

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of

Robert Whitman

Columbia Center for Oral History Research

Columbia University

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PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of recorded interviews with Robert Whitman conducted by interviewer Alessandra Nicifero on November 20, 2014 and April 22, 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: Robert Whitman

Location: New York, New York

Interviewer: Alessandra Nicifero

Date: November 20, 2014

Q: Thanks for being here. My name is Alessandra Nicifero. It's November 20 and I'm here with Robert Whitman. Thanks for agreeing to be interviewed for the Robert Rauschenberg Oral History Project.

So, should we start by talking a little bit about where you were born, where you grew up?

Whitman: Well, I don't want to talk about me.

Q: We'll talk about you and Robert Rauschenberg of course, but I would like to learn a little more about—whatever you feel comfortable with.

Whitman: Okay, ask away.

Q: Yes. So I know that you were born in the city.

Whitman: Yes, but I didn't stay here. I was a baby and grew up on Long Island [New York].

Q: And then you went to Rutgers University [New Brunswick, New Jersey] and those must have been very formative years.

Whitman: Yes. Probably, but I was completely undisciplined and I was just lucky to get by and hang out. But you mentioned that I did take some Italian courses, which were great.

Q: Because you were initially studying comparative literature?

Whitman: Well English literature and I got into that because I had a fantasy that I was going to write plays or something, which is in fact what I do, but I was just a completely inadequate student to put it mildly and probably very reckless.

Q: That's also part of being twenty and young.

Whitman: I suppose, but I think I was more exaggerated than most. So let's see, I realized that what was happening as far as playmaking goes was amazingly boring and it didn't seem to me to be very vital. The most vital stuff in the arts in those days was Abstract Expressionism and painting, which had a little passionate energy. So I took a bunch of art courses, as much as I could, and ended up meeting Allan Kaprow, Lucas [Samaras], George Segal, George Brecht, and a few other people that were around, but they were the main ones that were interesting to me. Oh, Robert Watts, who I knew slightly when I was there. Very slightly. So there were a bunch of interesting artists around.

Q: And Kaprow was teaching both studio classes and theory?

Whitman: Yes. He gave lectures on the history of art and the studio. And George—you're talking about ridiculous stuff here.

Q: Well, it changed the way of thinking about what art is now.

Whitman: And George [Segal] had a little gig as the Sketch Club instructor, which included a couple of guys. That's it.

Q: What was the Sketch Club?

Whitman: We'd just sit around and sketch [laughs]. It was so silly. I think the Art House in those days—the art department—was in a small house. The studio was a room about this big in the basement. The lecture hall was about this big and that was it. The art library at Rutgers in those days probably had fewer books than most artists have in their own personal library today. So it was very interesting because it was hard to find out stuff. I don't know why that's interesting, but now it's so easy to find out stuff. You can look on the Internet and it's done. If your brain asks a question, you just go there and ask it, and assume that there's a 90% chance the answer is going to be right.

So then—I don't know exactly when—the show at the Jewish Museum [New York] called the New York Second Generation [*Artists of the New York School: Second Generation, 1957*—I don't remember quite where I was when I saw that show.

Q: It was after your college years?

Whitman: Pretty much. I think it must have been. Just at the end or after. It was in that show that I saw a couple of Bob's small collages, which I felt were absolutely fantastic. And another thing that I could mention is that the opening lecture was given by Meyer Schapiro and the place was so packed it was standing room in the hall. That wouldn't happen now.

Q: And Meyer Schapiro was teaching at—

Whitman: At Columbia [University, New York], yes. I'm sure he's a legend at Columbia. He should be. So that was that. Also Jasper [Johns] had a few pieces in that show and there were some funny stories—Jasper is probably not going to talk to you guys, right?

Q: I don't think so, no.

Whitman: Okay. I did hear a funny story about how one of Jasper's pieces was not included, was taken down, and Bob and Jasper realized this either before the opening and found it in a closet and they rehung it. Something like that [laughs].

Q: And for what reason was it taken down?

Whitman: Probably because it was the one with the little boxes that opened up? [Note: Jasper Johns's *Target with Plaster Casts* (1955) was considered for the exhibition, but ultimately excluded.] Maybe the penis wasn't circumcised? I don't know. Maybe the Jewish Museum, I don't know. Anyway, I think I told Allan how much I liked Bob's stuff that was in there and he arranged some sort of introduction. Now this is where I can't quite remember how this happened because I don't think I went with Allan to Bob's studio the first time I went there. But the first time I went there, I also met Jasper and Bob—I think. See it's all confused. But the work was astounding. You can imagine how affected a kid would be seeing the bed piece [*Bed*, 1955], the first *Monogram*[: *First State*, 1955–56] with the goat on the wall, and the other stuff that was there, some of the early Combines.



Robert Rauschenberg
Bed, 1955
Combine: oil and pencil on pillow, quilt, and
sheet, mounted on wood support
75 1/4 x 31 1/2 x 8 inches (191.1 x 80 x 20.3 cm)
Museum of Modern Art, New York
Gift of Leo Castelli in honor of Alfred H. Barr, Jr.



Rauschenberg in his Pearl Street studio
with *Satellite* (1955) and the first state of
Monogram (1955–59; first state 1955–56), New
York, ca. 1955. Photograph Collection. Robert
Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York

And Bob was exceedingly generous I have to tell you because he sold me a couple of pieces. And I don't know what prices—this was before he had the show at Leo's [Leo Castelli, New York, *Robert Rauschenberg*, 1958] but after the Stable [Gallery, New York, *Rauschenberg: Paintings and Sculpture*, 1953] shows. Anyway he sold me a couple of things for virtually nothing. I don't know what virtually nothing would have been in those days.

Q: So I want to go back to the Rutgers years.

Whitman: Okay.

Q: Because you were very involved in the campus life, artistic life, you were doing a radio show?

Whitman: Oh my god. How the hell does anybody—

Q: And the *Anthologist*?

Whitman: No, I deny that.

Q: Oh, you deny that, okay.

[Laughter]

Whitman: The *Anthologist* drawings that I made and the stuff that I did was after I left, the very next year. Maybe it was stuff that I had done when I was around there and I guess Lucas was the editor of the visual part so he got me—I think I did a couple of covers. I forgot all about that. My goodness. And I think I even had a show there at the Art House [*Robert Whitman, Art House, Rutgers University, 1958*].

Q: Right.

Whitman: So how do you know this?

Q: Well it's been documented. There's a volume on Rutgers. [Note: Joan Marter, ed. *Off Limits: Rutgers University and the Avant-Garde, 1957–1963*, exh. cat., 1999.]

Whitman: Oh okay. Oh that thing.

Q: And the artists involved in those years.

Whitman: Okay, ask away.

Q: So you have this vivid memory of the first time you saw Bob Rauschenberg's work?

Whitman: Mm-hm.

Q: How did that impact your way of creating or thinking of yourself as an artist?

Whitman: Well luckily for me I was kind of too stupid to be influenced by anybody or able to understand anybody else's work. It was just gorgeous stuff and I really was affected, that's all. I don't think that's all because I think when you experience art and art in that kind of way, it's over. You can die until the next one comes along.

Actually one of the things about seeing great work like that is, that's a whole bunch of stuff that you don't have to do because somebody is doing it. So in a way it's very liberating. I've heard a

lot of kids say that they don't want to be influenced by this other guy, but I think that's really stupid because if you have anything going in your head you're not going to be influenced anyway.

Q: Right, but influence of great art always happens in a more experiential way than a rational one.

Whitman: Yes, right. Well that's—

Q: Making decisions on what is going to be—what elements are going to influence your work is just—

Whitman: Right. So ask.

Q: Then a friendship began with Rauschenberg?

Whitman: A little later, I think. Partly because I wanted to have him know who I was or what I did or relate to me in another way instead of being just a kid, so it took a while.

I might mention one other thing that I thought was very interesting. And once again, this goes in archives and by the time anybody looks at this stuff, everybody is going to be dead, so I can say what I want. And again, I don't know the exact date, the year, but it would have to be '58 or '59 or even earlier. I don't know. Paul Taylor did a small concert at the women's college [New

Jersey College for Women], which is now—I don't know what they call it. I think they call it Douglass [Douglass Residential College at Rutgers University]. First it was New Jersey College for Women, then it turned into Douglass. I don't know what it is now, but Bob did the sound and it was a sensational thing. Since you're a dance person, you know what I'm talking about. The piece where the sound comes over the telephone. It's the time and every ten seconds he makes a gesture. [Note: Paul Taylor, *Seven New Dances: Epic* (1957) in Taylor's 1958 program *Five Dances at Douglass*.] You know that concert?

Q: Right.

Whitman: Is that in film?

Q: There are definitely films.

Whitman: Okay. I felt that that was spectacular and I have to say in my opinion that he's never come close to doing anything like it since. Period. And I asked Bob directly, I said, "Listen, did you have anything to do with this? Did you guys—?"

Q: Talk?

Whitman: Yes. And he said no, but I don't believe it. Partly because it was so different from anything he did later. Maybe it was just that Taylor was being influenced by Bob and Jasper and getting that kind of clarity and purity and almost a minimal quality. If you know those pieces,

they're really amazing. I've only seen it once and I still think—walking around in a circle, please. Sitting on a stage with a fan blowing or standing—I think standing. I don't know who the woman dancer was. Maybe Viola Farber? [Note: *Seven New Dances: Events II* (1957) was performed by Donya Feuer and Toby Armour for Five Dances.] Did she dance with Paul Taylor? I can't remember.

Q: She was dancing with Merce [Cunningham Dance Company].

Whitman: Merce? Yes. And [John] Cage did the piano thing with four minutes and thirty seconds of silence [4'33", 1952]. So you can imagine how astounding that was at the time. In fact if you did it now it would be astounding because they don't know what's going on. They've never seen anything. Anyway that's just me being an old grouch. The dancing kids that I've seen just plain don't know a thing as far as I've seen. You would think if they would sit around and look at the movies that are now available of Trisha [Brown] and Simone [Forti] and Yvonne [Rainer] even—and Steve [Paxton]. Did you see Steve's piece at Dia [Beacon, New York]?

Q: I did.

Whitman: Wasn't that great?! [Laughs]

Q: It was wonderful, yes.

Whitman: Yes. The piece, what is it called—*The Beast* [2010]?

Q: *The Beast*.

Whitman: I know Steve. It was the best thing I've ever seen him do and he's seventy-five for goodness sake. Why in the world can't kids—Yes, that was great. I thought that was great.

Q: I think there was a lot of interest in the last decade in the Judson [Memorial] Church [New York, and the Judson Dance Theater group], in Europe as well.

Whitman: Yes, it's too bad it has to be like that, as a group. You take these individuals and each one is unique and special.

Q: Completely different. I absolutely agree.

Whitman: Yes. I was never much of a fan, even though if I saw it now I probably would appreciate it more, as the Grand Union. Because I always felt it was a dialogue between a couple of people, but the dominant person always sort of won. I don't know if they felt competitive or not, but it came across as being a little bit like that.

It was interesting to me that Bob had that relationship with other performers and later on of course making his own stuff. Sometimes I hate it that somebody does stuff that's so fabulous. *Pelican* [1963] is one of the great pieces and *Open Score* [1966] is one of the great pieces. Those particular pieces, it's just my bias, but I think they are so strong and uncluttered and perfect.

Q: In those years, there were already—the Happenings—your pieces at the Hansa Gallery [New York] and the Reuben Gallery [New York] and the Judson Church. Bob was somehow more involved with the Judson Church, probably because he was working as a set designer for Merce Cunningham.

Whitman: Well, Steve was also involved. So yes, he was—and [Deborah] Debbie [Hay]. They were like a group. The people around the Judson, it's funny because it's like two different opposed things. So [Jim] Jimmy [Dine] and Claes [Oldenberg] had stuff at the Judson.

When I saw what was going on with dance at the time, excepting of course Simone and Trisha, I found it horrifically precious. I just thought, oh my god, they're forgetting stuff. They're forgetting a certain kind of physicality and energy. They're too busy being pretty. So it was anti my own personal aesthetic, which wants a lot of dirt and mess. Excepting—I don't know if you saw Claes's—there's a film, not a good film, of Claes's piece called *Snapshots from the City* [1960; referring to film by Stan VanDerBeek]. Have you seen that film?

Q: No, I haven't seen it.

Whitman: Okay. What happens with Claes is a filmmaker might take the footage and use that as a subject for making that film, so it's not Claes, but he did a piece called *Snapshots from the City* at the Judson and he made the set. Some of the set was deliberately made with little city images out of cardboard with black spray-paint.

Q: I've seen the photos.

Whitman: Okay, you've seen the photos then. And then the stuff on the floor, he picked up on the street. You didn't know what was in those bags all the time, so it was garbage. And the costumes were garbagey, raggedy muffin costumes. Now what happened was, you heard this noise and the only people who could see it was how ever many people could stick their heads in the doorway, so it was limited to ten people looking around. And Lucas was just inside the doorway with a light switch and when he turned the light on, they would freeze and then he'd turn the light off. So that was the snapshot and then you'd hear the bump bump—the noise of them moving around—and then another snapshot. And of course the movements were all exaggerated—they were all very expressed, jumping around kind of expressionist moves. And of course during the course of the performance, which couldn't have been more than a few minutes, the dust would begin to rise from the floor from all this stuff. So that's just an example of the kind of activity and movement stuff that I felt was wonderful and probably why I wasn't terribly interested in the dancey stuff that was going on at Judson.

And there were some performances downtown at Yoko [Ono]'s studio and I don't know if Bob ever went down there or not, but Simone did a piece down there that was great. I do remember early on I thought [James] Jimmy Waring was also—I don't know if any of his stuff was ever filmed because as far as I could see he was much more far out than Merce, much more crazy in a way, which I appreciated, with limitations. I don't know when Red [Grooms] did his piece called *Burning Building* [1959]. That might have been as early as '59, but I do remember getting Jimmy

to go there—Jimmy Waring and Bob and I think I might have opened a window to another kind of activity to both of those guys because Red—in terms of Red’s performance stuff, I think that the original one was quite eye-opening and crazy and then Red did another piece I think a lot of people saw called *The Magic Train Ride* [1960; note: originally titled *Fireman’s Dream*]. Red had this gift of being—I don’t know what you would call it—naively inventive—making a kid’s solution where you don’t have the resources. So if the train is going through a forest, he had [Robert Louis] Bob Thompson with a shopping cart full of Christmas trees and some tin cans going like this and going by the train, the little cardboard train. So that was the train going through the forest [laughs]. So that was Red and that was a little bit of the gift that he brought everybody, I think, and was very influential. And I don’t know why he stopped doing—oh, he made the movies with Mimi [Gross Grooms] and some of the movies are terrific. But once again, I don’t know how much of this went into anybody else’s head, so ask away.



