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Oral history interview with Robert
Rauschenberg, 1965 Dec. 21

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Robert Rauschenberg on December 21, 1965. The interview took place in New York, NY, and was conducted by Dorothy Seckler for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

This audio recording was transcribed in the mid-1960s. In 2019, the full recording was reconciled with the transcript; it replaces a version which was published to this website. The transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

DOROTHY SECKLER: This is Dorothy Seckler interviewing Robert Rauschenberg in New York, on December 21, 1965. Robert, I have just been explaining to you why I am interested in taking the beginnings of this interview back to around the period of 1950. Since critics so often, discuss your work in terms of its being, as they suggest, a bridge between abstract expressionism and Pop art, that it might be interesting to see how very different it is, and how distinct your attitudes and ideas were from either, and from the artists who were, figuring at either end of that bridge. Around 1950, well perhaps we ought to come into the early fifties, you were in Algeria or in Casablanca around, just before 1953, and—perhaps that would be a good point at which to pick it up. You had come back to New York and were having rather a struggle at that time I believe. As I recall, you were supposed to have been living on Fulton Street and living on 15 cents a day. Is that right? [They laugh.]

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: Some days it was 25.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, what did you do with all that money you made?—[laughs]—in Casablanca? Well, one of the things that struck me about that period of struggle some of the people who have written about your work have said that the reason that you were able to take a position of accepting your environment, as opposed to the Abstract Expressionists, who were rebellious against theirs, was because they, or they said this about Pop artists in general, is because the artist was much better treated in this period than, they—then he had been in a period when the Abstract Expressionists were coming along. Now here you still were, at the minute, right? Struggling after having had some very notable shows at Betty Parsons and, I believe, at Egan.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: That time and still this period it was a struggle, and so apparently your attitudes were not being too much influenced by affluence.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: I think one of the main differences in my attitude and the—some of the Abstract Expressionists anyway, was based on my—natural point of view is never cultivated, that—the creative process somehow has to include adjusting, realistically, to the situation. I do not think any one person, whether artist or not, has been given permission by anyone, to put the responsibility of the way things are on anyone else. And—I just do not find it a very interesting motivation to work with the idea that—things are difficult, or that I will not accept the fact that things are easy. I think with affluence, which I was very—which was very foreign to me during the period we're talking about, there are new complications. If you do not have trouble paying the rent, you have trouble doing something else; that one needs just a certain amount of trouble. Some people need more trouble to operate and some people need less. And—I was—I felt very rich and being able to pick up, Con Edison lumber from the streets and—whatever the day would lay out for me to use, in my work. In fact, so much so, that sometimes it embarrasses me that I live in New York City as though I am a guest here. [Laughs.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: So that you did not feel like a hero, being an artist and working under, well having— [Inaudible.]

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: Oh, I think that is much too easy way to be a hero. [Laughs.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, perhaps the word hero slips in there, because at this time the—there was a kind of attitude among a number of the artists of taking a rather heroic stance. Perhaps, this was really something that the critics opposed, almost more than the artists, but there was a feeling of the artist being—having a sort of role outside of society, let us say, and sometimes it could become almost a Messianic role in among—with certain artists. This was not, of course, general. There were, that was part of the attitude, that was—that emerged from that thing. As you were sitting in club meetings, which I understand you walked during those years—

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: And—or to the Cedar Bar, listening to discussions of the, that more rebellious attitude, that feeling that the artist has a special role to oppose the demands and the ways of a commercial, materialistic society. Can you remember any particular feelings that you had? Or ways in which you expressed them to yourself or to anybody else at that time?

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: Well, I do not know how accurately I remember. It was certainly a lot more complicated and—I felt more involved than probably my generalization about it now. But I had—I was both in awe of the painters; I mean I was new in New York, I thought—the painting that was going on here was just unbelievable. I still think that Bill de Kooning is one of the greatest painters in the world. And I liked Jack Tworokov, himself and his work,—and Franz Kline. But I found a lot of the artists at the Cedar Bar were difficult for me to talk to,—It almost seemed as though there were so many more of them sharing some common idea than there was of me, and at that time—the people who gave me encouragement in my work, it was not so much the painters, even my contemporaries, but it was a group of musicians that were working: Morton Feldman, and John Cage, and Earl Brown, and the dancers that were around this group. And I felt very natural with them.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Was there not something—[Inaudible.]

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: There was something about the abstract self-assertion—of Abstract Expressionism that personally, always put me off because at that time—my focus was as much in the opposite direction as it could be. I was busy trying to find ways where—the imagery and the material—and the meaning—of the painting would not be not an illustration of my will but—more like an unbiased documentation of my observations, and by observations I mean that literally of my excitement—the way being in the city you have a—on one lot, a forty story building and right next to it you have a little wooden shack, and one is a parking lot and one is this maze of offices and closets and windows where everything is so crowded. And I remember—I was talking to someone about this one time, and they said yes well, you know, parking lots are the most valuable real estate in New York City because there is absolutely no overhead. And I thought this is so absurd, all these officious looking buildings and actually, the best business would be not to have a building at all. I am getting a little off the subject now.

DOROTHY SECKLER: No, I think that is fascinating, Bob. You know why—[Inaudible.]

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: It was this, just constant, irrational juxtaposition of things that I think one only finds in the city.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, and you have not seen—[Inaudible.]

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: One doesn't find that in the country.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: I had traveled quite a lot in Europe just previously, and I did not find it there either. There is a kind of an architectural harmony. There is—whether it is chauvinism, or patriotism anyway, there is something that tended to even unite the people. And so everything abroad that I came in contact with was so much more coherent or cohesive—[Cross talk].

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: —than I found New York. And I think that even today, New York still has more of this unexpected quality than—than any place else, around every corner.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. Are there particular sections of the city that appeal to you more than others?

