



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Transcript of interview with Robert E. Smith

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Transcript

Preface

Tape-recorded Conversation with Robert E. Smith

by Phone between Kansas City and Columbia, Missouri

September 23, 1985

Willem Volkersz, Interviewer

Editor's Note:

This transcript is from a series of recordings made by Willem Volkersz over a number of years. They are not formal interviews, but rather records of conversations, often taped during photo-taking tours of the artist's studios or home collections.

The naive/visionary artists in these interviews have unique verbal mannerisms, many of which are difficult or impossible to transcribe accurately into written form. Thus, for grasping certain nuances of speech, researchers will find it advantageous to listen to the original tapes.

Our intent in transcribing these interviews was nonetheless to translate as accurately as possible the spoken word into a comprehensible written form, making changes to clarify but not to interpret. Thus the speaker's grammar is unedited. For example, "them" for "those," "themselves," and "gotta" were all transcribed as heard. On the other hand, certain changes were made for clarity: "cause," was transcribed as "because," "fore" as "before," "yo" as "your," etc.

Other editorial notations are as follows: Bracketed words are of two types. Those with "[—Ed.]" or "[—WV]" are inserted by the transcriber, editor, or Volkersz. Other bracketed words indicate uncertainty: Two or more words or phrases indicate possible alternatives; "[unintelligible]" and "____" indicate words that are garbled or incomprehensible on the tape, the former being a much longer phrase than the latter; "[noise]" is self-explanatory.

The original format for this document is Microsoft Word 365 version 1908. Some formatting has been lost in web presentation.

Interview

RS: Robert E. Smith

WV: Willem Volkersz

[There are two recordings of this interview in the Archives collection, one complete the other incomplete. The incomplete version is on the reverse side of the tape containing an interview with Dow Pugh. The complete version, from which the final transcript was made, is on **Tape S3, a copy of Volkersz's Tape S3-A**.—Ed.]

RS: [Did you get the—Ed.] cartoon books yet?

WV: Yes! They're really quite wonderful. I am going to read the story tonight; I haven't had a chance yet to read the story.

RS: Yeah, the story in the back of the book is very good, [besides]. . . .

WV: Uh huh.

RS: And I tell you, sometimes what I do, I try to graphic draw some of them, you know.

WV: Um hmm.

RS: And then some of them I don't, because there's so much work. There's seventeen of them.

WV: Now, do you. . . .

RS: And then I draw and color some. And that way you've got a variety. Because some of them look pretty good when they're plain printed [photocopied—WV], you know.

WV: They do.

RS: They were plain printed from my original colored cartoons, you know.

WV: Now, have you done any where you have done original drawings for each one, original cartoons for each one?

RS: Well, I sent some to the, I sent some colored originals, and then some copies, to the Missouri Review in Columbia, and they're all booked on graphic cartoons—period—for the next few months, much less the colored.

WV: Uh huh.

RS: But they enjoyed my cartoons. And Willem, I got a copyright on them.

WV: That's wonderful. Did you get it back from Washington?

RS: Yeah, and you know who else I sent one to last week, and I think I'm going to hear from her. I didn't get a chance to see her two years ago, and she was one of my former art teachers at SMS [Southwest Missouri State—WV] College in Springfield.

WV: Uh huh, what's her name?

RS: And she's been trying to help artists in the area for a couple of years, for more uncommon, better things, and maybe New York. Jackie Warren. And I think I'll probably hear from her. And I've sold a, I sold some down on my trip to Springfield two weeks ago, besides here. I've made \$150 off of them things already.

WV: That's wonderful. It's a really good idea.

RS: Oh, it isn't bad.

WV: It's a great idea.

RS: I'm not doing business with a big publisher like I want to, but I did send a sample book to Publisher's Weekly in New York last, just before last weekend, and I'm hoping they might give me a review. I don't know. I'll have to wait on them and see. But I'm trying to get writers' opinions on them, you know.

WV: What gave you the idea to do this in the first place?

RS: Oh, I just got an idea. I'd been wanting to do cartoons for a number of years and do it, and then I just got to thinking, instead of making a whole thing, I thought, "Shoot, if I just get seventeen or twenty, why that's quite a few, and then I'll like kind of add a story with it, to make it, you know. . . . Because what gave me the idea. . . . Off and on I've wanted to write something, Bill, but I've had ups and down promises from editors, and I just decided to try to go on it myself (chuckles), you know, and see what I could do one of these days.

WV: Uh huh.

RS: 'Cause I feel like I have something to contribute, and I just don't care to waste my time on rejections and quitting again, and, you know, and all that stuff, and not getting around.

WV: What do you mean by your feeling that you have something to contribute? What do you mean? Contribute to what?