John Cohen
Red Grooms's "The Burning Building," 1960
Gelatin silver print
7 5/16 x 11 inches (18.6 x 28 cm)
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Purchase, The Horace W. Goldsmith
Foundation Gift, through Joyce and Robert
Menschel, 1997

Q: *American Moon* [1960] was created in those years, so you had at that point convinced Simone to work with you? Were you married at that time?

Whitman: *American Moon*? No, but in terms of movement, I think we were in phase. She also performed in a piece called *Mouth* [1961], which was later on that season, and she did a thing that was terrific. You should see the photos of it. You can detect a little bit of what it was like by looking at the pictures. And all those pieces I'm sure Bob saw because by that time I think—I had moved to the city in 1960, which is the date of *American Moon*. And I had done a few other pieces—I remember this. This is very funny. It's very embarrassing, but funny.



Robert Whitman's *Mouth* (1961), April 1961. Pictured: Simone Forti. Photo: Robert M. McElroy. Courtesy: Experiments in Art and Technology

I had done a piece called *E.G.* [1960] with lots of very violent movement in it and very fast and crashing into a wall and all this stuff and Simone came up to me afterward and said, this was terrific and this and that, and we did stuff like that in California—she had just arrived—and I was

kind of, what? That's not possible! [Laughs] But you know, the next thing, she agreed to perform in *American Moon*.



Robert Whitman's *E.G.* (1960), Reuben Gallery, New York. Pictured: Jim Dine (left), Whitman (center), and unidentified performer. Photo: Robert M. McElroy. Courtesy: Experiments in Art and Technology

Q: That's also a very incredible and strong performance, way different than what was then produced for the Judson Church—

Whitman: Oh, yes. It was impossible. I mean, you can see.

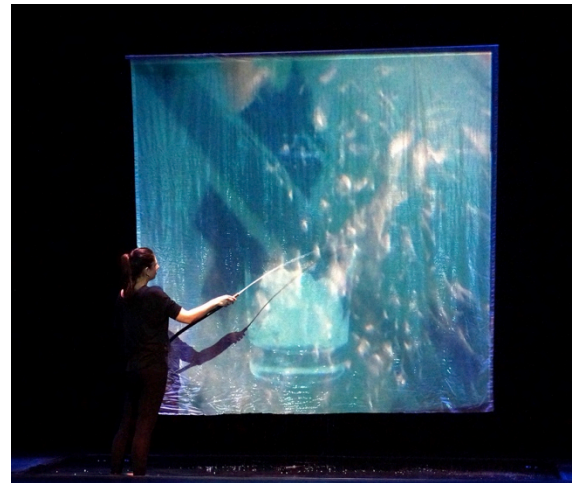
Q: So in a way you choreographed that piece? You were telling them what to do and—?

Whitman: Yes, yes, I was. I don't know, I'll have to ask somebody else about this who performed. I don't know if they could explain what my directorial style was, but I do know for some people in the later years, it was extremely frustrating that I didn't have a rigid script and I worked things out as they happened. People would rather have order and be told, but I'd rather

wait until last minute in case something interesting happens that you want to include. You don't want to get set too soon.

Q: So you would rehearse and—

Whitman: Yes and work things out. Which is different from working out at Montclair [State University, New Jersey] because you only have a limited amount of time and you have to be fairly well-organized, which is, it's okay. Since I don't have a place to work things out, it's okay. This piece for blind people is already written. It's been written for a year at least [*Swim*, 2015].



Robert Whitman's *Swim* (2015), performed at Peak Performances, Kasser Theater, Montclair State University, New Jersey, 2015. Pictured: Irena Pejovic. Photos: Anne Marie Williams. Courtesy: Experiments in Art and Technology

Q: I'm interested in the origin of the piece. How did you start thinking about—

Whitman: Well, [Jedediah] Jed [Wheeler] asked me how I would like to do a piece with blind people, as well as sighted, and I thought—I said, “Jed, I’m probably the only guy who you’re gonna ask this and also the one who thinks it’s terrific.” In thinking back over my history with *American Moon* to start with and other pieces, I’ve always had the idea that it’s not written in scripture that everybody has to see everything and that’s just a convention and it doesn’t have to be normal. And in fact it’s an unusual convention. So this is another one of those pieces where people are not going to see a lot of it and some people will not see any of it and for me it’s very interesting.

A friend of mine works at Cooper Union [New York] and he’d been helping actually, over the last several years, Jacob Burckhardt, and he arranged an introduction for me with a blind girl there who—I lied. Luckily for me I didn’t know the story before I met her. It would have been another level of meeting her. So Jacob arranged this meeting and she came down. I met her in the lobby at Cooper Union. Yes, with her dog, and of course she’s tiny and as cute as a button and she said, “I know who you are,” and she agreed to participate, help, and she has; telling me stuff that I don’t need to do, which is kind of interesting. And she’s going to sort of act—when we get around to it, I’m going to have her be the interface between what I do and—blind people have no abstract theater experience at all. I’m calling it that. Or dance experience. In the process of this, I asked my friend who’s been helping me do all of the interactive stuff, all those pieces with the telephones, and he’s designed all the applications and the systems. The last one we did in ninety places around the world. So I asked in passing because we were working on something else, if it would be possible to make a doll—I’m calling it a doll—that could use the electronic stuff available now to copy a dancer’s movement. You know they make those stick figures?

Q: Live forms that Merce used in—

Whitman: Whatever they call that, yes. Okay, why couldn't you animate a doll like that so a blind person would have the experience of movement that's not work-oriented? And he said "Yes, you could do that. Let's get some bright spot to figure out how to do that." So maybe it'll happen in the future. By the future, it's probably going to happen within ten years that they'll have this figure or figures. Because one of the things this girl was doing was working with the Met [Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York] to help them figure out a way to communicate what a painting is to a blind person.

Q: Was this woman blind from birth?

Whitman: No. From my understanding it's a very different experience. People who are blind from birth have a much easier time because the world they experience is the only world.

Q: There's no adjustment.

Whitman: So she does have a little—you can tell. I find her story quite remarkable. I met her mom and I met her therapist. She got blind by being hit by a big truck while she was riding a bike and her mom was told she was going to die. Her boyfriend and her mom stayed by her bed and they were going to put her in one of those—I don't know what they're called. I'm calling it a holding facility for people who are comatose and her boyfriend started writing in her hand and I

guess it got through and she woke up and said, “Who are you?” But she had other tragedies too. But she’s come and we’ve done some sound recording. We did some recording with an MRI [magnetic resonance imaging]. She’s been to the theater and walked around it.

Q: My father is blind so—

Whitman: Oh really. From birth?

Q: Not from birth. He also lost his sight when he was in his thirties. After my sister was born, but they have a great sense of tactile—great sense of space.

Whitman: Yes and the funny thing is, the cliché—I spoke to an expert on this—in the early days they thought they’d make great piano tuners because they’re so focused on hearing and it turned out to be true. It turned out that they were good piano tuners. Not all of them, of course, but I thought that was kind of interesting.

It’s so funny because now that you say that—I, in my whole life, never met a blind person to talk to and most people don’t. I asked my friends. Especially in the arts because they’re mainly visual, but you would think in music, there would be a lot of—there are a lot of blind musicians, but I just don’t know them.

Q: I know that there is a scholar here at Columbia, he's also Italian, who lost his sight when he was an adolescent because of giantitis. He's very, very tall and he's in the business school and he draws graphs on people's backs. I thought that was quite amazing.

Whitman: Yes, it is. Anyway, back to Bob.

Q: Back to Bob. What was your experience of the city?

Whitman: Again, I was still—god almighty—I don't know what condition I was in personally, but my experience of the city was that—New York at that time was much easier to get around. I had a car and you could actually drive somewhere to go to the movies in the city.

Q: Unconsiderable now.

Whitman: It is, totally [laughs]. At that time I lived on Fourth Avenue between Ninth and Tenth [Streets] and Bob and Steve were on Broadway for most of that time. So I did see them—and you can ask Simone about this—there was lots of social stuff. Bob did have some stuff going on in his place, quite different from the other kind of social stuff that was going on. As I say, I was the guy with the car so a couple of times I would do things with that. Boy it's awkward because this is more about me than Bob. When Moon was dying—Bob's a big dog nut and Moon was his totally fantastic Alaskan Husky. So they had Moon paper-trained. This is a great story. And if a piece of paper fell off of the table and onto the floor, Moon would come running over and pee on it. Anyway, Moon was this great dog and Bob left it at a kennel and it picked up distemper and

they had to put it down and I remember going up there with Bob and Steve, and it was very moving how upset Bob was. He really was. That's a side of him that a lot of people probably didn't experience except the people close to him who aren't talking to you. Although [Robert] Bob Petersen I understand is talking to somebody. Bob Petersen?



Steve Paxton, Rauschenberg, and Moon in Rauschenberg's Broadway studio, New York, 1965. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives. New York

Q: Yes.

Whitman: And Petersen, I think he's got a good memory. Julie [Martin] told me he kept a diary and he's a great storyteller. So that will be a rich source.

Q: Rauschenberg is always remembered as a generous and happy person.

Whitman: Yes.

Q: Remarkable laughter.

Whitman: Yes and astoundingly generous and not just in—there's another kind of generosity, which is his ferocious ability to do an awful lot of work. That, I think, is the biggest generosity. Just doing it. People outside probably don't know how hard it is to do stuff. It's very hard. And I'm sure everybody has spoken about his other kind of generosity, the normal kind, which was extravagant as well.

Q: Just being able to collaborate with people, not only creatively, but to address technical problems.

Whitman: Yes. And he sponsored all this stuff, like the First New York Theater Rally [1965], that sort of thing. He just jumped in. God bless him. Luckily he was also the kind of guy who managed his life in such a way that he had the resources to be able to do what he needed to do, which is pretty spectacular.

Q: And also to invest in what he could to help others. He also had a vision for a kind of work in support of giving to other artists in those years.

We were talking about the New York first theater rally in '65 that was organized by Steve Paxton.

Whitman: Yes.

Q: So what happens there? Do you have any memories?

Whitman: Just an incredible amount of support and people did some great pieces for that thing. Once again Claes did a piece that I—Claes had that same gift of complete simplicity at some times. His piece was just—I don't quite remember how it was lit, if it was lit at all, in those days you didn't have equipment to do this stuff. You just had to make it up and do it, so he had a telephone brought out, it stayed there, and it rang ten times. And you know how when a telephone rings, people start thinking about, "Are you gonna answer that?" Just to let a telephone ring with a whole bunch of people just watching—And I think Bob's piece had a couple of typical great Bob images. I think [Christopher] Chris [Rauschenberg] walking around with a shopping cart full of ticking clocks, turtles with flashlights on their backs [*Spring Training*, 1965]. Those are the kind of images that are strong and I remember them. I don't know if any of these pieces were filmed, I think at a certain point Bob began to record the stuff visually, but I don't know when.



Christopher Rauschenberg, Robert Rauschenberg, and turtles with flashlights in Rauschenberg's *Spring Training* (1965), First New York Theater Rally, former CBS Studio, Broadway and Eighty-first Street, New York, May 1965. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Elisabeth Loewenstein Novick

Q: There are films.

Whitman: Then you've seen the video of *Open Score*?

Q: Yes.

Whitman: Yes, so that's a terrific piece.

Q: So how was the organization of the 9 Evenings[: Theatre & Engineering, 69th Regiment Armory, New York, 1966]?



Robert Rauschenberg
Poster for 9 Evenings: Theatre & Engineering, 1966
Offset lithograph
36 1/2 x 24 1/4 inches (92.7 x 61.6 cm)
From an edition of 90
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

Whitman: I don't know how that happened. It's the most amazingly disorganized, almost combustible chaos. And [Johan Wilhelm] Billy [Klüver] was very autocratic about assigning times, which he felt free to violate on his own, which he did [laughs]. All of the obvious things you can think about 9 Evenings, but since this is going somewhere—since everybody asks me about that stuff and I keep on insisting to people, no more dead guy stuff. I'm not going to talk about it. Julie [Martin] is going to talk to somebody tomorrow. I am not going to talk about it. This will be about the [Pepsi] Pavilion [1970, Osaka for Expo '70]. But 9 Evenings was different in a way. The one astounding thing about that is, I don't know how many people participated, but if you count only artists and their friends and the friends of friends, I'm guessing there were maybe a hundred people who just jumped in and nobody got paid anything. I mean, there were a few people, like a bookkeeper maybe, that was it. And I asked Julie how John [R.] Pierce—who was Billy's immediate superior, I think, at the labs [Bell Laboratories]—allowed all these guys to

participate. How did that happen? Because the deal was they were only supposed to do this on their own time, not on company time. Well you knew damn well that these guys were doing stuff at the labs that kind of related to this. So Billy asked John Pierce how he let it happen and according to Billy he said that there was so much positive energy that he couldn't stop it, which I think is kind of terrific. Now where that came from, I have no idea.

Besides everybody chipping in and helping do whatever they could—I lost the thought. The stress. That was something else. Has anybody ever mentioned it? Oh, they have. The stress was huge and nobody killed anybody and nobody even had a fight, I don't think, but the stress was enormous. Engineers operate in a different world because if they don't make a deadline it doesn't matter because the project just gets put forward if something doesn't work.

Q: It's about the result—the final result.

Whitman: Well artists are a little different because you have a deadline, in this case, and it has to be met. So that was a little bit of the stress. And personally to get the work done in the ridiculously little amount of time that people had to do it.