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: It is something quite extraordinary. Well, I like way downtown—near the Battery. I lived down there at this time and—for, I guess, the following—well I have been in this—this is when I moved uptown and I have been here for four years and this is 1965.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And this is 809 Broadway, just for the record. [Laughs.]

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: And this is as far uptown as I have lived—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: Except for one period in my life when—my wife was carrying my son—and under the insistence of my mother in law—we got a ground floor apartment and—and lived sensibly—[laughs]—for about a year or a year and a half.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That—[Inaudible.]

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: But I like that area down there because maybe there it is even more emphasized, the contrast, it is more dramatic. On one side of town you have the largest pet store in New York, with all kinds of wonderful animals. At that time, they had the Washington Market; that was the only one in the city—where you could get all kinds of fresh vegetables and meat. It was like a farmer's market and imported cheeses. Then, right within the same block they had the wholesale plant places. The Flower District is up around 26th Street right around there, but this was a different kind of area. And in the next block they had surplus hardware stores galore.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, I remember that section.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: And electronic equipment. And then across town, you had the Fulton Fish Market, and they were separated only by big business. And during the day, the streets would be so filled with people that it looked like an ant hill or something that had just been kicked over. And then bam at six o'clock you could hear footsteps three blocks away. And the buildings were the tallest there. And—I always like being close to water if I have the choice. And if the roasting of coffee was not too strong, that was not putting your eyes out, well you could always smell the fish market. [Laughs.] I think that is a very rich part of town.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: But I do not find the rest of the city lacking in this quality that I am talking about. Every time I have moved, my work has changed radically. And I think that if it did not change radically naturally, well then I would do something about it and I would force it to change. In this place the light is so different you cannot tell so much because it is a gray day; but sometimes the light is so white in here, it is not to be believed, because of these skylights. And that is a very different kind of light from other studios that I have been in where the ceilings were not as high, but maybe the windows were bigger, and so there you would get the light as it reflected, as it bounced off the floor and it would always be warmed up. And all these things I think are the—well, they certainly, I would say, are the job of an artist—to move with these things as though they are additional qualities rather than an attitude about painting which makes one move into a place and make a—force on it a particular way of—working atmosphere that they remember as being the one that they like.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: And I think that carries through I think that attitude also makes a different kind of painting. And whereas my work was never a, I mean, it was never a protest of what was going on, it was only the expression of my own involvement,—it always had the possibility of being some other way. But if it were, I guess I would have to be someone else. [Laughs.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, this is one of the things that occurs to me to go back to, this is all so fascinating, the feelings you had about the city. And at that time, I can recall, that I was told that Franz Kline when he took a place had the window nailed up, I mean something covering the window and nailed shut. [Laughs.] So that, I am very fond of Franz Kline and his work, but it does illustrate a kind of different attitude toward a way of responding to what is around you, yours, as contrasted to some of the feelings of people at that time. Of course, in other ways, Franz, I can remember maybe it may have had some of—that you might have easily shared a sympathy. I can remember the talk he gave at the Museum of Modern Art in which shredded wheat played a very important—do you—[laughs]—remember that talk?

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: No. [Laughs.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Everyone else was—it was on Abstract Expressionism, and all the critics, Aline Saarinen, and I do not remember who else, had all spoken very intellectually; and Franz got up and just went on for, oh, a long, long time with different things, about getting up, and shredded wheat—and different, you know, right in close to the experience—[laughs]—of the moment.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: He was beautiful with his—some pet words like that; like Nanook of the North was one of them that he played with his image. And also his idea about—somehow London was the answer to all the good ideas in taste. And Princess Margaret was his idea about when a girl was really beautiful, "like Princess Margaret." And I doubt if he really had any, I mean it was just a feeling he had, all an abstraction. I do not think he wanted everybody to look English or anything, but it was a style.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I can remember one time when I was in the Cedar Bar and he came up and I was wearing a suit that had rather nice tailoring and he said, "Ah, that looks like a suit with English tailoring. Was that not made in London?"

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: Exactly. [Laughs.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: It was not, as a matter of fact. But it was so surprising to me because, you know, from everything I knew about Franz and his way of life, elegance of that kind was not something that I would have expected him to be concerned with.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: And he was not.

DOROTHY SECKLER: No, I am sure he was not.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: It was just one of his fantasies.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. It was a very interesting fantasy. You are quite right. Speaking of—using the word elegance reminds me of something else that I wanted to ask you about at this time, and I think it can easily be cleared up. As I recall reading Mr. Tompkins' very interesting article in *The New Yorker* about how you began collecting waste materials from where you were living, as you said, the Con Edison wood and so on. It was sort of an implication that the reason the materials were inelegant or every day, ordinary things, was because you were poor and those were the things that were around. Well, there might have been an implication that if you had been living in a posh environment then you might have included, let us say, gold chandeliers—[laughs]—and so on. Then I later came across the reminder that you had made a kind of collage with gold leaf and one very similar in toilet paper.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: Right.

