner: Yes.

Q: Because you're telling anecdotes about moments in Europe where Americanness comes out.

Weiner: If it weren't for the fact that I felt that I was American in a sense and America was a place that anybody can go to, I would not have felt so comfortable in Europe. I'm now having trouble because I have a residency in Holland. I like the culture and I'm interested in the culture. But I don't understand the xenophobia. I can't get it. I don't know where the racism is coming from. As I said, I don't like ethnic culture. I don't understand it; it's not an excuse. It is also not a subject for art. Art is a relationship of human beings to objects. Objects exist now, they don't exist from when your grandfather was alive; they exist now and that's it. If you can get that straight, then you have a reasonable relationship with the world.

Q: But art can't be historical or transhistorical?

Weiner: I don't see it as a subject. I see it as something that you can understand.

Q: Even Rauschenberg—

Weiner: Yes, you can understand, you can see your world better, me personally. But remember, I'm not Bob Rauschenberg. Rauschenberg can see another kind of history.

Q: Yes, that would be my first response; there would have to be a present-ism. Because that seems to exclude the idea of a historical art.

Weiner: Well, not the idea. I don't see it as a subject, that's all. I could never make something pondering on [Paul] Cézanne, but I have an enormous respect for what Cézanne did. I have an enormous understanding of what he did that allows me to do what I do. Fine, but that can't do it. But that's me. You're asking me a question. I can't talk for the rest of the world. There are people who can make art in manners that I couldn't even dream of. I like it. It doesn't repel me. I could get into it.

Q: Right. No and I understand, having lived in Europe for a few years. I've only been to Holland a few times. But some of that sense of disorientation, I understand what you mean, having felt similar things in France.

Weiner: Yes, but in New York everybody was an immigrant from somewhere. They all came from Arizona, from Wyoming, from California. Then they found themselves here and they made a world.

Q: But doesn't that have something to do with the difference in a context like the Netherlands where—

Weiner: It used to be. It's not anymore. But that's a class difference as well. We now are inundated with one class. Ten percent of that class, yes, there's a lot of very good people. But it's not enough to constitute a culture because the rest of them aren't any good. That's the same for every class; you're only going to get a certain percentage in every single group, in every single ethnic group, you're only going to get a certain percentage of people. It's got to be more than just that three people.

Q: So at this point, you go back and forth between Holland and New York?

Weiner: I work a lot in Europe. I work a lot in Asia. I work a lot in other places.

Q: Another broad topic that we've been asking people about in these oral histories, is whether there is the same kind of scene in New York now. I know that part of it is generational, that some of the people we're talking about have passed away, but thinking more generally. Can you describe the art world in the way you were describing the art world in the sixties, with a term like rumors? Does that exist anymore?

Weiner: I've been having a lot of trouble finding it, but it must exist. Although, I don't know. We have here in this room three people who all have totally different lives and different backgrounds, and we seem to run into the same people. We all know of the same people.

Yes, we all run into the same people. So I would say it probably does exist. It's not as open as it was before because there's more money involved. Even the White House is saying that it really has a lot to do with what you come from in terms of money. If you don't have it, you don't have it and you'll never fit in. We just got a thing from [Anthony] Tony Bond in Australia. We did a lot of things in the seventies in Sydney, Australia. Tony Bond had to leave Britain because he functioned his way through as an art historian by being a steward on BOAC [British Overseas Airways Corporation]. That was so looked down upon, but it was the only way he could make a life. He made that whole museum in New South Wales and that was the only way he could make it as a curator. The only way he could make a life was to go all the way to Australia. Well, now we have the same thing. Yes, okay.

Q: What do you mean now we have the same thing?

Weiner: If you're not from the right class, you just are not there.

Q: People who are excluded, yes.

Weiner: They're not excluded; they're not there. These are people who don't even know what a toilet brush is, they can't exclude anybody. They have no power. They're a bunch of schlubs. But the person's not there. They have a society that protects them to such an extent that they never meet the other person unless they make him into an exotic. I'm terribly sorry, no matter what ethnic group you come from, whatever background you come from, the aspiration of your life

very often is not to be an exotic. It's to be the baseball player, the artist, it's to be what it is, not an exotic. I don't mean token. I mean exotic.

Q: No, I understand. And you certainly don't want to be—

Weiner: That's what makes [Jean-Michel] Basquiat so interesting, that show out in Brooklyn [*Basquiat: The Unknown Notebooks*, Brooklyn Museum, 2015].

Q: The notebooks?