RS: Well, I feel that some people like it. I mean, I'm not the only one that has done something like that. And I mean, if I feel that I can write, and I've got a gift for it, wouldn't you do it too? I mean, that's not nonsense, feeling you have something to contribute.

WV: No.

RS: You're doing it. In other words, why wait until you die, then it's too late.

WV: (laughs)

RS: Huh?

WV: No. Are all the ones you've done so far the same? The same story?

RS: What?

WV: Are all the ones you've done so far the same story?

RS: Oh, I've done other stories before one time, that I haven't saved them, but I had this around for a couple of years, and I decided to finish it and. . . .

WV: I meant this cartoon book you've done now. They're all the same, aren't they? They're all the same story, right?

RS: Well, no. Each cartoon's different.

WV: No, I meant the story.

RS: What story?

WV: Well, the story that goes with the cartoon book. Is it the same story in each one of the books you've done?

RS: Oh, no, it's not the same story. It's different one. No.

WV: Well, the three. . . .

RS: Oh, oh, in all the books, yeah, yeah. That's the same. Yeah.

WV: Are you planning to do some different ones? I think it's a really good idea.

RS: I may sometime next year. I'm going to start a book of poems and illustrate some poems in art, and I might put a story in with that one too, yes. [Have] an idea for one, you know. Because sometimes I have been told by writers' critics that I'm half gifted for soap opera, but I'm not worrying about it. (laughs)

WV: Uh huh. . . .

RS: Send 'em in sometime to _____, and I got a halfway part, and then I don't. And I've given up, but I. . . . When I got a halfway of a good story sometimes, I've saved some instead of throwing them away, and I'm glad I do save some of my stuff, really, because it comes in handy.

WV: How did you think of this particular story?

RS: Well, it's because of things that I've wanted to do as an artist. And I seen myself, and I just thought it would make an interesting plot for a story, and I wanted to put in a little excitement and a little humor. And I don't know, I just. . . . (chuckles) It's not. . . .

WV: Are any of the events you write about ever about your own life?

RS: Oh, to a certain extent, yeah. In this story it's about things that I'd like to go to and travel, more travel, and see more things in the United States, or at least a foreign country again, if I could pick up more and get some money from my painting where I could afford to travel.

WV: Um hmm.

RS: And it's because sometimes I want to so bad and can't that I finally decided to put it in the writing that forget about my mood and not hold my feelings back.

WV: Um hmm. I've always been curious about why you. . . .

RS: Sometimes I'll put it in a painting and sometimes I'll put it in a story, in writing.

WV: Yeah, it's interesting that you combine both the stories and the pictures, you know. Do you just feel that you use words better to communicate ideas, or what? Why do you use. . . .

RS: I guess. I [do]. Yeah.

WV: Um hmm. Well, I think it's a real neat book and I think you. . . .

RS: Well, it isn't one of the worst ideas. I got to thinking, and then I did it, and then I got to thinking about it, and I want to, and I thought, "Well, I've thought of worse," and I thought, "To me, this thing's reasonable." Now,

there'll probably be some yes and no's, but, I mean, there have been some people that like this thing this year.

WV: Well, I think I'll try to sell those for you. I'd certainly want to buy one myself, so I'll send you a check for this one.

RS: I can't promise you when I can get up a whole bunch, but I'll try to send you some when I can, because it takes me a couple of days to work on one of these.

WV: Well, I'm going to have a sale again this Christmas, so it'd be great to have some then.

RS: Yeah, I'd be glad to do that much—and a painting too. You know what I might do for a painting for you, William, if you don't mind?

WV: What's that?

RS: I got some literature from places in Washington [state—Ed.] I'd like to do a painting on and send you.

WV: Like what?

RS: Well, one is a, one place, it's a peninsula [probably Olympic Peninsula—WV]. Another place is the Kingdome [sports arena—Ed.] in Seattle.

WV: Uh huh.

RS: And another place, and I'd like to send you like one nice painting, and then the cartoon books, too.

WV: That would be great.

RS: That wouldn't be the worst thing I've done, no.

WV: No, you're doing pretty well.

RS: What are you going to do with those other paintings of mine, do you think?

WV: Well, I'm putting together an exhibition right now, and some of them will travel in that exhibition. And some of them are just in my own collection, you know.

RS: Now what I wanted to mention to you, if you sell those books, you can take out [on a thing], just like the Columbia Art League does. Is that okay by you?

WV: Do what?

RS: You can take out a little bit for you-know-what-I-mean.

WV: Okay, okay.

RS: They take out 20 percent commission.

WV: Okay.

RS: And I've been selling 'em for \$15 dollars apiece around here.

WV: Um hmm. Now they, do they take \$15, and then take the 20 percent out of that, or do they charge more than \$15 for them?

RS: No, they take the \$15 dollars, and they take 20 percent of that.

WV: Out of. . . . Okay. That'd be great.