If you read the reviews at the time—most of them were not good. I remember somebody asking me something about that and the audience was quite huge for this kind of audience at the time, so a lot of the audience came with people who had no experience with this kind of work and they didn't get it. Including critics. But they hadn't been paying attention. They hadn't been paying attention to the different performance stuff that had been going on and taking it seriously. So I

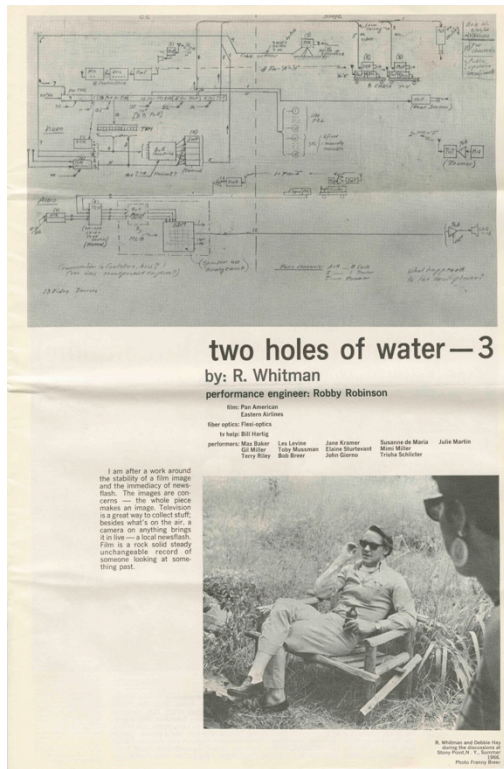
think the critics were kind of caught by surprise. I bet a lot of them, if they went back and looked at the material today, looked at Julie's videos, they'd be completely surprised. Some of the stuff wasn't so hot, but in general—at least Bob's piece [*Open Score*], David [Tudor]'s piece [*Bandoneon! (a combine)*, 1966], John [Cage]'s piece [*Variations VII*, 1966], they were up to their usual standards. Three out of nine is not bad.

Q: There were also more than three out of—

Whitman: Yes, that's not bad. Yes, more. There'd be more.

Q: I'm thinking about your work [*Two Holes of Water-3*, 1966]. That's probably one of the most complex of the—

Program for 9 Evenings: Theatre & Engineering, October 1966, featuring Whitman's *Two Holes of Water-3* (1966). Robert Rauschenberg papers. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York



Whitman: Did you see the tape?

Q: I've seen the tape.

Whitman: Actually, I looked at the tape and said, “Shit, that thing’s better than I thought it was.”

[Laughter]

Whitman: Because, as I say, everything was just total—there’s a word for—I’m using the word “stress” but there’s something deeper than that. There has to be a more profound word for that kind of stress.

Q: Well, obviously there was a mingling, a meeting of two different practices—the engineer and the artist, which began probably in that period and then has evolved as a way of using different practices between artists and engineers.

Whitman: Yes.

Q: And there was the limit of time and it was probably super-advertised and so—

Whitman: Yes, it was.

Q: So it was advertised as something slightly different than what it offered and it seems as if all the participants perceived—you're using the word "stress"—at the end something that seemed a failure. In retrospect it doesn't seem like a failure.

Whitman: No. If people looked at the stuff, they would say, holy shit, this is pretty good. I remember that a couple of years ago there was an art institution in Lyon, in France [Institut d'art contemporain, Villeurbanne] that had ten rooms available to show this stuff. They showed one film in each room, which is the best way of showing that material I can imagine. You walked around and saw it without the blather, the talking stuff, which is I think terrific. You just saw the pieces and it was great. It was a wonderful way to look at those pieces and you could see that it was quite an achievement. It really was. That came about because, I think, a music performance institution in Sweden suggested it to Billy, to do something in volume as kind of a collaboration

and to go to Sweden. And for whatever reason or lack of understanding, I can't quite understand, people have different memories of it, but it fell apart. I think it had to do with the Americans' attitude that the engineers should be seen the same as the artists. Equal participants somehow with different responsibilities. Anyway, the thing fell apart and so, like a lot of things that I've been involved with [laughs], you get mad and decide to do it anyway. So that's how that energy began coming up.

Now fast-forward to now, or a couple years ago, there's a young lady that I met a few years ago whose work I thought—I thought she was terrific. I thought, my goodness gracious. She did a piece when she was on the West Coast—I think maybe Berkeley [University of California at Berkeley]. The piece was, she petitioned the court to change her name from Kristin Sue Lucas to Kristin Sue Lucas [*Refresh*, 2007]. So what follows is a discussion between herself and the judge about this concept. And the judge is not stupid. Among things that I remember, he said, "I know I have the power to change your name, but I don't know if I have the power to keep it the same." Stuff like that. And this went on. Then he asked her to come back in a couple of weeks and he'd give her a ruling. So she came back and he said, "Look. I've spent more time than I should have thinking about this whacky idea—and your petition is granted."

So she does this as a performance piece and Julie saw it in Stockholm and I read the part of the judge, but I was in my house, and somebody from the audience read her part and it was at—Fylkingen was the sponsor. I thought that was terrific [*Refresh Cold Reads*, 2007–13].

I'm trying to think of more stuff about Bob that you want to know about. Simone and I saw Bob in different places, at different times. Somehow we ended up in California at the same time for a while and I saw some of him there.

Q: Did you end up in California for a long period of time?

Whitman: Different periods I was there for—and I don't remember. I was there for quite a while during the Maurice Tuchman art and technology thing [*Art and Technology*, 1967–71, Los Angeles County Museum of Art]. I don't think Bob was there during that time necessarily because I think his work was somewhere else. I know he was doing work at Gemini G.E.L. [Los Angeles] at different points when I was there. Oh boy. Keep asking.

Q: One thing that I'm personally interested in is the work on Dante [Alighieri] that both you and Bob Rauschenberg did in different periods and which was completely different. [Note: Rauschenberg, *Thirty-Four Illustrations for Dante's Inferno*, 1958–60 and Whitman, *Dante Drawings*, 1974–75]

Whitman: Yes.

Q: I wondered if there was a conversation about—

Whitman: Zero.

Q: Zero.

Whitman: When I finished reading Dante, I held off doing anything about it because I said, no artist reads anything so what the hell—I feel very safe in using that as a subject matter because these guys are virtually illiterate and then Bob does this thing which made me so angry because the *Inferno*'s the easy one. It really is the easy one and I've come to think that *Purgatory* is the hardest one [*The Divine Comedy*, 1308–20]. The only difficulty with *Paradise* is that you've got to read all this stuff that you don't want to read. Try to understand Thomas Aquinas and—

Q: All the symbolism and the complexity.

Whitman: Yes, all of that stuff and of course the curiosity of his guide being Statius in *Paradise* and all of that, so you've got to read all this junk and I don't trust my Italian that much. I read it when I was in college, but there's a beautiful bilingual edition by a scholar named [Charles S.] Singleton and his English is really good. He doesn't try any of this—poetic translations never work except for Dorothy [L.] Sayers because she's great at notes. [Laughs] Her notes are wonderful, but the other guys I think are really awful. That's just me and I don't know that much about poetry. But the Singleton *Paradise* [*Paradiso*, 1975] is about this thick and the notes are about that thick. It's painful.

So I read an edition of the *Convivio* [Dante Alighieri, ca. 1304–07].

Okay, so I go, god almighty, I go to get—is that in Latin? Which one is in Latin? It's a long thing of his in Latin. So I say well, I'll go to get a translation, which I did and of course it's in Italian. [Laughs] So when I came to do Dante, that's why I did it, because I couldn't do the *Inferno* part. *Inferno*'s fun.

Q: The *Inferno*, the reason's more memorable.

Whitman: Yes, well the imagery is there. If you read *Paradise*—actually the whole thing is rich in any kind of imagery. *Purgatory* is fantastic and so is *Paradise*, but *Paradise* has got all this complicated philosophical stuff that's very unfamiliar to those of us who don't have a good formal education and it's hard to read.

Q: Do you remember seeing his work?

Whitman: Oh, yes. I bought one. [Note: facsimile portfolio of Rauschenberg's Dante illustrations, *XXXIV Drawings for Dante's Inferno*, published by Harry N. Abrams, New York, 1964]

Q: Did he talk about his—

Whitman: I've never heard him talk about any of that stuff. In fact I don't think we ever had any conversations about art specifically. Petersen remembers us talking about stuff that I don't remember. He paid me a great compliment. He said it was so much fun when I came over and we

talked. I don't remember that. One of the things is that it's much more fun to talk to somebody who's really smart and there are very few people like that and for sure Bob was one of them. And his smart was natural smart, good smart not book smart.

I did ask Julie. I said, "Julie, how in the hell did Bob ever read Dante?" Julie said she thought that maybe Michael [Sonnabend] read it to him.

Q: So this was already in the fifties. The early fifties?

Whitman: I don't know. He did those drawings about—the book—

Q: '58. [Note: Rauschenberg's original Dante drawings were completed over the course of 1958–60. The subsequent portfolio was published in 1964.]



Robert Rauschenberg
Canto II: The Descent, from the series Thirty-Four Illustrations for Dante's Inferno, 1958
Solvent transfer with paper, watercolor, wash, and pencil on paper
14 3/8 x 11 3/8 inches (36.5 x 28.9 cm)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Given anonymously

Whitman: Really? '58? Oh, okay. He said he took a year. I took two. Michael said he read a canto a day. He must have had it memorized because even in college you had to memorize stuff.

[Laughs]

Q: He follows a sort of progressive, narrative structure for his—no, for yours. There is no—I mean, there are recognizable images.

Whitman: There are, but I did follow it and what happened was I went through it once with Coosje [van Bruggen] and it just broke my head to go over that material again and try to figure it out which is which. And then again when Lynne [Cooke] published, when we did the catalogue [*Robert Whitman: Playback*. New York: Dia Art Foundation, 2003], I started going over it and I said to Karen Kelly, who did it—some people surprise you and they drive you nuts. I said, “Listen Karen, this is what I’ve got now. This other stuff I can’t—I’m not going to go through the trouble of trying to figure out which one goes where. I really can’t do it anymore.” And then she came back a little later and she said, “Well, I figured it out.” I said, “What do you mean?” She says, “I read it.” I’m going, that’s totally amazing. She read it. So anyway, as I say, we didn’t talk about any of that stuff.

Q: How often did you see Bob while he was still living here?

Whitman: Before he went to Captiva [Florida], we saw each other quite a lot socially, you know, parties. A lot of that sort of thing. And then not much when he went to Florida. And he was very protected when he came to New York.

Q: In what sense?

Whitman: Well, it was hard to reach him sometimes. The entourage would be a little off-putting sometimes. I think especially when Darryl [R. Pottorf] got on the scene.

Q: So, protective in terms of time he would have spent—

Whitman: Probably, yes.

Q: Before he moved to Captiva Island, you were able to spend time together?

Whitman: Yes, pretty much. He was much more available. I mean, everybody has their own life. It was nice. He was a very sweet man and more than that. We used to go over to his house. Occasionally with the kids, Bernardo and Pilar [Whitman]. I don't think my daughter really remembers a whole lot of visiting. She might have been a little too little. I know she went down to Captiva once and Bernardo went down there.

Q: With Sylvia [Palacios Whitman] or—

Whitman: Yes. You didn't see the performance [Sylvia Palacios Whitman, *Passing Through*, 1977, performed 2014] at the Whitney [Museum of American Art, New York] did you?



Sylvia Palacios Whitman, *Passing Through* (1977), Sonnabend Gallery, New York, May 1977. Photo: © Babette Mangolte

Q: No, I didn't. I saw the exhibit at the Whitney [*Rituals of Rented Island: Object Theater, Loft Performance, and the New Psychodrama—Manhattan, 1970–80, 2013–14*].

Whitman: Well, she did a few pieces, I think it was probably the best one they had.

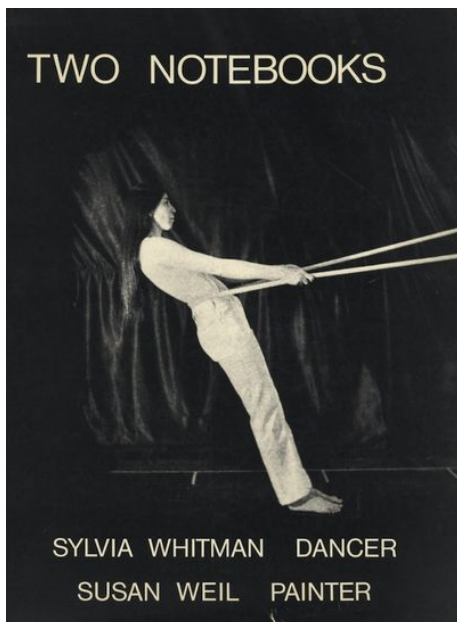
Q: But she has returned to work and created more performances. Is she working on the new project now as well?

Whitman: She's doing more drawing, collage kinds of things now. That's what she's doing. She's been doing that for a while. She had a show a couple of years ago. Some older stuff and some newer stuff and she did some performances at the gallery in getting ready for the Whitney. Have you seen any of her work at all?



Sylvia Palacios Whitman
Coil, 2014
Watercolor, graphite, and collage on paper
17 3/4 x 24 inches (45.09 x 60.96 cm)

Q: I've seen only the photo on the catalogues and I saw the beautiful book that she did with [Susan] Sue Weil [*Two Notebooks*, 1976].



Susan Weil and Sylvia Palacios Whitman, *Two Notebooks*
(Captiva, Florida: Untitled Press, Inc., 1976), cover.

Whitman: With Sue Weil?

Q: Yes.

Whitman: Okay, well that gives you an indication.

Q: Yes, so I have a sense of her use of object. It reminds me of your work as well.

Whitman: Let's see. Is the hand piece [*Passing Through*]*—*is the big hand piece in the book?

Q: It is.

Whitman: Okay. I can't remember. Yes, she did that at the Whitney.

Q: So there is this incredible power of your theater piece, of objects being real characters and I see in that somehow the strong association with Rauschenberg's work, your use of time as a material to work with kind of extends the power of static objects. How do you relate the use of time to your view of Rauschenberg's work?

Whitman: Oh boy. The problem with that kind of question for me is that I have long ago given up thinking about stuff. It probably happened when I was very young. I looked back on some stuff that I'd said and I said, "Oh my god, that is the dumbest thing anybody ever said." So I stopped thinking about stuff. Not only about my stuff, but other people's stuff, and I prefer much

more to be as completely intuitive as I can. Without thinking. I mean, you can't stop thinking. It's in there so you don't have to worry about it. It's just going to come out or not.