DOROTHY SECKLER: So it made an interesting comment on each other.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: That was earlier... it was right after the all black and all white pictures. And there had been a lot of critics who shared the idea with a lot of the public that they couldn't see black as color or as pigment, but they immediately moved into associations and the associations were always of destroyed newspapers, of burned newspapers,—and that began to bother me. Because I think that I am never sure of what the impulse is psychologically. I do not mess around with my subconscious. I mean I try to keep wide awake when I paint. [Laughs.] And if I see in the superficial, subconscious relationships that I am familiar with, clichés of association—I change the picture. But I never have—I always have a good reason for taking something out, but I never have one for putting something in. And I do not want to—because that means that the picture is being painted predigested. And I think a painting has such a limited life anyway. Very quickly a painting is—turned into a facsimile of itself, when—one becomes so familiar with it, that one recognizes it without looking at it. And I think that is just a natural phenomenon. It maybe I think it is even an important one. I do not think that we have the strength, to over a period of years, to constantly being—to seeing things always as though we had not ever looked at them before to see them new. I know that there may be someone that you are very close to and you see them every day. If they take a two weeks' trip, or you take a two weeks' trip, it is only for about the first 15 minutes when you are back together that you are noticing how they have changed from the idea that you have of the way they look. And then one is readjusted.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: And I think the same thing happens to painting. So if you do work with known quantities—making puns or dealing symbolically with your materials, I think you are shortening the life of the work even before it is had a chance to be exposed. I mean, it has not had a life of its own. It is already leading someone else's life.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That is a fascinating point.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: And when I did the—so that I moved—well, as I said, I was not sure that I really might have been using materials because they were old or liked black with newspaper because of the burned-out look. But I certainly did not like the idea of tortured, tarred, because I do not think that you torture newspaper. A newspaper that you are not reading can be used for anything; and the same people did not think it was immoral to wrap their garbage in newspaper. And I think, you know, that that is a very positive use for a newspaper. [They laugh.] So I did a painting, or a couple of each, one in toilet paper collage, trying to duplicate it in gold leaf. And I looked at—I studied both paintings very carefully and I saw no advantage to either. I mean, whatever one was saying the other seemed to be able to be just as articulate. So that I knew then that it was someone else's problem, not mine. [Laughs.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

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ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: We have an auxiliary in case your tape machine isn't working, which is your memories.

DOROTHY SECKLER: My memory is a very poor auxiliary. [Laughs.] What you are saying is fascinating and I would be desolate indeed if the machine did not work. Just to keep in the general period; we've jumped about a bit which I am happy about; back before when you mentioned the black paintings and, of course, the black paintings belong to the same period as the white paintings.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: You know, excuse me, you know you that business you were talking about the difference in my work during those years and the work that was going on?

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: There was a whole language that I could never make function for myself in relationship—

DOROTHY SECKLER: You know, I would like to hear about that. If you can recall specifically—

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: —to painting and that was attitudes like tortured, struggle, pain. And I never could—I do not know whether it was from my Albers training or what, but my own personal hang up, but I never could see those qualities in paint.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You had, of course, seen them in life.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: I could see them in life.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You had been [Inaudible.]

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: And I could see them in representational art that illustrates that fact pictorially. But I never saw in the materials this conflict and I knew that it had to be in the attitude of the painter and a kind of interpretation of the attitude that existed separately, so that—if in the future one were to lose the idea that those paintings were made from—that it would be very possible to have a completely different attitude about the painting.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Well of course, someone has a theory; we were speaking before about the life of a painting and the instability of perception in regard to painting. I think it was Duchamp who had a theory that it is true that the painting has a lifetime; I think he said 15 years, I am not sure do you remember that?

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Then apparently, however, it comes back into perception for another generation or for posterity possibly on some other basis. And this is what you are saying now that if, you know, 200 years from now when black may have all sorts of other associations. [Laughs.]

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: Right.

DOROTHY SECKLER: This anguish that was being put in, perhaps, was being put in by some Abstract Expressionist might not be perceived, but the painting may have a different life. In other words, they may bring some other qualities.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: I think necessarily it will. I am sure we do not read old paintings the way they were intended.

DOROTHY SECKLER: No.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: I think it is what may be part of my naïveté but I think that—painting being as extreme as it is now, and it was only extreme in the past by degrees, at this moment in New York you have old masters, new masters, no masters;—[laughs]—people painting in all kinds of styles and they all celebrate a certain amount of recognition and tolerance and communication between each other.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative]. If I may say so, you had something to do with it, because at the time when you came on the scene, this was not so.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: It did not feel like it; I know that. I felt very isolated, but I felt reasonably isolated. I mean I had—I thought there was a good basis for the separation because the points of view were very different.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Was there—did you feel at the same time that the position of some of the Abstract Expressionists had also opened the way for you? In one sense I am thinking of this, that at least one of the main results of their point of view had been to restore to the painting a sense of its being an object. Here I am thinking

perhaps even more of we have not mentioned Rothko but the idea came in at one point, of the painting as an environment. Barnett Newman told me that he even urged, he put a sign in an exhibition saying, "Move up close to the painting."

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: In other words, not looking at it from a distance, but there it is as an object. Well, while your attitude of what you were going to do with that object were completely different, possibly with that it having, the art traditions had not reached a point where the picture it—it was a canvas right in front of you; it was a two dimensional phenomenon; it was a phenomenon like other objects.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Would that have been important? Or [Inaudible.]

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: Yes, I am sure that the climate for my involvement—was right. Pollock also—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: Wanted one to be wrapped in the painting. And—also the new excitement and variety of ways that the Abstract Expressionists were applying paint. You could put it on as though it were colored air and it would be painting.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: Or you could stack it on so thick that it would be a relief. And all of this, all these physical aspects of painting at that time excited me very much.

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Cross talk.] You could experiment with a number of these.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: [Cross talk.] You could do a picture in just black and white. I mean all the things—whether you are soliciting permission or not, do give you permission.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did you experiment a good bit with—well did you ever do any pictures in which the pigment was applied in an airy way? Or were you always more apt to work with a very active brush, and so on?

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: I remember how at different times I had different preoccupations. But one of my preoccupations at a period was that I would not use the same color when I broke loose from those monochromes. And it was after the red. I would not use the same color in a picture in more than one place.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] I was fascinated by what you said last [Inaudible.]