Weiner: He comes from a background that allowed him in. He was aware of who he was and what he was, but he knew he wasn't an exotic, he knew he was an artist. That's interesting. Keith [Haring] knew he was an artist. He comes from Pittsburgh, lower class, the whole thing.

Q: Well, in the sixties, just thinking about the geographies you've outlined, did you cross paths with people like Amiri Baraka [born Everett Leroy Jones, a.k.a. LeRoi Jones] or [Alfred] A. B. Spellman and Norman [Henry] Pritchard?

Weiner: He was living on the Bowery. He was the neighbor of Marzette Watts, who was making soundtracks.

Q: Yes, by the Five Spot.

Weiner: Marzette was one of my closest friends.

Q: Really?

Weiner: Yes, Marzette and I were quite close.

Q: He was a sound engineer?

Weiner: Marzette was, yes, a musician, sound engineer, artist. He was a painter at the time, but then he did sound things. He had the place on the Bowery, across the street. He had the studio, which I did a soundtrack in once. But he and Ia [Watts], the Swedish girl he was living with, and the woman I was living with, Susann, we were so close that we were sharing dogs practically.

Q: Really?

Weiner: Yes. Amiri Baraka was the neighbor.

Q: Right, it's when he was with Hettie [Jones, née Cohen].

Weiner: Right. He was the neighbor. I was not close with him, but he was a normal person. We got beers together and everybody talked a lot. Everybody talked to anybody who could buy a round of beer. I don't like beer much.

Q: Neither do I. I'm just thinking in terms of the kinds of dissensions or debates that you would've had. It's not a simple thing and Baraka changes in that decade.

Weiner: Yes, he does.

Q: I wouldn't say in a simple sense that he's against ethnic art. He's against being exoticized certainly.

Weiner: That's different. You could use your background, you could use your knowledge, and you could use skills that you learn from what you are. But when you exoticize yourself, then you're becoming an exotic. Then you're just becoming another person in a bordello. Let's have the green one, let's have the yellow one, let's have the red one. That's not an aspiration for anybody trying to make art, or music, or literature, or anything else.

Q: So what was Marzette? He's a legendary figure.

Weiner: Marzette was 6 feet, 6 inches tall. He had been lucky and he was at NYU [New York University] or something. That's where he got taken care of. He had come out of the deep South. He also had a completely kinky idea of life. He ended up living with these two twins in the South.

Q: Yes, I thought there were two sweet Scandinavians.



Weiner: No, no, that was later. Ia went back to Sweden. Ia was tiny. He was living with two people in the South. He had a funny way of saying, “But I was living with two people at the same time.” It was a different time. But Marzette had a shove it up your nose kind of thing. I don’t mean coke, I mean like, fuck you. He was a great friend. We met on the street one day, Marzette and I. He lived by the Five Spot. I lived on Bleecker. We were walking down the streets and we were talking to Ray Johnson, who had some stand, things out on the street on a skid. I really remember that’s how I met Marzette. We started to walk and talk and I don’t know what happened, we became friends. Isn’t that the way most people become friends?

Q: It would be nice. Not always. And it seems harder for that to happen anymore.

Weiner: Well, that’s not my fault.

Q: No, it’s certainly not your fault.

Weiner: And it’s not my problem.

Q: Yes.

Weiner: If they don’t like meeting other people, then they can stay with the same people for the rest of their fucking lives. I don’t care. Make your life into *Cheers* [1982–93]. You only know people you went to school with. What a lunatic idea.

[Laughter]

A lot of these people are talented and intelligent. You bust your ass to get good as a human being and then you close yourself off.

Q: Yes, it sounds pretty tedious.

Weiner: It sounds stupid.

Q: It is stupid. So did you hang out at Marzette's? Because people gathered at his loft.

Weiner: Yes, we hung around with Marzette. They hung out at my place too, on Bleecker Street. Bleecker Street was on the trade route from the West Village to the East Village.

Q: Is that how people would usually go across on Bleecker?

Weiner: Yes and it was different people at different times. During the day it was one kind of people.

Q: Oh, different times of the day.

Weiner: There were no buttons, so people would stand in the streets screaming your name.

Q: They didn't have doorbells either?

Weiner: I didn't have a doorbell. I don't think Marzette had a doorbell. You screamed a name up and somebody came to the window, looked out, and if it was the right person they either threw a key down or they went down and let you in.

[Laughter]

Q: A different time. So going back to what I was asking—that scene must exist.

Weiner: Yes, it must. There are people who will surprise you. You're going to walk into a gallery one day and you're going to see something that will knock your socks off. You're going to be sitting in a bar talking to somebody and they're going to come up with something. Of course it's going to happen.