As far as Bob's stuff goes, I think as far as I can say, any art, it's all about the stuff you can't understand. It's all about magic and wonderfulness and stuff that you, as I say, you can't understand. There's no sense in even trying unless you're a scholar. I'm reading stuff—in fact that catalogue. I don't know if you have the catalogue, the Dia catalogue [*Robert Whitman: Playback*]? Well, I have a friend that I've known since high school and still talk to, and his wife said, "I read the catalogue." I said, "Louise, you read it? I haven't read it." She said, "You forget I'm a law professor and I can understand almost everything." So that's what my feeling is about that because I read stuff and I honestly can't understand it. Maybe it has to do with the fact that as soon as I know that it's something that concerns me, my mind automatically goes like this.

I think the one to talk to about Bob's involvement would be Julie. I think Bob tended to be more concerned with his own issues and work and, as I say, I don't know what Billy had to say. I did ask Julie the other day, "Why in the hell did they decide that I should be part of that situation?" The beginning of E.A.T. [Experiments in Art and Technology]. The way I figured it out was [Frederick D.] Fred [Waldhauer] was kind of normal, Bob was sort of normal, Billy was kind of crazy, and I was probably the craziest, so they had a little scale going down to make them mix. Anyway, in the beginning it was a little rugged because I think I had a slightly different ambition for the organization. I was much more interested in projects that I thought had social content or political content, which in general it all does anyhow and what Julie calls Projects Outside Art. Projects that don't have any apparent art content, that are made to do something else. During the

one year that we were very active—Julie will tell you how many proposals were made, more than you can imagine, and practically none of them were approved by anybody. Practically none of them.

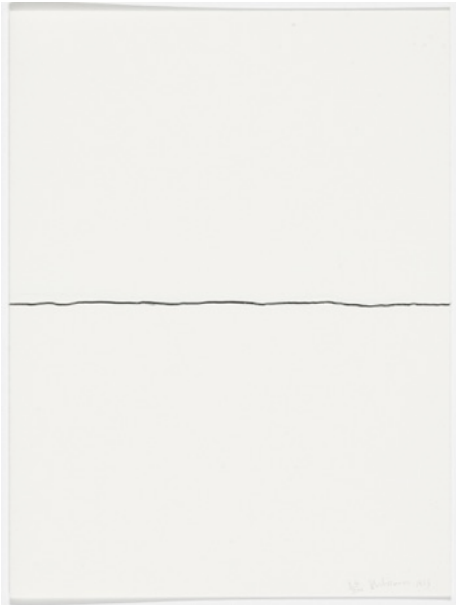
Q: Do you remember a single one?

Whitman: Well, I can remember something that did get done, but not the way it was proposed. With any foundation there's always the problem of raising money to do something. I came across something that referred to something that the government did. Treasury funds. And treasury funds were made available by the government: if you gave the government something, they would give you the value of that back. So if you had like a thousand acres of forest-land somewhere that would have a certain value and if you gave it to the government, they'd give you value for your foundation. We didn't have anything. Nobody had any property. So I said to Billy, "I bet what we could do is we could get some art and give it to the government and we could figure out a way to get the dealers to forgo their commissions and that would be the money we'd get for the fundraiser." So we got Pontus [Hultén] to pick the collection. Pontus was the director of the Moderna Museet in Stockholm and probably the smartest and best champion of the new American art. He's the one who I think arranged for the Moderna to get *Monogram* [1955–59].

So Billy got Pontus to come and pick the collection. Pontus came and, as I say, rounded up the usual suspects, picked thirty artists, and there's hardly anybody you can think of in the thirty that's not in there. The one that isn't is Jasper. I asked Julie about that and she said it was too

expensive. And Bob of course gave a piece. There's a good example of what we've been talking about.

So we assembled these thirty—and if you look at the catalogue, it's like holy-moly, this is an amazing collection [note: *New York Collection for Stockholm*, Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 1973]. This is—wow. In 1972 or '73 small museums in this country had no collections to speak of, much less a collection of contemporary masterpieces, you'd have to say. So we made this proposal to the National Endowment [for the Arts (NEA)] and it got rejected. Which is hard to understand, isn't it? It's amazing. It got rejected. So now what do we do? Pontus got the Swedish government to put up \$100,000 to start us and then we asked all the artists to do a one-hit silkscreen. Of course some people did more than one hit. And the printer did it, which at that time was Styria Studio [New York], I think, downtown. So there was this little box of thirty silkscreens that we were going to sell to raise money for the project [*The New York Collection for Stockholm* portfolio, 1973]. My sneaking suspicion is that Bob probably bought most of them. A few were sold. They're out there. You can buy them on the Internet somewhere. So the collection did end up going to Stockholm. As I say we're still waiting for somebody to do the book on this.



Robert Whitman
Untitled from *The New York Collection for Stockholm*,
1973
Double-sided screenprint, folded, from a portfolio of
seventeen screenprints, nine lithographs, two lithographs
with screenprint, one photocopy, and one photograph
composition (irreg.): 3/16 x 35 11/16 inches (0.5 x
90.7cm); sheet: 11 15/16 x 17 7/8 inches (30.3 x
45.4cm)
Museum of Modern Art, New York
Gift of Steven M. Feinstein



Robert Rauschenberg
Sketch for Monogram, 1959
Lithograph and two-color silkscreen
12 x 9 inches (30.5 x 22.9 cm)
From an edition of 300 published by E.A.T.,
produced by Styria Studio, for the portfolio *The
New York Collection for Stockholm*
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

The party started at the Swedish embassy and most of the artists and some critics and friends were driven to the airplane directly and the luggage was collected there. And the party continued on the plane with our own bar, our own menu, and our own movies. We got to Copenhagen and the Swedish press got on. Remember, this is also at the time of the Vietnam War so there was a lot of antipathy to—

Q: The Americans.

Whitman: The Americans. Although I must say, the artists that I met in Sweden at that time were okay. It was hard for them to understand that the American artists were as against the war as they were, but they were. Anyway, so the press got on in Copenhagen and in those days they had a lounge in the upper part of the 747s where the interviews were to take place and I said to people, you know there's a god because the noise of the engines or the frequency of the engines screwed up their recording equipment and so nothing got done because there was no way that any of the people in our group could articulate a thought, not even to say, "Where is the bathroom?" because everybody was so tired and still hungover or drunk from the night before. The party never stopped. It was great.

Billy sent me and Larry Rivers from the airplane to go and talk to the press. And I've seen video of this. Luckily for me, Larry Rivers is very verbose. You may not understand a word he's saying, but he just goes—and he's flying. And I was stunned. So that was among the things I remember about it. I did see Bob. He was on that trip. Of course he was. It was just one ridiculously weird thing after another.

The dinner reception was at the State Department and hosted by [Sven Olof Joachim] Palme who was the Prime Minister at the time. Julie remembers these things. Nancy Hanks was the chairman of the NEA at the time and she spoke and said, "We had nothing to do with this." And [Stephen] John Brademas [Jr.] who was a congressman friendly to the arts spoke and he said the same thing, "Well, we had nothing to do with this." So we were completely rejected by everybody. Apparently there was some stuff in the Swedish press having to do with Vietnam and why are they doing this with American artists? Why aren't they Vietnamese artists? And there's

an article too—Julie found an article that was not bad, that was written by somebody we now know, who in those days was a young student. But anyway, that was an event, and as a result, the Moderna has this amazing collection of American art and it's kind of terrific. They have a Claes. I don't think Claes was part of this or maybe he was. I'll try to remember, Sol LeWitt, Andy [Warhol], Walter De Maria, Lee Bontecou, George Segal, Larry Rivers I mentioned, Jimmy Dine, Richard Stankiewicz, Cy Twombly I think. The whole gang.

Q: What about Osaka [Expo '70]? It happened in 1970. Do you remember any of that time where Bob was involved?

Whitman: I don't think so. I don't know what he was doing. I don't think so. I'm not quite sure how it happened, but because of touring with Merce, he may have suggested Fujiko [Nakaya] to Billy. I think that might have happened. And Fujiko is the one who did the fog—the *Fog Sculptures*.

Q: Right, so the tour happened in '64, so a little further.

Whitman: Yes, right. That must have been kind of interesting.

Q: The world tour of Merce Cunningham?

Whitman: Yes.

Q: That was an amazing year and an amazing year for Bob too. He won the prize in Venice [International Grand Prize in Painting, Venice Biennale, 1964].

Whitman: That's right.

Q: And they went all over the world.

Whitman: That was probably when that stuff meant something too. I think it's become a little less meaningful now, those kinds of things. If you look at the artists who represent the different countries.

Q: But back then, it probably was still relevant.

Whitman: Oh yes, sure. It's impressive, for goodness sake, yes. It's always astounding. I guess it's the fact that Bob was able to get people to understand his work in that way and affect it, that's really interesting. He had the retrospective at the Jewish Museum and I guess that was the way to get to Venice too. I think that was before it.

Q: Venice was '64 and I believe the Jewish Museum was before [*Robert Rauschenberg*, 1963].

Whitman: Right, so I think that's what happened. And the fact is there aren't many people in this world who are as charming as Bob. I don't think so.

Q: How would you describe his—

Whitman: I can't. Please. Terrific humor, usually the smartest guy in the room—or always maybe. And he could turn it on. I'm sure I'm echoing what everybody else says. It's very hard to remember any times when Bob might have been angry or upset. It's like Cage. You can't remember—but I do remember two times with Cage.

Q: What do you remember about Cage?

Whitman: In one of those rounding up the usual suspects things, we were both in some university in Texas. I'm trying to think of which one. Whichever one is in Dallas. Anyway, so I met him in the hall and he was very upset because they hadn't rehearsed the score that he'd sent. And I said, "What do you mean they haven't?" He said, "It's on the desk and they haven't even opened the envelope." He was very angry. I'm terrible with these things. I said, "John, upstairs they have all of the Goya etchings on exhibit. Go up there and you'll feel better." The etchings, they're really horrible.

Q: So did he follow your advice?

Whitman: I don't know if he did or not. I said, "I've been having the same problem," and he said "Oh, well you've got your youthful enthusiasm to carry you through." You have to think you were lucky to have known these guys. I did see John upset—see, these things stand out because

they're so rare—in 9 Evenings because he was having trouble getting something done and the organizer, or somebody who was in charge of something, wasn't there. He said, "Well, if she doesn't come in five minutes there will be no performance," and at the same time there's John with a bunch of people sitting around a table soldering connections for cables. Figure that out.

Q: Do you remember seeing the other events of 9 Evenings?

Whitman: Oh yes. I did. I saw them all.

Q: Do you have any memory of that?

Whitman: The ones that stood out the most were John's, David's, and Bob's. Something that I didn't know until I spoke with Julie, I didn't remember, the first night of John's, it may have been both nights, people wandered around the space. That was unexpected. That wasn't supposed to happen, it wasn't part of his idea, and I thought it was the genius part of the idea because when you were in different places the sounds were different, because of the way the hall was so they were focused in different areas [*Variations VII*]. So by walking around, it was different. I thought that had been part of John's idea, but apparently it wasn't. So that was interesting.

I thought the filming was not enough. Because there's one camera it can't do much. It's better than nothing I guess and Julie did a brilliant job of editing it and putting it together. David's piece was of course completely bizarre [*Bandoneon! (a combine)*]. You liked the idea of

somebody having the nerve to do things with equipment that it's not supposed to do. That was David. And the idea of him playing the bandoneon, which he apparently picked up—I'm not sure if it came about from the—did they go to Argentina on the tour? The famous tour? No? Anyway, he picked up the bandoneon in Argentina, which is the major instrument that's used for the tango.

Q: Not much earlier?

Whitman: This is off the subject completely, but I think there are about three or four tango movies that are just great that I always recommend to people. Have you seen them?

Q: The tango movies?

Whitman: The tango movies. There's a great movie called *Tango Bar* [1987] that stars Raúl [Rafael] Juliá [y Arcelay] before he became an American star. He goes to Argentina to learn tango stuff and the story is a tango—the plot. But in the process, they have spectacular shots of dancing, really wonderful. Then there's another movie about an English lady who goes to Argentina to learn tango and she kind of does okay. She gets the best people. Then there's another movie about an Argentinian guy—he's actually born there. He's an opera singer, but he wants to learn how to sing and he never gets it. He doesn't get it. It's great. I don't know if he thinks the way I do, but if you watch it, there's something else that goes on. And it happens with performers and you watch the performers. If you look at the way people work with dance and movement, and it's a similar thing with singing. The great tango singer historically is this guy

[Carlos] Gardel [née Charles Romuald Gardes] and if you ever watch any videos of him singing, all these songs have stories, and he's looking directly at the audience. He's telling it to you. But the opera guy never learned how to do that. He's singing at you. So I often look at performers to see if they're doing that. Now usually performers we know are a little more objective. They're doing neither. They present something to be seen, but once in a while I like the idea of somebody engaging the audience directly. Anyway, this is not about Bob.

He was a pretty good performer himself. Of course, he picked the best parts. At the end of *Open Score* he comes out and picks up Simone. I'm surprised how well her voice was recorded in that space. The acoustics in there were horrible. If you were 10 feet apart you couldn't talk to each other, but that seemed to work. The singing seemed to work in that—in the bag.

And in *Pelican* he was—you were thinking of that? [Laughs] Now let's see who did—I think the first—other one is Per[-Olof] Ultvedt—

Q: And there's Steve Paxton.

Whitman: Did Steve or was it Alex [Hay]?

Q: Alex and there was Carolyn Brown, a female dancer.

Whitman: Per Ultvedt was a really good artist. I don't think he traveled much unfortunately. A lot of those good artists in Sweden didn't get out much. And he was also a champion skier.

Let's see—my problem is I don't remember names of pieces too much. The piece where he wore the big shoes and carried the neon bulb [*Map Room II*, 1965]?

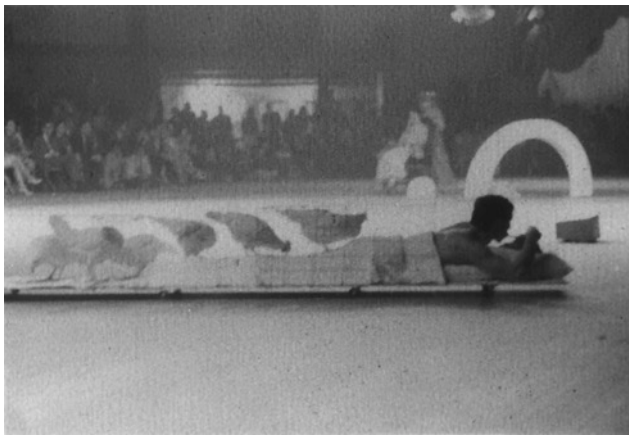
Q: Is that *Linoleum* [1966] when there are also the—

Whitman: Somebody's in the cage?