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: [Cross talk.] And another was, even though it was an intellectual idea and with its built in limitations, I tried to imply with the different ways that the paint went on, that even though I might know only seventeen—that there were thousands.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative]. That is beautiful. Coming back to the other thing that you mentioned that you had been at that time also very closely associated with John Cage and with other musicians. I know that many people have assumed that because of your association, that accident and a philosophy, an outlook of accident was important to your work, since it had apparently been in his. And I gather that this was not your feeling, that you were once quoted as saying that you did not believe in accident any more than anything else as I recall. At that time, were you—was that a strongly developed attitude?

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: I tried to, I was very interested in many of John's chance operations.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: Each one seemed quite unique to me and I liked the sense of experimentation that he was involved in. But—painting is just a different medium and I never could figure out an interesting way to use any kind of programmed activity. And—even though chance deals with the—unexpected and the unplanned, it still has to be organized before it can exist. I think maybe chance works better in a situation like music because music exists over a period of time, and you do not maintain constantly the—you cannot refer back from one area to another area. One's familiarity or lack of familiarity with time is very different from, say, the size of a canvas, which is what I would compare it to. One can see that a canvas is six feet by eight feet, or any other size—quite accurately. But you can spend two minutes or think it is five, or 30 seconds and it is just a different bed for activities there.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] The only parallel [Cross talk, inaudible.]

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: [Cross talk.] The only thing that I could get with chance, and I never was able to use it, was that I would have to—I would end up with something quite geometric or the spirit that I was interested in, indulging in, was gone. I felt as though I was—carrying out an idea rather than witnessing an unknown idea taking shape. I did things, like I did the print once, if this is called accident I certainly used accident, and I certainly used the fact that wet paint will run, and lots of other things. That seems to me it is just a kind of friendly relationship with your material where you want them for what they are rather than for what you could make out of them.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative].

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: I did a 20-foot print and John Cage is involved in that because he was the only person I knew in New York who had a car and who would be willing to do this. And I poured paint on one Sunday morning. I glued, it must have been 50 sheets of paper together; it was the largest paper I had and stretched it out on the street. He had a Model Ford then and he drove through the paint and on to the paper and he only had the direction to try to stay on the paper. And he did a beautiful job of it. Now I consider that my print.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative].

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: It is just like working with lithography. You may not be a qualified printer but there again, like the driver of the car, someone who does know the press very well—collaborates with you and they are part of the machinery just as you are part of another necessary aspect of—that it takes to make anything.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative].

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: Would you call that accident?

DOROTHY SECKLER: Actually, I am not sure I would call anything accident. When paint drips, well it is like an insurance company—say a man crosses the street and is hit by a car. To that particular individual, it is an accident. But to insurance companies who have tables showing how many people will be hit by a car that year, it is an expected event.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And in a sense though you do not know exactly where a drip will run, you know, it may wiggle a little in the middle, you know that there is gravity and you know that paint will drip and so on.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: You know that it is not going to run up.

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Laughs.] That is right. So there is a certain element of, in which some of the things that were called chance were not. But in the, I was wondering about another [Inaudible, cross talk.]

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: [Cross talk.] Anyway, they were not all done with I know maybe this is what you are getting at they were not done with some kind of wild abandon where you just shut your eyes and throw things about.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. Well, I do not think anyone ever imagines that would be possible. Now one other thing that I thought might be a parallel [Cross talk.]

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: I am not saying that they are better for it. [They laugh.] But that just never interested me.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Was the use of intervals because I understand in John Cage's work that he often emphasizes interval and waiting and silences a great deal. And I notice that you have also emphasized leaving open spaces in your paintings and areas in which there is less happening and those work very beautifully in relationship to the things that are happening very fast in other parts of the canvas; and I thought perhaps that there was—there may have been a kind of sharing of feeling about this kind of thing, of the importance of interval and openness.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: Well, it is no secret that we admired each other's work very much, and still do. But I think that those are like—some feeling of variety within a restricted area or are important to—if you are dealing with multiplicity and variation and inclusion as your content, then any feeling of a—complete feeling of consistency or sameness is a violation of that attitude.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: And I had to work consciously to—do a work that would imply the kind of richness that I saw around me, and complexity; and I think those things just got into it. Also there is a sense of—one of my painter friends says I am awfully good at the edges. It was intended as a joke but I—think that that may be true; but there has been a conscious attempt for me to treat any area, whether I only have half an inch more before I hit the wall, or whether it is dead center, to not treat any one area with a kind of dramatic preference. I dealt with that several ways. One is with a kind of simple-minded formal idea about composition, by just putting something of no consequence, but dead center—so that when you look there, yes, there it is, but you see well that certainly doesn't matter,—[they laugh]—you know any more than anything else; that is not what the center is for. So that ideas of sort of relaxed symmetry have been something for years that I have been concerned with because I think that—symmetry is a—neutral shape as opposed to—a form of design.

DOROTHY SECKLER: There is quite an important group of younger painters now who are interested in symmetry and in a sense, it almost returns it to something Byzantine it seems to me.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: In a curious way the whole thing seems to have come full circle. Whereas your work has always seemed almost like the most opposite of Byzantine. There is no sense of hierarchy at all; you cannot make a hierarchy out of things in your paintings. Nothing can be assigned a position beyond or above anything else so that you have to—I mean, the relativism is complete—[laughs]—I would say, as opposed to the structure, which moves up from a base to a high point in which every position is fixed. But I do not know, how do you read, this is an aside, and I do not want to perhaps take up too much time, but I just wondered in passing how you react to the importance that these new painters are giving to symmetrical design, all over and symmetrically centered.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: I enjoy most of it. I think I said this earlier, but I have never felt that one way of working excludes another. I mean, the kind of situation I would really like to see, in fact, I think that one of the— aspects of my work that I criticize myself for the most is the fact—that so many people recognized it as a way of working, as an end in itself, so that the influence that the work has had on other artists to work, what I think they would call in the same direction is really one of the work's weaknesses. And—I have forced myself to, I have taken—well, if I were interested in styles, I have run through a good many.