Q: Is it the money that destroys the scene? Is it too simplistic to say that?

Weiner: No, it's the class exclusion that destroyed the scene. Before, people came from all different classes. Ten percent of the ruling class would run away to the circus, ten percent of the middle, ten percent of the emerging. We were the circus. Now it's not that way at all. But that'll change. For all you know, it's going on now someplace. Maybe in Detroit, for all you know.

Q: Could be.

Weiner: Yes, honest and truly, I'm not just speaking of Detroit. But it might be someplace else that we don't know about. It could be Phoenix or Austin. You have no idea what's going to happen until the people who do it put it out in the world and you find yourself dancing to their tune.

Q: Right.

Weiner: Yes, okay.

Q: Still, it seems hard to imagine it happening again in New York.

Weiner: Not necessarily.

Q: New York is a pretty special place for that to happen.

Weiner: Well, it's hard to imagine it happening in New York right now. But it's harder to imagine it happening anyplace else. Okay, I'm sorry. I don't have an answer for you.

Q: Yes, I'm not sure there is an answer.

Weiner: No, I'm very serious. It's harder to imagine it anyplace else because those places are locked. This place, at least, is so broken up and so fucked up that it's not locked.

Q: Right.

Weiner: They'll take one part of Bensonhurst or Williamsburg [Brooklyn] and turn it into a gated community. Three blocks away there might be a whole other world in the same area. In New York, one block is one thing and then you turn the corner and you're in another world. So I wouldn't prejudge. I really don't like this taking people you don't know of and just because you think they're younger than you, you put them into a category, saying, "Well, they're younger, they're this, they don't know this." What the fuck, what do you mean they don't know it? They know it; they're not doing it. They're doing something else. I really am so tired of people putting people, any emerging artist, any emerging musician, in a slot. What do you get from that? They can't hurt you. They can only enrich you. If they're schmucks, it's not going to hurt or affect anybody. Do you understand?

Q: I agree.

Weiner: It's just going to peter out. It's going to be a fart in the wind. But if they really are good, they will only enrich your existence.

Q: And why wouldn't you want to be enriched?

Weiner: Because you want to stay. You want to be in the European model. You want to stay who you are exactly. Okay, when I say American, that's what I meant: you don't have to stay who

you are. Robert Rauschenberg did not have to stay who he was; he could stay who he is, for better or for worse. Maybe he had a little bit of an economic problem because of it.

Q: But that is an American quality?

Weiner: I'd say it was one of the privileges of being in an immigrant society where everybody comes from somewhere. You are what you do. You wake up in the morning and you don't know who you are, you know what you are. Well, that's fair.

Q: And there's that capacity for self-reinvention.

Weiner: Absolutely.

Q: But still, going back to what you said before that it's class more than financial influence; you could say that that kind of elitism actually flies under the radar in a way that, in say England, because the class lines are much more cleanly demarcated, class is right on the surface, everybody sees it.

Weiner: But the music world busted that up. It took art students to enter the music world to open up the music world. John [Winston Ono] Lennon, [Sir Michael Philip] Mick Jagger. They were all art students. It took art students to break that whole thing open. That's interesting. So it's going to take something here to break it open. Maybe it'll be curators. Who the hell knows?

Q: Probably not.

Weiner: Why not?

Q: Maybe.

Weiner: I don't know, I know a lot of aspiring curators who haven't gotten their act together yet, but I have great faith in them because their honesty is legitimate. It's emotional, but it's legitimate.

Q: Curiosity.

Weiner: And honesty. If they see something they don't understand, they look at it until they understand it. Well, that's something great. I don't know where it's going to come from. But I don't like that people keep coming to do interviews with me, saying, "Oh, it was better then." No, it wasn't. It was different. The work was better, but there was a reason for it. This is just work that's made for a market. Some of them might turn out to be okay. A majority is made for a market. Off the rack clothes are sometimes good; blue jeans really and truly have made the world a wonderful place. Okay. It doesn't matter any longer if the blue jeans are made by Levi Strauss, Wrangler, or Uniqlo, they're just blue jeans.

Q: Right. No, I understand what you're saying. And it makes sense to me. Although it's hard not to regret the influence of the market.

Weiner: I don't know why. Again, now look, we're looking at his position. I think Rauschenberg would agree with this. You're looking at something and in that group of people you're having disdain for, there's four or five people who are really going to make a contribution to the world. Why should they be uncomfortable? I didn't learn shit from being uncomfortable, nothing. I'm very serious by the way.

Q: I understand.