Q: Right. Steve Paxton is in the cage with the chickens.

Whitman: Yes, that's it.

Q: Simone is sitting on a throne with some kind of costume on and Deborah Hay is putting spaghetti all over the floor.



Steve Paxton in Rauschenberg's *Linoleum* (1966), NOW Festival, National Arena roller-skating rink, Washington, D.C., April 1966. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Steve Schapiro

Whitman: [Laughs] Yes, that piece. That was another funny one because the guy who produced that—if I'm thinking of the right one, he went to Claes and he said, "Bob and Bob are doing pieces. You want to do one?" Then he came to me and he says, "Bob and Claes are doing pieces, do you want—" the same way around. Of course you never really have the opportunity or rarely have the opportunity to do a piece with the two other artists who you may most admire so that was a good one.

One of the problems that I had when I saw Steve's—I'm sure a lot of people had the same experience—it really made me miss Bob terribly. It caught me by surprise. I wasn't expecting that.

They're doing stuff on Captiva and inviting people down.

Q: They have residencies [Note: The Rauschenberg Residency.]

Whitman: Yes and they did contact me and my answer was I couldn't do it. It would make me too sad.

Q: When I interviewed Deborah Hay, she said it was actually a way of saying goodbye to Bob because his presence was very strong there.

Whitman: Well—

Q: Did you go to Captiva often?

Whitman: No, no. A couple of times. I did some presses. I did some stuff on the press [note: referring to Untitled Press, Inc., Captiva, Florida].

Q: So when was the last time you saw Bob?

Whitman: The last time that I can remember exactly was in Porto [Portugal], when he had the show there [*Robert Rauschenberg: Travelling '70–'76*, Museu de Arte Contemporânea de Serralves, 2007–08]. Well that's a good example of something. Those pieces were amazing. It was an amazing show. I think they had pieces there that they didn't have in Houston. Anyway, that was great and that was probably the last time. The things I'd heard about that—I don't know who told me. Maybe he did. The reason they had all those pieces was because he couldn't sell them. And if you look at those pieces you're going, this can't be. That can't be true. Because they were just amazingly brilliant, the pieces in that show. And another example—it's good. I spoke to the director there, whose name is João Fernandes and he said the only reason they could have the show was because Bob kept the insurance and he got the shippers to do it at a bargain rate. So that's great. I don't know if you know that or that you would be concerned about this sort of thing, but that museum is one of the nicest museums there is in terms of architecture and spaces for showing stuff. The architect's name is [Álvaro Joaquim de Melo] Siza [Vieira] and he's, as my friend Roger says, the real deal.



Installation view, *Robert Rauschenberg: Travelling '70–'76*, Museu de Arte Contemporânea de Serralves, Porto, Portugal, 2007–08. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York

When I was there, I went with a guy named Walter [Patrick] Smith, who's an architect, another one, and at that time he was still a Skidmore, Owings & Merrill [SOM, New York] guy. Walter is compulsive in a way, so he got João to take us around, and Walter looked at every room in that museum—there wasn't a closet that he didn't look at. We went through the whole museum inside and out and I'm going completely crazy. Completely crazy. But Walter is good about that because then he explained, he said, "It's impressive because the building is beautiful and you would never know but they built it on the cheap," and João said, "Yes, otherwise it couldn't have been built." Meaning simple solutions. Sometimes simple solutions are the best. It's very clean. Instead of being, I don't know, what I call ego architecture, where you make a statue instead of a building. The light there is extremely clean and sharp so the shadows are really articulated, so the way the sun works on the building is quite spectacular because it moves and changes. It's really beautiful. Anyway, Google it. The museum is called Serralves. Porto. Yes, Porto is a neat city. Where port comes from.

Q: Where port comes from.

Whitman: Oh, yes. I forgot. Italy is just around the corner.

Q: Relatively, yes.

Whitman: Well in America things seem far away and if it's another country you think, oh my god, it's really far away, but in Europe, you're often surprised. Oh my gosh, we're in Austria. We were just in Germany [laughs].

Q: And you had a few exhibits in Italy in the seventies?

Whitman: Yes. One and a performance. Oh yes and I was in a show there once. Boy oh boy. I remember having dinner with Cy and Bob at one of those places, one of those outdoor places, in a plaza somewhere. And Cy probably was a reader and he probably knew a lot about history. And I can't remember who—he's sitting there and he says, "That bridge over there is the one where so-and-so came across—" and he goes into this thing about it. Quite amazing.

It's kind of interesting thinking about this stuff because if the guys had been respectable, they would be worth talking to. I'm talking about the accountant and the lawyer and Darryl, the guys that sued the estate. The tragedy about all of this, one of the tragedies, is that of all the people who were concerned and careful about this sort of thing, Bob was the most. I can remember being in a conversation with him about trying to figure out what to do and this was years and

years and years ago—because in order to pay the estate taxes, they would have to sell some work and they would have to pay taxes on that and they would have to sell some more work and try to work that one out. I know he took special care and these guys weren't paying attention and then they go and sue the estate. That's my opinion.

He testified against [Robert Heron] Bork when Bork was nominated to be on the Supreme Court and I can't quite remember the reason, but I think it had to do with freedom of speech possibly, it'd be an issue he cared about. Another time I remember him talking to a labor lawyer.

[Theodore W.] Ted Kheel was a good friend of Bob's and could arrange all these things. So we're talking to a labor lawyer about forming an artists' union. [Laughs] Talk about naive. The labor guy listens to him and says, "The trouble with all of this is you've got to understand nobody gives a shit if you stop working."



Still from C-SPAN footage of Rauschenberg testifying before the Senate Judiciary Committee against the nomination of Judge Robert H. Bork to the Supreme Court, Washington, D.C., September 1987. Audiovisual Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York

[Laughter]

Whitman: So that's the end of it. Oh, it never occurred to us. I suppose there's another thing worth mentioning in the context of principles. There was another ugly incident where somebody sued Bob because he bought one of Bob's works and held that he was entitled to a commission. And Bob didn't think so and said no. He was having a show in Houston at the museum and I think it was curated or organized by Walter [C.] Hopps. Have you heard any of these stories before?

Q: Vaguely.

Whitman: Vaguely. The t-shirts with "Walter will be here in 20 minutes"? Okay. Anyway, at the opening dinner they got some judge or somebody in Houston to permit this to happen. [Note: referring to works being temporarily removed from *Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective* at the Menil Collection, one of three venues in Houston hosting the exhibition in 1998, because of a lawsuit filed by Alfred Kren.] You've heard the story?

Q: I've heard the story.

Whitman: Okay.

Q: But please tell.

Whitman: Okay. Ultimately they scurried around and hung the show so it looked normal without the missing works. Anyway, Bob asked Ted about this and Ted said, "You'll win, but how much

of your life do you want to spend on it?” Bob obviously did not want to spend even a second on it so he gave the guy the dough. That was one case that was ugly. And why guys like that attract ugliness, I can’t—I guess everybody does to an extent, but these are major uglinesses. Serious uglies. Once again, somebody you wouldn’t want to talk to because you can’t believe them about anything, would be Terry Van Brunt, the famous lawsuit, and that one Bob did fight. He probably felt there was a principle involved there, something he couldn’t tolerate. He had that and a certain kind of delicacy that I don’t think generally—other people can’t talk about this, I don’t think. Steve might if he is available to talk about it. I know he doesn’t want to talk about old stuff and neither do I for that matter. But there was a point when Bob was on Broadway and a lot of money went missing and it obviously would have been taken by somebody who had been alone in his place. Anyway, he let it get around that he knew and somehow the money came back. Which is a really delicate way to handle what could have become a horrible, emotional problem—a way to maintain a friendship if it existed.

Q: Do you have a theory of what happened?

Whitman: My theory is that whoever took it put it back as soon as they realized what they had done and that they were being treated decently. That’s just my theory. Steve would remember. Now I don’t know if Steve went around with Bob when they found Captiva.

Q: I don’t know.

Whitman: Or if that was post-Steve, but I always had the feeling that, if possible, people tend to gravitate or hone in on a climate and a landscape that they have feelings about from their childhood. Something like that. Although Port Arthur [Texas] is not exactly a remote city. I don't know where he lived in Port Arthur, do you?

Q: No.

Whitman: Well, it's the Gulf Coast. The climate's the same. So I had an idea that he traveled around the Gulf Coast until he found paradise. I would think that place is paradise. Boy, you're draining my brain. I'm rattling on.

Q: You would not consider going to Captiva Island for—

Whitman: I'm not good at this stuff. Debbie thinks she can say goodbye. I don't think I can ever say goodbye. There are too many people out there that I miss. I'm not good at it. There's a doctor, who I really like. After we discuss my problem, he just sits down for twenty minutes and talks. And one of the first times I saw him, he shocked me. He said, "We're not very good at death. Not you guys, us." Well, I'm not good at it. I think if you've had a childhood trauma that relates to that, you end up not being good at it. That's just my theory. I don't have to talk to a shrink about it.

Q: Okay. Maybe we can stop.

Whitman: Okay.

Q: If that would be okay and we can rethink and—

Whitman: If you think I have more to offer, I'd be glad to do it, and you can call me up.

[END OF SESSION]

Transcription: Audio Transcription Center

Session #2

Interviewee: Robert Whitman

Location: New York, New York

Interviewer: Alessandra Nicifero

Date: April 22, 2015

Q: Good morning. My name is Alessandra Nicifero. I'm here with Robert Whitman for the Robert Rauschenberg Oral History Project. It's April 22. Thanks for being here, sharing with us your thoughts and memories about your work, and about this incredible artist community from the 1960s in New York.

Can you tell us a little bit about where you were born and where you grew up? Briefly.

Whitman: I was born in Manhattan and basically the first nine or ten years spent on Long Island at a place called Cold Spring Harbor. Then New Jersey. And that's that.

Q: Then you went to college, at Rutgers. Can you talk about those years?

Whitman: I was probably the worst student who ever went to any educational institution. I got in there because there was a very nice man who was a master at the school that I went to in New Jersey, even though the headmaster, who was a nasty man, hated me. He didn't graduate me. So they got me into Rutgers.

Allan was at Rutgers because I don't think he got a job closer to New York. George Segal was stuck on his farm. George Brecht was working at the laboratory—I think Johnson & Johnson. Lucas got a scholarship, so as a friend of mine said when he heard these stories, "That's how you bunch of losers ended up being at Black Mountain in New Jersey?" [Laughs; note: referring to Black Mountain College, North Carolina]

Anyway, that was Rutgers at the time.

Q: We're talking about—it was the early 1950s, '53 through '57?

Whitman: Right. I started studying English literature but I soon discovered that the most vital work and exciting work was going on in visual arts. It was a little too late for me to shift, but I took as many art courses as I could and mainly focused on that stuff.

Q: Allan Kaprow was teaching a course there. Was it theory or a studio class?

Whitman: He did art history. He did have a studio course, which was, I would say, kind of a studio course. I don't remember it actually. He might have made a few observations, but I don't remember anything. People just let loose, I think.

Q: You were not making art or painting.

Whitman: Yes, I was making stuff.

Q: What kind of stuff?

Whitman: It's hard to describe, but I did make a painting or so and construction kind of things.
Temporary stuff.

Q: You also were engaged with all sorts of other activities in college. There is the *Anthologist*.
There was a literary magazine?

Whitman: Yes. Lucas was engaged with that. I wasn't. I did a few covers, but I wasn't engaged.
If I was looking back at myself now, seeing that kid, I was probably about as clueless as you
could be about doing anything. A kid has a miserable time in college. Some kids are great at it,
but I wasn't.

Q: You mentioned the Sketch Club.

Whitman: The Sketch Club? I think that was mainly a setup for George to make a little extra
money on the side. We're talking peanuts by today's standards. It was just a couple guys, once a
week, sketching in the basement of the Art House.

The whole art department at Rutgers at that time was in a house, an ordinary house. The living
room was the lecture hall. I don't know how many people you could cram in there. Thirty. Then
there was another little place, another room, and a basement, and offices upstairs. It was tiny.

Q: What kind of work were you doing or what were the conversations that were going on?

Whitman: It's really very hard to know exactly, but I think my conversations, particularly with Allan, had to do with the limitations of what we were seeing around us. Once something had happened, once there'd been an explosion, there needed to be more.

Q: You're talking in terms of theater production? Art production?

Whitman: Well eventually that would come about. In those days I had the idea that every new thing should be a revolutionary new thing. That's a typical kid's idea, I suppose. You would get mad at an artist for making paintings that were similar to the ones that he did the year before, forgetting the fact that you have glorious old men singing their songs and they're perfect.

[Laughs] But kids don't think like that.

Q: In our previous conversation you mentioned at a certain point you saw one of Paul Taylor's first performances, a collaboration with Bob Rauschenberg called Five Dances. Can you talk about the memory that you have of the performance?

Whitman: I thought it was quite spectacular. Almost minimal. I don't remember the names of anything. But there was one piece I was amazed by where he's there, standing still in a suit and the sound was taken off the telephone. In those days I don't know if it still exists or not, but you call up the telephone company and get the time. And the voice would say, "At the tone, the time

will be ten minutes and thirty seconds past ten exactly. Boing.” Something like that. Every ten seconds, he would make a gesture, starting out first with his head and then with his upper body slowly and then finally with his whole body. I don’t know how long the piece was. Not terribly long. But it was pretty astounding and, as I say, kind of minimal.

He had another piece I think he did with David [Tudor] playing—is it four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence? At the piano, and my memory may be faulty, but I believe with just a breeze, a fan, blowing wind across the stage. He’s standing still and somebody else is being still as well. I think she might have been seated. [Note: *Seven New Dances: Duet* (1957) was performed to Cage’s *4'33"*; *Seven New Dances: Events II* involved fans.]

Q: Yes. This one is described in books, yes.

Whitman: Oh, it is? I’m not bad in my memory then. Okay. Yes.

So I was stunned. Then later on when I saw Taylor’s work, I couldn’t quite understand how it had gone from this kind of wonderful, still, minimalist kind of work to this more dancey, hopping around, terrible stuff. Since nobody’s going to see this for a while, until I’m long gone, I can say these things. But that first thing was so interesting.

I did ask Bob once, because I couldn’t understand how he had started out at one place and ended up in this other place completely different. I did ask him. I said, “Did you guys have anything to do with this at all?” He said, “No. Absolutely not.” My guess is that Paul Taylor probably got a

lot from hanging around with Bob and Jasper in the way of learning. Even they were young in those days.