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Laughs.] Right you have.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: And it is always a pleasure to give them up because—I feel, if one takes an overall point of view, sees my work in general as, you know, massed, then I think that that point can be made. I am not so facile that I can accomplish or find out what I want to know or explore enough of the possibilities and a way of making a painting, say, in just one painting or two paintings. Sometimes a period—of say, silk screen, or those all red paintings or the ones that I did after the all red ones which I called *Pedestrian Colors*. Maybe one will be made up of 30 paintings, maybe one will be made up of 15 paintings. I cannot tell. I use as a—there is no desire to mount. I use as a guide for this, when it seems—when things seem to work out consistently. It takes three or four paintings to really decide whether, you know, you are just having a lucky streak—[laughs]—or whether you have somehow within yourself made some accomplishment that lets working this way be easier for you, where you are more apt to be successful than unsuccessful. And then when I definitely decide that that is the case, well then it is just gone. I mean, I just start something else. And I never seem to have any particular problem about— like people say, “What are you going to do next?” And usually while I am working one way, there is another attitude that is growing which as often as not is a reaction from what I am doing.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Almost the reverse of it perhaps?

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Would that have been the case just before your show that was called *Oracle*? I mean how did that very different adventure come about? Well, I suppose it was not so different from some of the objects you would made before.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: *Oracle* was—I had started it, I guess two and a half years ago, maybe even longer than that, closer to three. And it was going to be a radio painting but a concert variation. I did *Broadcast*, a painting that has three radios in it but only two tuning knobs, one for volume and one for tuning. And I objected to the fact that one had to be standing so close to the picture that the sound did not seem to be using the space—and the way the images were reacting to each other. And that was all right, that was one aspect of it. But through that, having made that and feeling that limitation with that piece, I wanted to do something that was remote control that could be separated in the room. And I started—I had some canvases stretched, but it took so long I needed help with the radios. And it took so long for me to find the help that I used the paintings for something else. [They laugh.] Then later I decided that was a good idea, because once I started seeing what was involved, I saw that with the weight problem, and the depth the

painting would have to be to house the equipment, that painting was the wrong form for that to take. So I started on a sculpture. Then I went to Amsterdam to work at the Stedelijk Museum with what was going to be a collaboration of about five artists, or six. And because I was working in sculpture, I had three weeks; we found that our ideas were so different that it was very difficult to get together and just make a piece.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Was that with Tinguely? Was he one of the people?

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: Yes, Tinguely, Niki de Saint Phalle, Per Olov Ultvedt, Martial Raysse, Daniel Spoerri.

[END OF TRACK AAA_rausch65_6290.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: This is Dorothy Seckler continuing a tape with Robert Rauschenberg on December 21, 1965. At the point where we had left off in our previous reel, you had mentioned your participation or possible, intended participation with a group of other artists at the Stedelijk Museum in Holland. I think we might take up at this point with what actually happened to that project.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: Right. The form that the exhibition took finally, was that each person just picked a part of the museum. It was a very interesting experiment for the museum, by the way, because they wanted the artists, instead of just shipping and picking a lot of work, they trusted the artists that they picked to respond in this time—in some way or another, doing works that they would show whatever the artist made. I thought that was kind of beautiful for a museum.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: And the artists were given a salary; they were given money, a budget for materials and all the transportation.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And a studio, I assume?

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: Well, the museum itself functioned as a studio. They had emptied out about, well it is a very large museum and we took, I think, almost a quarter of the museum. And each artist then just picked a spot in the museum that they wanted to work and just started in that area. So I was working with the sculpture which became *Oracle* with the radios. And painting did not really interest me.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: So in kind of a crash program of three weeks I made one, two, three, four pieces of sculpture and some of them quite large. One of them is about ten or 12 feet high and was very densely massed, about eight feet by five feet, and 12 feet high. That was by far the largest work. But I am not really a sculptor in the traditional sense. I tend to work with materials that are a little heavier and put them together as practically as I can. By being a sculptor, I mean, I do not weld or solder. [Cross talk.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Cross talk.] How did you put them together?

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: Just with bolts and nails and wire. And I was working alone. I could have had help there, except that the way I work I can never tell anybody what to do to help me—unless it is just a very simple thing like "drill three holes here." And there was not enough of that kind of work for me to warrant my doing all of the—getting over the language barrier. I mean by the time I could have told someone how little they could help me; I could have done it three times myself. But then that had its disadvantages because a lot of the material I was working with it was a very large room and things were in that scale, were really too heavy for me.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: So it was practically disastrous to my health. I was laid up for weeks afterwards. And not to mention the cuts and bruises dealing—[laughs]—with airplane parts and things falling. So by the time I left there I had worked—so frantically, because I started running out of time, too, and so the last week I never even went home from the museum. If I got terribly tired, I would just lie down on the floor for a few minutes. Because there was no way, as you know, there is no way of hurrying some things. There is no way of anticipating how much time it is going to take. At a certain time, you just are through. And I still worked on it a couple of days after the exhibition opened.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Had the sound equipment been sent over there? [Cross talk.]

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: [Cross talk.] I was so, no, I did not have sound then. I was not continuing this piece, you see. The pieces I made did happen to have sound, but it was not radio sound.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: I had submerged, I had—an air pump, an electric air pump attached loosely enough as part of the sculpture so that the vibrations of the motor would make a constant rattle and then the air went into a large tub of water and you had this bubbling all the time in contrast with the—

DOROTHY SECKLER: But the water did not run freely?