Weiner: Nobody I knew in that world learned shit from being uncomfortable. Even the people who could write about it like Baldwin made it clear that it would've been a hell of a lot easier if he wasn't so uncomfortable all the time. He could've written better.

Q: You think so?

Weiner: Or been happier.

Q: Well, been happier.

Weiner: Well, being happy is worth something.

Q: But that's a different question.



Weiner: No. But I learned nothing from having made the choices to not enter into the academy and this and that. Nothing. It just made it a little bit harder and it made it so that you had to do three more things and you were hungry. I don't mean ambitious, I mean hungry.

Q: Yes, I don't know. I would say there's your personal story. But some of the artists in that generation, I would say that they learned something by being uncomfortable.

Weiner: Do you? How?

Q: Baldwin says in his essay, "The Discovery of What It Means to Be an American" [1959], that he figured out his Americanness by being uncomfortable enough that he felt he had to leave.

Weiner: Josephine Baker [née Freda Josephine McDonald], the same thing.

Q: Yes. And someone like Baraka; there's an early poem that starts out, "I am inside someone who hates me." That sense of self-loathing and discomfort on an existential level took him somewhere.

Weiner: I don't know. Again, I'm looking at it on a personal level of physical discomfort. I'm seventy-three now and having physical problems that I shouldn't be having if I had had another kind of a background.

Q: Yes. Well, yes, there's no argument there. I'm just thinking—

Weiner: I don't think anybody learns anything from it. Most of the people one knows who have entered the art world have a very comfortable life and relation to all the people that they're studying. Almost all. Seriously, up until the seventies, eighties. I don't want them to be uncomfortable. Why? I used to think that the idea of being an American Socialist was that everybody had a comfortable existence. Why would I resent—

Q: You don't think there's a moral virtue in poverty and suffering?

Weiner: No. I'm just upset sometimes when somebody does something that I don't find useful. But I don't really want them to be uncomfortable. I really don't. Like I said, I don't think you get shit out of it. You get something out of being able to do your stuff and get up on a platform and sing.

Q: Yes.

Weiner: Yes.

Q: Well and being able to do your work, yes.

Weiner: Yes, or being able to try to do your work or try to figure out what the hell your work is supposed to be.

Q: Right.

Weiner: Okay, I think we've done it.

Q: I hope I haven't taken you too far afield.

Weiner: Well, it's gotten me a little freaked out.

Q: Oh no, I'm sorry.

Weiner: Memory lane is not my shtick. I'm always afraid. I sometimes go to a local bar and there's a famous poet who's not a poet anymore, sitting in the corner, telling the world how it is. Every place has got a place like that. It's the one place I don't want to end up. Okay. Personally, you have to be a little careful with that.

Q: Did you know Ted Jones?

Weiner: Oh my god, that is a poor man. That is a poor story.

Q: When I was living in Paris in the nineties, there was a particular bar, and if you went in the afternoon and bought him a drink, he had office hours.

Weiner: Yes, that was Ted Jones. But an artist I found really interesting, who is doing very good social work now, is [Joseph S.] Joe Lewis [III]. He entered in, in the same ethnic group, when I was young, and used to hang out on Bleecker Street with me. He used to come by. I liked Joe a lot because of Coleen Fitzgibbon and all of those people. He got lost. I think [Frederick] Toots [Hibbert] from the reggae group Toots and the Maytals was anathema because he had brass, remember.

Q: Yes.

Weiner: Jesus Christ, do we want to get involved in that kind of shit? That's what I mean when I say I don't like ethnic culture.

Q: No, I understand.

Weiner: Because it really spends all of the energy of what they produce to make everybody stay the same. It's like in the communist suburbs in '69. I don't know how old you are, if you were there. That was the only place that was dangerous for a hippie kid. The police had already bent everybody. The right wing had bent. They wanted the child to have a shirt and a tie and a suit, the way they aspired to when they did all the good work building the factories. It's crazy. You understand?

Q: I do understand.

Weiner: But it's lunatic.

Q: I do understand. It's a big historical issue one could talk about, but I generally agree with you. Because what's the use of calcifying an ethnicity that you're going to parade around as your badge and just try to reproduce—

[INTERRUPTION]

Weiner: But it was like, until Elijah Muhammad [born Elijah Robert Poole] decided he didn't like Malcolm [X, born Malcolm Little], Malcolm was safe. Then when he decided he didn't like him, he was dead.

Q: Then there was trouble, yes.

Weiner: He was dead. Okay, may I take this off?

Q: Yes. Thank you very much for taking the time.

[END OF INTERVIEW]