RS: Yeah.

WV: Well, I'll send you a check for at least one pretty soon, because I sure wanta keep one.

RS: Oh, sure, yeah. And there's a few others that I've got to send to, too, that'd be interested, and I'm gonna have to, you know. . . .

WV: Okay. Yeah, I'm gonna. . . . Yeah, I've shown them to Craig, too, and he really likes them, and I think he. . . .

RS: Who?

WV: Craig Bruns.

RS: Oh, yeah.

WV: And I think he'll buy one too, probably.

RS: And listen, by the way, I may be taking instructions from a cartoonist later too this year.

WV: Um hmm.

RS: And send him a little money to pay on it. He saw some sample of my cartoons, and of course he thinks in some ways I'm a painter, but he also thinks I've got some talent otherwise, and he's, if I want to enroll he can help me.

WV: Where's he at?

RS: Oh, he's from Florida. He charges \$75 dollars for the whole course, you know what I mean.

WV: Um hmm. Correspondence course.

RS: But that's cheaper than he was gonna charge. I was, I, I was interested, and then I wrote him a letter on his original price, and I told him my only source of income and what I was doing—I wasn't trying to complain about it, but I wasn't gonna hide it—told him. And [when—Ed.] he found out my circumstances, he said, "Well," he says, "I'll settle for this much then, instead of that." In other words, he assumed that I'm not workin' all the time, and on that low income, and, you know, I don't. . . .

WV: Um hmm.

RS: But he'd, if I wanna enroll, he'd like to kinda help me to some new things, and. . . .

WV: How did you find out about this guy?

RS: Oh, it was in a ad in Writer's magazine. . . .

WV: Um hmm.

RS: Yeah.

WV: That'd be neat. Well, I'm real glad you called, and I'll. . . .

RS: Yeah, and if you know anyone in Kansas City who wants to give a writeup on me, why tell 'em that I'd be glad for 'em to do it.

WV: Okay.

RS: I tell you what I would like to do—it may take me a couple of years, Willem—but I'd like to sell one of my original things on one of my books. I'd like to work in with a publisher, but I don't have the full time to, I don't have the money to spend for the whole thing. It'd have to be on a contract where each of us shares somewhat in the thing. . . .

WV: Sure.

RS: . . . and we get so much, you know what I mean. And they're hard to find, but if I could find a publisher like that, well, I'd be glad to sign the contract.

WV: Um hmm. Well, that's a neat idea. I think if I ever come across somebody I'll let you know.

RS: 'Cause that isn't the first time it's been done like that.

WV: Um hmm.

RS: Yeah.

WV: Well, thanks for calling. . . .

RS: Yeah.

WV: . . . and if you get a painting for me or some more books, send 'em along, because I sure like the stuff.

RS: Oh yeah, I will.

WV: Okay.

RS: As I said, there'll be some, I'll have four or five [cartoon books— WV], that I think it does look nice if they're colored, you know, and then I might [just] plain graphic draw four, but they won't be colored, and then the rest of them graphic print, but they'll look pretty good.

WV: One thing you might think about sometimes is just, you know, the individual pages are pretty nice little drawings by themselves. So you might think sometime about doing just some individual drawings, almost like the poster design you did for me, and color them in, and I'll frame them up, and I'll sell them as drawings.

RS: You mean my cartoons?

WV: Yeah, just like what you call an individual cartoon. Just do some real nice ones in color on paper, maybe a little bigger paper than that, and I'll frame. . . .

RS: Oh! Yeah, well, I did, I've done some of them on posterboard.

WV: Um hmm.

RS: But I tell you, if I do it as an individual, too, now it may not. . . . Well, it does take a little while to do it right. I. . . .

WV: We could charge. . . .

RS: I might wanta charge, well, thirty dollars for each one of those.

WV: We might be able to get that, and I think. . . . You see, the nice thing would be some people, after I've framed 'em up, some people would feel that they're getting an individual work of art, but for people who couldn't afford like a whole painting maybe, see?

RS: Oh yeah, well, I might, I might send them along later with the thing for your Christmas sale, you don't have to. . . .

WV: Why don't you do that. I think that'd be a great idea, and I'll send you the money.

RS: Yeah, but I'm still gonna send those cartoon books, too.

WV: Right. Please do.

RS: Well, no. . . . [correcting himself: —Ed.] Yes, because those are for the people that don't feel like they could afford a painting. . . .

WV: That's right.

RS: . . . but don't mind buyin' a book, and. . . .

WV: That's right.

RS: There's a lot of difference between \$15 dollars and \$30, and \$50 and \$75, you know.

WV: Yeah, that's right. Exactly.

RS: Okay.

WV: Terrific. Nice talkin' to you!

RS: Yeah, bye.

WV: Bye, Robert.

[End of interview]