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: No, it was a closed thing. It was just that the air passing through it made this gurgling. And another piece had clocks that were all—they all had been tampered with. It had nine large clocks in it, all running at different speeds, some just zipping around and others, you know, barely moving.

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Cross talk.] I can give you some of my damaged electric clocks any time you want to do that again. [They laugh.]

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: I might take you up on that. [Laughs.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did that interest your—[Inaudible, cross talk.]

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: [Cross talk.] I got so—I was really just sick of sculpture. Nothing appealed to me more when I got back than the gentility of a beautifully stretched piece of canvas. [They laugh.] And the fact that I couldn't break anything as I crossed the room, and if it fell on me, it would not hurt a bit. So that the piece then that I was working on, the radio piece, then was put aside.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: And then I just worked on it from time to time, when—mostly in relationship to the experimentation with the radios to see if—how that would work. And I came back from tour recently—with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company and—I am going to move my studio. I had had my silk screens destroyed while I was gone so that I would not fall back on that.

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Laughs] I think, before you go—[Inaudible.]

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: I really wanted to work.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: I think there is something about moving and coming back that before you can begin on something new well, I find it morally difficult to simply abandon a work and I got very interested in the sculpture again. I made two additional pieces for it and worked on the sound, and so on.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Has it continued to interest you since then? I mean, are you likely to resume? I suppose—[Cross talk.]

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: [Cross talk.] I think the radio piece probably is the closest thing to what I am about to do next as one can predict without knowing where one is going, because I like very much that mixture of technology and aesthetics.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I was interested in what you said the last time we talked, I think, about the sound having been—important in shifting the focus of the audience, in a sense, in that insuring a certain movement through the exhibition.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: Literally.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Literally, yes.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: You had a sense of distance that as often as not was distorted. You had the feeling possibly of—knowing where you were, but where you were was lost. [They laugh.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: That is very expressive. And another thing that you had mentioned which we have not recorded, was your feeling that it was important that the sound frequencies, that the radio sources, be actual ones, not taped; and your feeling that if you had, even if you had been able to tape them, it would have been, as you said, rather like commercial art in that case and not being an actual—

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Would you like to enlarge on that in any way?

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: No, I think that just about says it. I liked for the sound to be as fresh as the—daily fall of the dust and rust and dirt that accumulates—[they laugh]—which does not mean that one does not clean it off from time to time. But then that is another thing. It is an actuality of a literal insistence on the piece's operating and existing in the time situation that it is observed in. It is another one of those things trying to put off the death of the work. [They laugh.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. Did I hear you mention before, that you had in mind possibly using at some time in the future, a piece in which the wind might work as an actual force?

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: Yes. I would like to work with wind and water and plants. It sounds like it is going to be a garden, but I do not think it is going to be, but if it turns out to be a garden that may be my own sneaky way of moving out into the country. [They laugh.] I hope I do not pick this new building out just in order to discover that what I really needed was a farm. [They laugh.] In fact, having two dogs now is also an indication that I am trying to get out. [They laugh.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: I think so. Siberian dogs are going—[Cross talk.]

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: Maybe it is—[Cross talk.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Cross talk.]—to be moving you out into the great open spaces any moment. [They laugh.]

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: Maybe it is bigger than I am. And I—[Cross talk.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Cross talk.] I think that would be the cream of the jest for the art world: that the man who was sort of responsible for introducing the whole urban environment into painting moves to the country—[they laugh]—and becomes a collaborator with sun and wind and rain and flowers.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: And beaches.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And beaches, yes. That would be very beautiful.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: I might move out there and find that all the work is finished. At that point I might just become a collector—[they laugh]—of vegetables—and I could be a critic on waves. [They laugh.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. And I could come into the studio and start fooling around with some of this lovely stuff here. [They laugh.]

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: Right.

DOROTHY SECKLER: The bit about the other end of that bridge that we started off with sometime ago, I realize that the point about inclusiveness makes a question about your responses to your so called descendants in Pop Art perhaps superfluous. But I thought it might be kind of interesting to try to separate off in any way that we can, the distinct differences that exist between your outlook and those of some of the leading Pop artists. Of course we have not really done all of our in between traveling to bring us up to the point where Pop Art appeared. You did mention at some point that you saw a great many people taking what you had done as a kind of well, simply new kind of materials; collaging and tires and posters and so on as a new aesthetic element without taking along with it or perceiving that there was a great deal more involved than unorthodox materials. And—

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: I think—I do not think there is anything really wrong with influence—because I think that one can use another man's art as material, either literally or just implying that they are doing that—without it representing a lack of a point of view. But I also like seeing people using materials that—that one is not accustomed to seeing in art, because I think that has a particular value. New materials have fresh associations of physical properties and qualities that—have built into them the possibility of forcing you or helping you do something else. I think it is more difficult to constantly be experimental with paint over a period of many, many years. Like Ad Reinhardt said to me one day, and I took it as a compliment until he had finished his remark. He said, "I saw your show." I think that was—maybe it was the Egan show. He said, "I saw your exhibition." He said, "Those are very good pictures." And I said, "Thank you:" And he said, "Yes, it is too bad." He said, "Somehow we just cannot help but get better." [They laugh.] And I could not agree with him more.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And I suppose that explains your destruction of the silk screens that everyone was so fascinated by. Does that mean that you do not ever—[Cross talk.]

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: [Cross talk.] That is my own personal relationship with them. It does not mean that I will not ever use silk screens again. I certainly will not—I just do not have any appetite for them now. But it would have been very easy to come back after being away from the studio for eight months and simply pick up, even though the concepts and the sense of the construction, the choice of color and all of that might have been

different, I mean necessarily, in the paintings. I think the temptation to just use the screens I already had made, would have—it would have been too great. And I think it is important for an artist to know his weakness and use it well. [They laugh.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Of course, you had a resilience—[Cross talk.]