Q: Apparently at one of the performances in New York at the 92nd [Street] Y[M-YWHA], there was a dog performing. Was the dog at Douglass College when you saw it?

Whitman: I didn't see it. No.

Q: So it was a different version I guess. That was the first time that you saw Bob Rauschenberg on stage, but was that also the first time you saw his work, or had you seen his work before?

Whitman: Do you remember the date of that concert?

Q: 1957, possibly around that time because I have the date of New York, but not the date at Rutgers College. [Note: Five Dances, Douglass Residential College, 1958.]

Whitman: Do you know the date of the show at the Jewish Museum?

Q: That was in 1957. [Note: date of the group exhibition *Artists of the New York School: Second Generation* was 1957; the Rauschenberg retrospective at the Jewish Museum was in 1963.]

Whitman: That show was where I saw Bob's actual work for the first time. So I don't know which came first. Shortly after that show is when I arranged a meeting with Bob. I don't know

where the studio was, but Bob and Jasper had—it was on Front Street maybe? Somewhere downtown. [Note: Rauschenberg moved to 128 Front Street, New York in March 1958, prior to this he had a studio at 278 Pearl Street, New York.]

Q: You told me that Allan Kaprow took you to this studio?

Whitman: He may have, yes. Or at least got me there. Yes.

Q: Do you remember the first impression of seeing *Monogram*?

Whitman: Well, of course. Naturally I was astounded because I had seen the work in the show at the Jewish Museum, but this was different. It was similar, but obviously, these pieces were big and masterpieces. The one that stunned me in particular was the bed [*Bed*]. At that time *Monogram*[: *First State*] was on the wall with the goat on top. I don't know if it's called *Monogram*. I don't remember the names very well. But those Combines were there. I don't know if they were in his first show at Leo's or not. I can't remember.

Q: You were able to buy two pieces of Bob's.

Whitman: Yes. One is called *Opportunity* something—seven or so [*Opportunity* #7, 1956]. And the other one I can't remember what it is called [*Wanderlust*, 1957].

Q: It was one of the Combines.

Whitman: It was very subtle and very different. I think it was—I would say peculiarly under the influence of Cy almost. It had that Cy-like scribble across it and very subtle.



Robert Rauschenberg
Wanderlust, 1957
Combine: oil, fabric, paper, graphite, and crayon on
canvas
30 x 25 inches (76.2 x 63.5 cm)
Private Collection

Q: Was there a reason why you selected those two specifically?

Whitman: I like them. [Laughs]

Q: You like them. Yes.

[Laughter]

Q: Seems a good reason.

Whitman: Yes.

Q: It was also very common to buy each other's work. Did Rauschenberg—

Whitman: Oh heavens to Betsy. Buying is hardly what you would say. It was basically a gift.

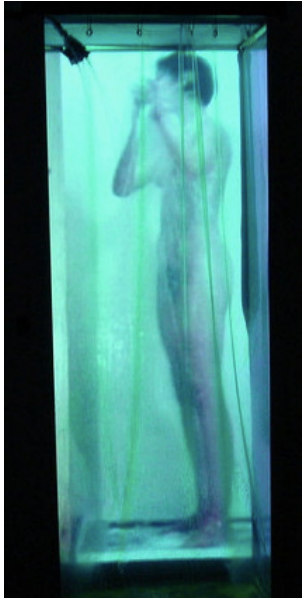
The prices were so silly—

Q: They were symbolic. Yes.

Whitman: Yes. Completely made up. Yes.

Q: Bob Rauschenberg also bought one of your works?

Whitman: Yes, he did. He bought a shower [*Shower*, 1963], which got sold when they sold work out of his estate.



Robert Whitman
Shower, 1963
Installation with metal shower stall, water and film projection
78 x 30 x 30 inches (198.1 x 76.2 x 76.2 cm)
Private Collection

Q: Oh. I thought it was still part of the private collection.

Whitman: Yes, it was. I can say what I want, right? I could still consider it a criminal act to have sold work out of his collection because he collected very carefully. His collection could be seen as a massive piece of art in itself. It showed his astounding range and the ability to express that range and the generosity of that range, the work he collected. I consider that to have been a work in itself. In New York State, I think it's against the law to destroy a work of art.

Q: I was not aware of that.

Whitman: I don't know if it is or not, but I think it's a bad thing. It's like what those ISIS [Islamic State of Iraq and Syria] guys do. It's similar. It's a similar thing.

Q: Your first solo show in New York was in 1959 at the Hansa Gallery [*Whitman*]. Can you tell us a little bit about the relationship with art galleries in those years?

Whitman: Oh, boy. I think the Hansa was one of the co-op galleries. I don't know the history of it, but I'm guessing because most of them had been students of Hans Hofmann. And also since Jan Müller was German, there was the idea of the Hanseatic League. Something like that. I'm guessing some of that thinking had to do with their joining together.

The galleries on Tenth Street were also kind of co-ops. There were a few other galleries. The situation at that time was that you could probably visit all the galleries in a couple of days. And that was that.

Q: They were all located pretty much in the same neighborhood.

Whitman: Fairly, yes. The Hansa was on Fifty-ninth Street. [Sidney] Janis [Gallery, New York] was on Fifty-seventh, I think. [Leo] Castelli was uptown off Madison and then Martha Jackson [Gallery, New York]. There were others. Stable—

Q: [Anita] Rubin's [Reuben Gallery]?

Whitman: Which one?

Q: Rubin's?

Whitman: That was much later. Not much later. In those days a couple of years is much later, but these days—

Q: The *Below Zero* festival and exhibit [Reuben Gallery, 1959–60] was organized in 1960, I think. Around that time. Do you have any memory of that exhibit?

Whitman: Very little. I've recently seen pictures, but I don't remember a whole lot.

Q: Because Bob Rauschenberg was also there. Do you remember what work? [Note: Rauschenberg's *Coca-Cola Plan* (1958) was exhibited.]

Whitman: I don't know. I think Allan had a lot to do with organizing that.

Q: When did you start creating performances? Or more theatrical pieces?

Whitman: About that time. Let's see. I did a piece at the Reuben in that year. And another piece at the Reuben that year. After that one year of activity the people who were in the gallery, they kind of disbanded in a way and renewed itself to only do performances on Second Street. And that would be probably 1960, I think. 1960 and '61.

Q: You created *Mouth* and then soon after—

Whitman: I did *American Moon* first and then *Mouth* there.

Q: In these performances there were already some of the leading characters of the Judson Dance Theater, like Simone Forti and Trisha Brown.

Whitman: Actually Simone was the only, what I would call “outsider,” to do any performances at the Reuben. Trisha appeared in pieces—

Q: Can you describe a little bit what *Mouth* was about?

Whitman: [Laughs] Oh, boy. It’s a little hard to describe that piece. Actually it’s hard to verbally describe any of these things. It can be done, but I don’t know if you have enough time.

Q: We have enough time.

Whitman: Oh god. [Laughs]

Q: Do you have memories of the process of creating and the people involved?

Whitman: Well, at the time, it was very luxurious in a way. God knows why people were as nice as they were because nobody had any money to pay performers or do that stuff. Everybody just sort of said, “Sure. I’ll help.”

I had started out with what I call a format, whatever that word meant to me in those days, and I filled it in with stuff that was on my mind. The one I'm thinking about, *American Moon*, I have some knowledge of at the present time because I took some documentary film of it and I did it a couple of times recently, within the last ten years I'd say. One time was actually pretty accurate to the original.

In that piece the audiences divided up into six parts that were each an individual tunnel construction. The tunnels were closed to start with and then they lifted up and exposed a performance area in the middle—let's say three tunnels facing one way and three the other way. Then there were movement elements. At the time I considered the movement art, dance, to be a little bit on the precious side. I sort of lean towards more expressionistic—bordering on violent—physical movements. In fact in the first couple pieces I did, there was very active stuff. I realized the audience can be seduced by speed and activity and they don't look at the piece. They get caught up in the action.

In *American Moon* it was a little more toned down. Funny little things happened. I also used film in this piece. I liked the idea that one of the things projecting on the screen that was dropped down in front of each tunnel. So each tunnel had its own film even though all the films were the same. At the end the curtains in front of these tunnels were raised up, but the projectors were kept going and so the light of the projector went across the space and into the tunnel opposite so that the people sitting in the tunnels became the film for the people watching. And so each tunnel became the film of the people across the way. I kind of like that idea. [Laughs]

Q: So at the same time Bob Rauschenberg was also starting creating performances. He was collaborating with some of the Judson Church people. Do you remember seeing any of this work?

Whitman: Not at that time.

Q: So maybe just a few years later. Do you have any memory of *Pelican* for example?

Whitman: Oh yes. Everybody remembered *Pelican*. That's one of the great pieces of all time.

Q: Were you friends with Bob Rauschenberg in those years?

Whitman: Yes.

Q: You were seeing him?

Whitman: Yes. For a few years at least, we were kind of neighbors. During the years of Steve, when he lived on Broadway. I ended up eventually on White Street—well Mulberry Street then and White Street. And Bob was on Lafayette near Great Jones Street, I think. Yes. I get the years mixed up and I don't really know who was where when. But when he was on Lafayette before he really moved to Florida, we were pretty close. I have been there recently. My daughter and

Bernardo used to go and visit as well. Play. Bob was very open to having people around at certain times.

Q: You were talking about the studio on Lafayette or on Captiva Island?

Whitman: At Lafayette Street.

Q: Can you tell me more? Was Bob Rauschenberg roller-skating around while he was working?

Whitman: That part I don't remember. No, I don't. He must have just gotten the idea and then learned how to roller-skate. That's my guess. Or he may have seen it. Actually he may have seen it as part of—I don't remember when any of Alice Denney's productions in Washington [D.C.] took place.

Q: Right. There was the Pop [Art] Festival in 1964 or 1963 [note: 1963].

Whitman: When was *Pelican* done?

Q: '63. So I believe probably it was '63 as well, the Pop Festival in Washington.

Whitman: There was a roller rink. I remember going to that roller rink too [National Arena roller-skating rink, Washington, D.C.]. But not at that time. It was quite spectacular because there's music and there was just regular roller-skating and then there were couples. The couples

were one thing and then there was another time when they would have three people together roller-skating. It's kind of like dancing. That was quite spectacular.



Alex Hay, Carolyn Brown, and Rauschenberg performing Rauschenberg's *Pelican* (1963), First New York Theater Rally, former CBS studio, Broadway and Eighty-first Street, New York, May 1965. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Elisabeth Loewenstein Novick

If Bob hadn't done *Pelican* before that, I would think that would have been, "Oh man. That stuff is great. I want to do it—make a piece with roller-skating." I don't know.

Q: Do you remember any other of the performances that Bob Rauschenberg was doing in those years?

Whitman: I remember a lot of performance stuff, but the images run together in my head. I don't remember the names of much. He did a piece at—oh god almighty. I can't even remember the—

Q: There was the First New York Theater Rally that was organized by Steve Paxton. And you also had work there. You had the *Night Time Sky* [1965].

Whitman: Yes. And Bob's piece had—there were two spectacular things that I remember. One is, turtles going around with flashlights on their backs pointing here and there. And Chris, going through his shopping cart full of ticking alarm clocks [note: *Spring Training*]. It was quite spectacular.

Q: What was your piece about?

Whitman: Oh my gosh. It was called *Night Time Sky*. You can put any kind of imagery you want in those stars. They don't have to be the ones that the classical guys did. So that's what that piece was.

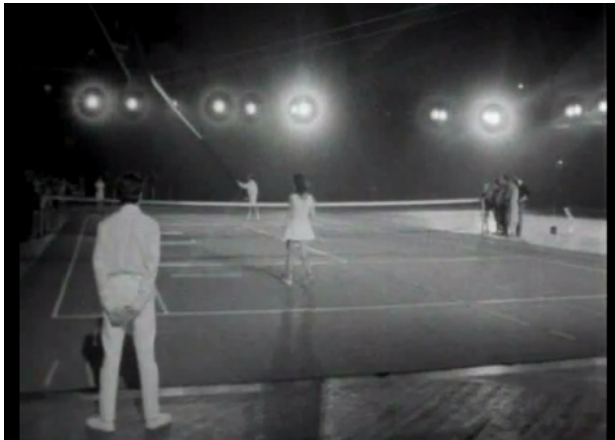
Q: Do you remember working with Bob and going to his studio, seeing what he was—

Whitman: I just visited. We talked about collaborating at one time, but by then he had moved to Florida. I thought it would have been fun.

Q: At a certain point, he stopped doing performances. Do you know why? And did you miss him from the scene?

Whitman: Did I miss him? Oh absolutely. I don't know why he stopped because he certainly did some of the best things there ever were and ever will be.

I can isolate images from a lot of the pieces, but *Pelican* is one in particular that hangs together as a kind of a solid single event, a single image that's very focused. So does *Open Score*, the one with the tennis game. I don't have the language to talk about how these pieces are so solidly put together. There's no way you can do that. [Laughs] You're not supposed to be able to do that stuff.



Mimi Kanarek and Frank Stella on the tennis court in Rauschenberg's *Open Score*, 9 Evenings: Theatre & Engineering, 69th Regiment Armory, New York, October 1966. Still from *9 Evenings: Theatre & Engineering* (1966). 16 mm, black and white, 25 minutes. Produced by Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.), New York

When he stopped doing stuff like that, it was a big loss. But that's like with anybody. But he did other stuff.

Q: So you mentioned *Open Score*. That is part of the great 9 Evenings at the armory. Can you talk about—

Whitman: I could talk about that piece in particular. I'll describe it. I'm sure that when this is all done, you'll have all this material and film anyway.

It's a tennis game. First, people come out and I think they set up the net and stand there because they have to hold the net taut. You couldn't just mount the net on the floor of the armory where it took place. Let's see. Each time the ball was hit, the sound of the ball was amplified through the space and the speakers. One can talk about the technology, but it's just too boring to talk about that stuff.

So you heard the cosmic pock of the sound of the ball hitting the racket. And each time the sound came, a light went off, until the space was in complete darkness. I think the sound continued—I'm not sure—for a while. In the dark, you heard people say their names. There was a rustling sound of a lot of people in the dark. You couldn't see the people until they were projected—he had gotten a hold of infrared video cameras and projected images of this crowd of people who were like ghosts, appearing on the floor in front of the audience. They made gestures that were cued by lights that they could see, that were behind the audience. They made simple gestures like embrace your neighbor, wave, or something simple like that. And then somehow they got off the floor.