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: [Cross talk.] I think, excuse me, I think that the difference in the work that I would have done with silk screen after I got back from the tour and being away from painting, would not have been as great as it will be, because I am having to work in some entirely different medium.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.] I suppose I should ask this while it is on my mind. You have, of course, resumed work with silk screen in connection with a commission from Life—

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: —to do a series dealing with the theme of Dante?

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: I had intended to do that with lithography, but there was a—I do not know what you would call it, a legal question there. It is absurd to do a single print as elaborate as that would have to have been.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: I mean, it is just uneconomical. It is, the making prints, one of the values is that you can make several copies or that it is possible to have an edition. And the legal tie up there was, that Life Magazine, if they commission a work, it has to have an exclusive.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.] You could not have had—[Cross talk.]

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: [Cross talk.] There would have been one of it—I would have had to have made an edition of one. So then I thought, well, how I will get all this photographic material—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.] Yes.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: —down, and I thought of silk screens. I had about twenty-five photographs, because the scale was magazine scale—I had twenty-five photographs reduced to one screen. And it was like having just that many palettes but instead of lots of colors laid out you had all of these images on one surface. And—

DOROTHY SECKLER: It was a very handsome and very provocative piece. One of the things that I am sure you have been asked a great deal about the Life piece, is something dealing with its imagery. The various photographic materials deal with areas in contemporary life that are readily identifiable; well the Negro question, the Jewish issue, the atom explosion, the bomb, concentration camps, apparently—

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: Yes, it is.

DOROTHY SECKLER: —I am not sure exactly where the photomontage of bodies came from. And in a most exciting way—the question that, or I suppose occurred to me was that well, Mr. Sullivan and other people who have written about your work, have always insisted that your intention was one of creating an imagery which remained ambiguous, which could not be pinned down, which could not be directly related to issues. And also, of course, it has been said that, or I think perhaps people were interpreting, at least what you had said yourself, as taking no position in any attitude of reform concerning the world we live in. Does this represent an exception to that attitude? [Cross talk.]

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: [Cross talk.] No, personally I do take—a stance in questions like race issues and atrocities of all sorts. But—the Dante illustration, one of the problems there was that I was illustrating.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. [Cross talk, inaudible.]

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: [Cross talk.] Someone asked me yesterday, “Do you really see today, there being more hell.” I mean, “Was being all made up of hell?” And, of course not, is the answer to that. But if one is illustrating hell, one uses the properties that make hell.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: I have never thought—that problems were so simple politically, that they could, by me anyway, be tackled directly. But every day by consistently doing what you do with the attitude that you do it, if you have strong feelings those things are expressed over a period of time or in a few words as opposed to,

say, one Guernica.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: And that is just a different attitude. When I was working on Dante, it was during the election year with Nixon and Kennedy. The Dante thing—a historian will be able to read that that was when it was done. So that I have never thought that well, I consider the other for me anyway, almost a commercial attitude of—where you illustrate your feelings about something, self consciously. If you feel strongly, that is going to show there. I mean, that is the only way it can come into my work. And I believe it is there. My work is—the one thing that has been consistent about it, is that there has been an attempt to use the very last minutes in my life and the particular location as the source of energy and inspiration, rather than retiring to some kind of other time, or dream, or idealism or—I think cultivated protest is just as dream like as idealism. Does that answer that?

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, I think it answers it very beautifully.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: The problem when I started the Dante illustrations, the idea really was to see. I had been working purely abstractly for so long, it was important for me to see whether I was working abstractly, because I could not work any other way, or whether I was doing it out of choice.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: So I really welcomed, insisted, on the challenge of being restricted by a particular subject, which meant that I would have to be involved in symbolism. I mean, the illustration has to be read. It has to relate to something that already is in existence. Well, I spent two and a half years that result—deciding that yes, I could do that. And I think that all these things that you do it seems to me they can sound rather schoolroom-ish—like insisting that you make yourself do this, to see if you can do it. But it is so easy to be undisciplined. And to be disciplined is so against my character, my general nature anyway, that I have to strain a little bit to keep on the right track. [Laughs.]

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DOROTHY SECKLER: That is okay, we are going to have to do that again.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: Is it okay now?

DOROTHY SECKLER: It is alright now, yes. You were just talking about disciplines when I interrupted.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: I think that one of the reasons that I have been so preoccupied with theatre is that it has in an extreme form two of the things that I like. I like the necessary control that one has to have in order to work with other people and to put a piece of theatre on. One has to be, on the one hand, extremely aware of things like tape recorders and what time a piece starts; the responsibility with the lights; one has to have an understanding of the light board; one has to communicate clearly with whoever is running the light board. It is just the opposite end of the kind of freedom that one has to then necessarily be involved with in order to do the piece. And I think I try to do pieces where every move is not choreographed, but it is planned and there is a great deal of open trust—within an image on the stage. I am talking about the performance now, as opposed to the discipline of the organization that makes the performance possible—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: —makes it possible for you to see one, or to get to the theater on time, or have the people all there when you are, or have the show ready to start. Within the image, there is a kind of freedom that allows one to be much better one time and not as good another. As in painting, it may be the same color, but sometimes red looks better than it does in other paintings. And it is a combination, well the necessary co-existence of the known and the unknown in a positive relationship, a constructive relationship to each other. Without one or the other, the event would not be possible. I guess it is a kind of a fight against dualism, using dualism as using both yes and no at the same time to say yes, I hope.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I was fascinated by the Happening that you just presented in the past few weeks—and the imagery, the action, references were very beautiful and very inexplicit. I wondered if there is anything you would like to say about the way the sequence developed, or, you know, the first impulses that may have brought it about and how it was changed perhaps by people who were in it and by other circumstances.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: I guess the first, the way I intended to make most of my theatre pieces—I do not call my theatre pieces Happenings. Because that my involvement with theatre through dance, I think I would refer to it as dance theatre or maybe just theatre or anything else, because my understanding of Happenings is that—