For the second night, the second performance—he didn't have it on the first one—he appears and picks up a burlap bag on the side in which Simone is singing this fabulous song. Somehow she filled that space which had lousy acoustics, but it worked and you could hear the words very well. It was really great. That was almost like the end of the piece. Terrific.

Q: How was the organization of the 9 Evenings? How was working and getting ready for the big event?

Whitman: I would have to say that it was completely insane. No rational person would have thought of doing this, but Billy just proceeded ahead as though there were no obstacles and it was easy. Letting, letting his fantasy come to fruition—and everybody else participated in this. It was mad. Everybody was under amazing stress. I don't think anybody really had a clear idea of what they were doing except Bob's piece, of course, and John's piece. They were all tightly composed.

Having seen a lot of the material recently, five or six years ago, the thing that stands out is how many people participated. It must have been hundreds almost. I don't know how many people participated, but I get the impression that hundreds of people, engineers and artists and friends, just jumped in and participated without getting paid. Amazing generosity and focus on the part of these people, in spite of all the attention. Only maybe the artists and some of the engineers were aware of the dangers of the technology that was being used—other people just went along with it. It's hard to understand. Looking at the videos now, it's amazing how this got done. The amount of work is huge because a lot of the pieces were quite complex.

Q: Can you talk a bit about your piece, *Two Holes of Water-3*? So it happened previously in two—

Whitman: Well, other versions had been leading up to this. I was trying to work on a piece as though you start here and change it to here and change it to here.

Number two [*Two Holes of Water*–2, 1966] was in the auditorium at Lincoln Center [New York]. A few minutes in, in the middle of a total deluge, the roof of this building leaked. And there was a total cascade coming down across the stage. It was amazing. That in itself would have been a piece. The guy said, “Keep going.” I said, “You can’t keep going. There are projectors here and somebody’s getting electrocuted,” because this was really dangerous. It was a real flood. Cascade, just like a regular waterfall. So number two never really got done.

So number three was at this place. That change had to do with the idea that—it was like a drive-in movie only the movies drove in. We had a bunch of cars, vehicles, with different kinds of projectors, film projectors or video projectors projecting different images on the side. Some of the images were of things that were happening in the space that the audience couldn’t see because they were too far away. To tell you the truth, as far as flow or movement, I can’t remember how it worked, but it doesn’t look bad in the video I’ve seen.



Robert Whitman's *Two Holes of Water – 3* (1966), 9 Evenings: Theatre & Engineering, 69th Regiment Armory, New York, October 14, 1966. Pictured: cars parked in front of a long screen, each with a film projector showing films or scenes from the balcony via closed-circuit video. Photo: Robert M. McElroy. Courtesy: Experiments in Art and Technology

Q: Do you have memories of the other events? Were some of the artworks more memorable than others maybe?

Whitman: Well, I mentioned Bob's piece and Cage's piece and David's piece. Yvonne had a nice dance piece [*Carriage Discreteness*, 1966]. Steve had this funny piece where people walked in these tunnels in these big shapes and heard sounds that were produced in the space [*Physical Things*, 1966]. Kind of like what they do in museums now when you walk by a work and you hear something. He had a system, something like that. He made sounds happen. [Öyvind A. C.] Fahlström had a very complicated theatrical piece that I kind of remember [*Kisses Sweeter than Wine*, 1966]. The big problem with me, remembering some of these pieces, is that you're so

involved with getting your own thing done that it's really hard to focus on somebody else's thing. Also the fact that Billy managed to make my rehearsals very difficult at night. [Laughs]

Q: Why was that?

Whitman: I was having a hard time getting time. I wasn't assertive enough about getting my time. But those things happen. That's what goes on.

Q: Initially the piece was supposed to be in Stockholm at the Moderna Museet. Then that didn't happen and this place was found.

Whitman: Right. I think the place was found because of Bob's ability to charm. And of course Marion Javits was one of the people who helped get us in touch with the general who controlled the armory. Or she leaned on him maybe. I don't know. So the armory appeared. The thing about the armory is, it's huge. I mentioned the acoustics were horrible. I think John and David were able to deal with the acoustics because of who they are and the fact that they are used to listening in a way that the rest of us sometimes aren't.

The thing that's important—I asked Julie recently, “How in the world did Billy get permission to use all these engineers? How did that come about? And why did John Pierce let this happen?”

This is hearsay, but Julie said that Billy said that when he asked Pierce why he let this happen, the answer was there was too much positive energy for him to stop it.

The deal was that the engineers were only supposed to work on their own time and not use any of the lab's time. Well that's impossible. It's impossible to imagine. These guys being involved in this massive project and not thinking about it during their working day at the labs. I don't think so.

Q: It must have been so engaging.

Whitman: Yes. Of course. Yes. It was a funny relationship. I actually remember doing something that seems very absurd now. I had actually at that time bought a video projector. These days video projectors are a dime a dozen and they're very cheap and they're way better. In those days they were big cumbersome black-and-white things, but I was the only one who had one. So I got to participate in tape-recording and projecting the closing ceremonies at the Westbeth Labs where the Bell Labs originated on West Street. That's Westbeth [Artists Housing, 55 Bethune Street, New York], the housing thing, now. So that was funny. There were too many people there for the president of the labs to give three speeches. So they tape-recorded the first one and then projected it for the next bunch of audiences. [Laughs] That has nothing to do with Bob—

Q: What do you remember of Bob in those days? He was transitioning back to focusing on art production, left the performance world, for some reason? Was there ever part of a conversation or—

Whitman: I never asked. A lot of things you realize aren't your business and are best left as a mystery, I think. Doing the performance stuff—I don't know if he had the same experience that I

did—but it's constant tension until the event is actually done. Then even if you redo it, the tension reappears. So that makes it a little hard, I think. You're very dependent on other people. Particularly I am because I don't have a company or anything. In those days nobody had a company. The idea of having a company was absurd. That's what dancers do. [Laughs] Your company is the people you can con into participating in your work or get. I think maybe if he were going to continue, it would have required him to have done things like that, get a steady group of people and work with them in that way, which he probably couldn't do in Captiva. I don't know. I'm sure the guys who have an idea probably are going to be hard to talk to. Petersen might have an idea.

Q: What happened after that? Actually I have one more question around that time, 1965. There is a performance of Steve Paxton, probably part of the NOW Festival [Washington, D.C., 1966] that you participated in as well. Bob Rauschenberg is in it—called *Earth Interior* [1966]. Do you have any memory of that?

Whitman: No, I don't, but I kind of remember that idea. Yes. Bob had a piece there too, I think. Or was it just Steve? [Note: Rauschenberg premiered *Linoleum* (1966) at the NOW Festival, in addition to performing his *Pelican* (1963).]

Q: I think the *Earth Interior* was Steve. There is a photo with both of them being in a plastic tunnel which reminds me of the 9 Evenings, the Paxton piece [*Physical Things*]. Do you have any memory of that?

Whitman: No. If you're busy doing your own thing and a part of a thing, you often don't get to see the other guys' stuff.

Q: Do you remember the organization? The trip to the NOW Festival?

Whitman: Not really. I remember some of my own experience. I remember a particularly unpleasant part of course. You don't ever remember the good stuff. When my piece was being performed, Andy's people came right in and started rehearsing and setting up. It was rude to say the least. Giving me a little friction. But I had people helping me who were wonderful, performing in the piece. Cindy and Simone and a nice young woman named Mimi Stark. They were terrific.

Q: Your involvement in the Experiments in Art and Technology? How did that all start?

Whitman: I've asked Julie about this again and she doesn't really have an idea either. [Laughs] I was always open to using whatever it might be to create the image that I was after, however that gets produced. It's better for me, for example, to find somebody who is smarter than myself and more resourceful and has more knowledge of how to do things than if I try to learn how to do it. So you go and ask the guy who is the expert, "How do I do this?" or, "Can you do this?" And then they say, "Yes and this is how you do it." So that's the technology part. I guess because I'd been doing this for a while and it wasn't a stretch for me, that might be one of the reasons. But to tell you the truth, everybody who can tell you is no longer able to talk about it.

Q: How did you get involved? Was it Bob or Billy Klüver?

Whitman: My guess is that Bob and Billy got together and decided they needed another guy.

[Laughs] They asked for volunteers and everybody else stepped back. [Laughs] Yes. Okay.

Q: Do you remember any of the projects that you were able to realize or some of the projects that were never made?

Whitman: Let me think. There were quite a few that were realized. I'm not really the one to talk about all of them, but I think the most interesting one was one in India. Somehow this very important person in India asked E.A.T. to participate in a proposal to develop instructional television for rural India. His name was Vikram [Ambalal] Sarabhai. At the time he was the head of the Physical Research Laboratory [Ahmedabad, India], the head of their space program, and probably one of the smartest guys in the world. A very important guy.

I was given to understand that he was interested in developing this programming to short-circuit what he thought would be all-India radios getting into the game. Their habit had been to hire people who had been trained in the United States. I think Vikram had the idea that you don't want a graduate of NYU [New York University] Film School or California—some U.S. institution—to come and impose an aesthetic that's not natural to the community that you want to address your material to. The idea was to invent a system of having the villages actually participate in developing a program, getting some feedback from the users. It was a complex proposal that involved getting videotapes out to the villages, back to the studio, and back out

with the version that had been edited according to what the feedback was and so on. Back and forth until you got something that was relevant to the people who needed the material. Since he was a chief of the space program, the U.S. had said they were going to loan time on a communication satellite, that's why he had charge of it. Using a satellite, he could broadcast down.

Now it turns out, we made the proposal in conjunction with his people. We didn't hear a sound for ten years. Nothing. He died shortly after the proposal. Mysteriously according to Billy. We read that they had actually done it. There was an article about it in the [*New York*] *Times*. They had actually done something like this.

Q: And you learned about that ten years later?

Whitman: Yes. I don't know when it was done. It's just that we read about it. Yes.

The other interesting thing—which I've come to understand differently in different situations—was that we went to a meeting and spent about an hour trying to generate the first paragraph of the proposal before we realized that Indian English and American English are two completely different languages. So we agreed to each submit a proposal that would be the same, but in our own languages. That was an interesting insight for me.

Q: Did you eventually read and compare the two different—

Whitman: No, no, no. When you are in a situation like that, you don't get sleep. So when it's done, it's done. I was like the oddball because the other people involved were more technically oriented or scientifically oriented. I was just some guy. You know, the artist. Whatever the hell. My bias led me into these things because I could be the guy who might accept another aesthetic or be aware of the fact that you're imposing an aesthetic on somebody. That was my role, to be that guy.

Q: So for how long—the Experiments in Art and Technology—for how long did it go on?

Whitman: It still exists as an entity and Julie is the custodian so I don't know.

None of this, by the way, has much to do with Bob. The thing in common, I guess, is these projects that are in the community, a little bit like Bob's ROCI [Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange] project. Going around the world and doing art that relates to the community where he's generating it. That's the kind of thing Bob would come up with, but it's not unlike the kind of things that E.A.T. was doing, except Bob was making art and our idea was to do projects where the end result might not be art. It might contain an aesthetic value of some kind or another, but the purpose wasn't to make art. The purpose was to do something in a community.

I think during those years we generated huge numbers of proposals, almost every single one rejected. [Laughs] One of the things you find out when you're doing proposals, particularly for government, they don't want anything that's going to leave residue. They don't want to create

something that'll have an ongoing impact. They want to have a project that when it's over, it dies. I think.

Q: Certainly the opposite of art.

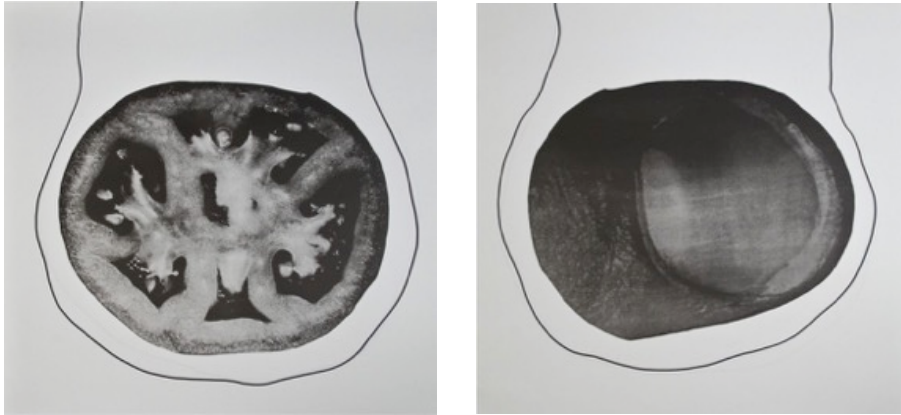
Whitman: Exactly the opposite of art.

Q: So in the early seventies you were also working with the Untitled Press in Captiva with Rauschenberg?

Whitman: Yes. That's another example of Bob's generosity, just invite somebody down there and make prints.

Q: What do you remember of working there?

Whitman: It was great because the opportunity to work is rare. For me they're rare. So to just go down there and cut yourself loose. And be the beneficiary of his generosity.



Robert Whitman
Untitled (Tomato/Fingernail), 1973 (recto and verso views)
Lithograph
37 7/8 x 37 7/8 inches (96.2 x 96.2 cm)
Published by Untitled Press, Inc., Captiva, Florida

Q: Can you talk a bit more about Bob Rauschenberg's generosity and his capacity to always involve the group of friends and people to work with?

Whitman: Well in this particular case it was his openness to anything that I was going to do. Period. But the real generosity, I think—because that's a word that applies to him in almost every way—comes to his ability to generate this enormous amount of work. Just keep doing. Not stopping. Just keep doing. Taking a rest and then just keep doing. I think that's really hard and very few people are able to do that. [Laughs]

Q: So later on—there was also the Museum of Contemporary Art, the Serralves. [Note: *Robert Rauschenberg: Travelling '70-'76*, Museu de Arte Contemporânea de Serralves, Portugal, 2007–08.]

Whitman: Well, once again, it was a fabulous show. It's probably one of the best Bob shows I've ever seen. It was totally amazing. I later discovered the only reason that they could have it is because he owned all the work. The reason he owned all the work is because he couldn't sell it. Isn't that weird? Masterpiece after masterpiece and they couldn't sell them? It's astounding. And it was a great show.

Q: What were some of the works of Bob in there?

Whitman: I can't tell you the names because I don't know them. The one with the bathtub [*Sor Aqua (Venetian)*, 1973]. The ones with the fabric in the boxes, the cardboard stuff [*Cardboards*, 1971–72], the fabrics in the boxes that are against the wall where the color comes on the wall [note: description applies to works in the *Early Egyptian* series, 1973–74]. That sort of thing. Just great.



Installation view, *Robert Rauschenberg: Travelling '70–'76*, Museu de Arte Contemporânea de Serralves, Porto, Portugal, 2007–08. Pictured: *Sor Aqua (Venetian)* (1973), front center, with *1/2 Gals. / AAPCO (Cardboard)* (1971), *Radiant White / 952 (Cardboard)* (1971), and *Baton Blanche (Cardboard)* (1971) in background. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York

I spoke to the director about it. I said, “This is spectacular,” and he said, “Well, we couldn’t have done it if Bob didn’t keep the insurance himself and didn’t impose on the shipping company to give us a cheap rate.” He listed the things that Bob did to get the show there. That was another good example.

Q: Once he moved to Captiva—well you went to visit for the project of the Untitled Press. Did you stay in touch? Were you able to communicate with him?

Whitman: Not as much as I would’ve liked. I have an idea that the people around him were kind of protective at a certain point. I don’t think Darryl was a good guy. That’s just me.

Q: In what sense, protective?

Whitman: Isolating him a little bit. I know Trisha was able to stay in touch pretty well. I’m by nature kind of a hermit too. So it’s hard for me to get out even when I am in the city.

Q: Do you have memories of being at Captiva Island and how was Bob living and working there?

Whitman: Sort of. It was great. He had his little community and it was spectacular. When I was there, Bob Petersen was also there. [Hisachika] Sachika [Takahashi] was sort of okay. He was there. There was always somebody dropping in. I think I must have gone there a couple of times,

working on the same thing. It was like, work like hell during the day and have a good time in the evening. [Laughs] Which is the best thing you can do, I think.

Q: There are many stories about Rauschenberg partying in New York and he loved dancing. Have you ever been with him in one of these occasions?

Whitman: Oh sure.

Q: Any memorable ones?

Whitman: It's one big, blurry, nice memory of all the people around during that time.

Q: Well, can you talk more about Bob's use of different kinds of materials for his artwork and how that was surprising, inventive—and if it was influential in your kind of work?

Whitman: I wish it was. But I'm a little too dense to be influenced by certain things. So it was hard. It took me a long time to understand why Bob was such a big fan of [Marcel] Duchamp. Finally I sort of got the idea.

Q: Which was?

Whitman: Anything is there. You can do any damn thing you want to. Period. Anything that comes into your head. Of course a lot of the things that you say are complete baloney. You have

to understand that. I do the same thing. But I think if there was an influence, it might be the idea of allowing irrationality to be the important part of the work and only intuition. Then later on, of course, you discover that intuition is probably the deepest kind of intellectualism you can have in a certain way, because you don't have to think about it in a conscious way.

Did you go to Bob's memorial service at the Met? There was an art scholar there who analyzed a painting of Bob's or a Combine or whatever it was. It was horrifying to think that that's what people make out of the work. You can't do that. It's like dissecting a dead body almost, when the stuff is a living thing. I like to think that Bob relied on this gift of genius intuition.

Q: We're not necessarily comparing, but I see his artwork as, again, living objects and that create an experience when someone is looking at. And it's quite similar to your work in the theatrical pieces as objects become real—

Whitman: Well, if you're lucky, you can still be amazed and be awestruck by something so stupid and simple. You can see the magic and the mystery in it. [Laughs] I'm thinking that in the piece you just saw, the stars of the teapot and the coffeepot maker and washing machine [*Swim*].

Q: So I was thinking, there are many quotes of Rauschenberg's but there is one that I particularly like. "I refuse to be in this world by myself. I want an open commitment from the rest of the people." [John Gruen, "Painter Dancing in the Dark," *Sunday Herald Tribune Magazine* (New York), January 2, 1966] Kind of describes the level of energy and commitment and also his desire to be working with others constantly. And to support the other artists and receive the same

support from them. Can we talk a little bit about Rauschenberg's relationship with other artists and his being supportive and collaborating with others?

Whitman: You just said—

Q: Well in between we were also talking about this idea of ephemeral. There was much more in the pieces from the 1960s and so there was not enough material that was recorded, but you were more interested than others in documenting the pieces.

Whitman: The performances. But if you look at what appears to be ephemeral in Bob's other work—the collage that I have has to be from the late fifties [*Opportunity #7*]. And it hasn't changed at all, that I can tell. I don't have it. Pilar has it. I gave it to her before it got valuable. So you're always amazed at how well put together these pieces are, how crafted they are. They might not look that way, but they are.



Robert Rauschenberg
Opportunity #7, 1956
Combine: oil, pencil, paper, fabric, and glue on
newsprint
10 1/4 x 13 1/4 inches (10.25 x 13.25 cm)
Private collection
Included in *Artists of the New York School:
Second Generation*, Jewish Museum, New
York, 1957

The other curious thing, speaking of that—and I don't know quite how to approach this myself. I think he was always fairly solid in not wanting any of the pieces to be performed again. Now I think that that's a minor crime in a way. I think *Pelican* for example and *Open Score*—two pieces that would be fairly easy to produce and fairly easy to produce perfectly and it would be wonderful to do them. I hope that someday in the future people will forget that he was against doing this stuff again and do those pieces.

Q: Can you talk a bit more about Rauschenberg the activist?

Whitman: Well he did produce a bunch of posters for different causes. He testified at hearings. He just tried to pursue things that he felt involved in, trying to organize. I think he was very much in the forefront of the idea of artists getting a certain percentage of the profits of a work that had been purchased at a low price and sold later by the collector at a high price as it got value over the years. Stuff like trying to organize that sort of thing.

Now I can't tell you why I ended up in a lot of these situations with Bob. But I remember when we were in Washington, going to see this fancy labor lawyer with the idea of figuring out how to organize artists along the union lines. Something like that. He kind of laughed and said, "You guys have one problem. That if you stop working, nobody gives a shit." [Laughs] So that was the end of the meeting right then and there. I think we finished our coffees and just said, "Okay." We got put in our place.

You mentioned ROCI—somebody will talk about the ROCI project. I can't really think of—just the posters and the kind of general availability to do that thing. I know he had other interests. I think there's a college somewhere that he did some supporting of. I don't know which one.

Q: I don't know.

Whitman: Somebody will know. You'll get a better picture. I'm quite sure that some of his activism might have been subtler. I think he took an interest in preservation in terms of Captiva. When I suddenly realized the extent of the property that he had—I think part of the reason for acquiring that much property was to stop development. Stuff like that.

Q: You never considered going for residency there?

Whitman: They asked me. I said it would make me too sad.

I had the same feeling when I went to his house a few years ago to talk to the people in charge of the foundation. I just felt awful being in the building.

Q: And experiencing his absence and—

Whitman: Yes. It made me cry. [Laughs]

Q: I understand that. So do you remember his sense of humor? His laughter? Everybody talks about—

Whitman: Sure. Yes. Yes. He just loved to have a good time. There are two kinds of good times: having a good time and working. And he was lucky enough to enjoy them both in the biggest way you could imagine.

I'm sure he had the ability to get mad but I only saw it once. I don't think I want to talk about that. It wasn't serious in a certain way.

Q: But you mentioned it and now we are curious.

Whitman: Oh it's just that one of the printers he had working there was working on my stuff and didn't like it. So Bob said, "How much can I pay you to not work?" And he got another printer. So that's the extent of it. That's hardly getting mad.

Q: That seems a very elegant way of getting mad.

Whitman: Yes, very elegant. [Laughs]

I don't know. There are certain things that are kind of funny that I remember. His instant take on certain things. Not one thing. Billy fell down in Stockholm and hurt himself kind of badly. Fell on his face. Bob's comment was, "Billy, you need a new face!" [Laughs] So it was funny takes.

When I visited Captiva the first time, they picked me up at the airport. I think he had a Volkswagen bus or a little Volkswagen there. The door slides open and he hands me a beer. And I said, “You guys are drinking in the car?” “Mr. Scandalized Prude.” Bob’s comment was, “This is the South, son.”

Q: Was it early in the morning?

Whitman: Midday. Midday. I think, anyway. It doesn’t take long to get there.

Specific details are hard to remember— You have to ask questions.

Q: Well, we were mentioning before, in between, about the event in Stockholm. You said you had memories about what happened. We just heard about Billy falling.

Whitman: Oh. Well that was one of those things. It’s a unique event. It was part of the end of the *New York Collection for Stockholm*, which came about through a series of peculiarities. Odd things. The nice thing about a lot of the projects you get involved in is, if you get rejected, you get mad and you do it anyway.

In this case I had come across something referring to treasury funds given to foundations or if you gave the government a certain amount of property or money or something, then the government would give it back to you somehow. Or double it—somehow if you gave the

government a whole bunch of forest somewhere that was worth something, then they'd give you the money. Something like that.

We didn't have anything to give. E.A.T., didn't have anything to give. But what we did have was the ability to get art or talk to artists. And so we devised a project where we'd ask the dealers if they would allow an artist to contribute a work and forego their commission. We'd establish a collection. We would get the value of the collection from the government, give the artists the money for their work, and use the rest for our fundraising projects. We got rejected by the National Endowment for the Arts. In those days museums and universities didn't have huge collections the way they do now. So some museum because of some guy in Washington rejecting this project didn't end up with millions of dollars worth of art from most of the best artists of the seventies. The collection was chosen and picked by Pontus Hultén, who was the most supportive curator and most innovative curator of modern American art. He was one of the founders of the Moderna Museet. So you had a collection that had, besides Bob who probably donated his work, George Segal, Jimmy Dine, Claes. Anybody you could think of almost was in this collection picked by Pontus.

So then since it had nowhere to go—thanks to Bob again the idea arose that all the artists would agree to do a one-hit silkscreen that would be sold to generate the money to buy the collection. So we generated this collection of silkscreens. It was a wonderful collection. We got some money from the Swedish government. I suspect that Bob contributed some money or bought a bunch of these silkscreens. And the collection ended up going to Stockholm.

Now the trip over to the opening started at the Swedish embassy. Most of the artists, friends, a critic or so, other people had a reserved section of the plane. An open bar. And movies that were picked by Billy, I think, that were relevant to the trip. I like to think of this flight as being fueled by alcohol rather than jet fuel. When we got to Copenhagen, the Swedish press got on the plane and the recording guys and the TV guys and they took us up to the first-class lounge that was in that bulge on the 747s in those days. They were going to interview us on the way over to Stockholm from Copenhagen. Well not one of the people involved could speak English at that point, much less any other language. So that was the trip over.

I don't know why Billy decided that he was going to send Larry Rivers and myself on ahead to meet the press at the museum, but he did. Now luckily for me being as inarticulate as I could possibly be when confronted with that kind of situation, Larry Rivers as you know is the exact opposite. Amazingly verbose, even though a lot of times what he was saying, you couldn't understand. It was just stuff, but what was coming out sounded good. It was just fine. So that was the beginning of this amazing event that included several parties and a reception at, I guess, the foreign, whatever their state department was.

Palme was a speaker there. And there were two American speakers. One was Nancy Hanks who was the boss at the NEA at the time. She was an art person, a serious art person. Had been a Rockefeller person. Among the things that she said was, "And we had nothing to do with this." Well they did. They rejected our proposal, but they were not going to talk about it. The other one was John Brademas, who was a congressman sympathetic to the arts. He also said, "And we had nothing to do with this."

However, Julie has researched it somewhat and found that at the height of the Vietnam War, there was a lot of resentment in Sweden among some of the artists. “Why were they doing this American art stuff when the Americans are the evil-doers in the world?” Well luckily, we didn’t understand that, the artists. And also they didn’t know that most all the artists were just as vehemently against the war as they were. So that was a thing. But I think that there was an undercurrent later that this collection was being used to calm some of the waters that were being roiled by these animosities. I don’t know about any of this by my own knowledge.

Q: You mean the political animosity?

Whitman: Yes. And between the different communities. But I don’t know about this.

Anyway, it was one of those amazing things that comes about. Again if you can get people to cooperate on these big projects and get people to be generous—you can’t imagine anything more fun and better. I always wonder where that spirit is now. Maybe because I’m old and living out in the boondocks, I don’t see it. But I’m waiting. So.

Q: And what was the audience? Was the audience different, the visitors of the museum, the interaction with the people coming to see the artwork? Was it different than in New York and—

Whitman: I don’t really know. I have spent a lot of time—a relative amount of time for me—in Stockholm. And in those days, you couldn’t go into that museum without a modest but terrific

restaurant—and you couldn't go in there, hardly, without seeing somebody you knew. It was almost like the museum restaurant would be a hangout. Stockholm's a relatively small, easy-to-get-around city. So people could just walk over there from anywhere pretty much. One of the things that's very appealing about a city like that is, they take their intellectual life very, very seriously. [Laughs] If there's an intellectual dispute—in those days, I don't know about now—it would likely end up on the front pages of the newspaper, if you have a squabble among the bright spots. Which I think is terrific.

Q: And that was not the case in the *New York Times* for example?

Whitman: Can you imagine a couple of artists having a fight and it making the front pages of the *Times*? I don't think so. It wouldn't even make the back page or wouldn't even make the art section or the Arts & Leisure section. Oh you never hear any dispute. Yes, you do. On issues, you hear disputes. But not the same kind of thing. Not the abstract art arguments.

Q: Do you remember the last time that you saw Bob Rauschenberg?

Whitman: No.

Q: And the last show that you—

Whitman: Oh, yes. Probably the last thing was in Porto, at that show— Yes. Everybody was there of his crew.

Q: Did you have a correspondence with Bob?

Whitman: You mean at that time?

Q: Yes.

Whitman: Not really. Because he—just talk, talk, talk. “Beautiful show,” and, “This is terrific.” It’s like he was too surrounded. In a way it was kind of good that he was because his nurse was very protective. She seemed to have been a terrific person. And, of course, Darryl was always in the way also.

Q: One last thought about—

Whitman: I think if you add it all together, you get the thoughts.

Q: Okay.

Whitman: Good. I hope so.

Q: This may be a good time to end.

Whitman: Good.

[END OF INTERVIEW]