that came out of a desire painters had who were working with objects, or objects were their content, their subject, a desire to animate those materials. And I think mine comes out of really quite a traditional—response to dance. The way I begin is by just having an idea and then if that idea is not enough, you have another idea, and a third, and a fourth, and composition could be described as an attempt to mass all these things in such a way that they do not contrast or interfere with each other, that you never set up a sense of cause and effect or contrast like black and white; but that they either calmly or less calmly just happen to exist at the same time. So one of my main problems in composing a piece is how to get something started and how to get it stopped without—breaking a sense of the whole unit that more or less should look continuous and anti-climactic, or—I do not know the word for it, when one thing simply follows another—progressive—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: —progressive relationship with the elements.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You were of course—[Cross talk.]

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: [Cross talk.] And it is very much the way I work with the paintings.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: They are the same kinds of problems.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Certainly a great deal of the performance—does the performance have a title? [Cross talk.]

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: [Cross talk.] Yes, Map Room Two.

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Cross talk.] I am sorry—[laughs]—Map Room Two?

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: Yes, the first Map Room was a sketch, really, for what became Map Room Two, which was done at Goddard College—just going up there and staying a week, and at the end of the week giving a performance. And working with things that were there and having the ideas on the spot. It would have been impossible to do Map Room One in a theatre, the Cinematek Theatre, that I did Map Room Two in, because of—just the difference in the architecture of the place.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: And when it is at all possible, I like to draw people's attention to the fact that this is a different place that they are in, rather than assuming that the stage is where all the magic action is.

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Laughs.] Yes.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: There was very little to do with the Cinematek that way.

DOROTHY SECKLER: With the white cards? [Cross talk.]

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: [Cross talk.] That is right. Actually that did move out into the audience.

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Cross talk.] Yes, with the audience.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: That the audience, which—would have it been an average situation, would have been an inactive part—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: —like, just on the receiving end of the theatre experience, became a necessary element by using their cooperation, first, voluntarily asking them to put the white cardboards on their backs—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Then the lights played over them.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: And then using the cardboards as a movie screen—

DOROTHY SECKLER: That was great.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: Which, if you would have been sitting in the first row, you would not even have known it was happening, probably. [They laugh.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: No, I liked that. There was another sequence that was sort of interesting in relationship perhaps to your painting although, of course, most of it was related more to dancing. But the sequence in which

you erased an image into existence, instead of out of existence, I thought was beautiful. [Laughs.]

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: I had not thought of that.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, it did seem very much related to your painting at that point but otherwise, of course, one was more involved with action. And it was interesting that you were also a performer and that lovely last sequence where you were very high and very poised and picking up nylon wands—

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: Neon.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I mean, neon wands of colored light, in a very poised and deliberate way. [Cross talk.]

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: [Cross talk.] Yes, I used my body as a conductor of electricity by holding a live coil in one hand.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, that was remarkable.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: And then just with the contact, then, with the neon tubes, they came on. I consider that piece more successful than some others that I have done, simply because—maybe it is that I have done enough pieces now, so that there's a collective vocabulary that is being built up. But I am now beginning to see more and more things that are possible to do. And if one's body can be a conductor of electricity, there are all kinds of materials that one could use and activate by hand—dancing that, rather than—it is like moving the controls out onto the stage. I like for the lighting man, if the setup permits it, whoever is running the lights to be visible.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, it was.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: And if something has to be moved onto the stage, that one does it in the most direct, simple fashion—that you just walk over and pick it up and put it there, rather than the proscenium—[Cross talk.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Cross talk, inaudible.]

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: —type hiding and where everything is supposed to look effortless. I nearly never choreograph expressions for my—the people that I work with to have. I think that their bodies should be working totally, that they should look as though they are doing something easily. If it is difficult, necessarily, I do not want any mask of the activity. It seems to me that it is so difficult in art particularly to—now, I am finding out the same thing is true in real estate—to keep in direct touch with exactly what is going on. I think that in the last 20 years or so, there has been a new kind of honesty in painting, where painters have been very proud of paint and have let it behave openly. I mean, this has been used for different reasons, probably as many different reasons as there are different artists. But, it is very rare—well now there is a new kind of paint which hides it. Like you said before, things have sort of worked their way all the way around again. But for a long time now, one could see a brush load of paint almost as though it had just been put on the canvas, and the artist had just walked away—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: —rather than using the paint only to build an illusion about something else or, say, only wanting the color aspect of paint. All these things are being separated, each one used independently. And I think it is a very exciting time.

DOROTHY SECKLER: The element of the audience participating in the work of art by its psychological attitude, even by its movement is something that has become more and more pronounced in the last decade. And your directness in dealing with an audience, or your involving them even when they were not aware of it. For instance, the white paintings, of course, where shadows were cast and people did not appreciate this very much—[laughs]— but it was still part of your conception.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: They had to go all the way across town to see a shadow of themselves. [They laugh.] I can see that they might resent it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: In any case—[Cross talk.]

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: [Cross talk.] Think of the happy few, though, who really thought it was worth it. You would really go away holding your head up. [They laugh.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: But even in many other kinds of work, your combines and your silk screens too, I think there is always been a way of making the audience re-experience its own experience in front of the object; and I have often wondered also, if this process does not continue after leaving the object. If another part of the effect

of work like yours is not really not only what happens when you are looking at it, but going away and then meeting in life—some of the same elements with a new awareness of what they were like when they were in a different ensemble.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: I am sure that has happened. The most recent example of that was—fan mail that I got from London after the Whitechapel Show. And if I would have answered the letters, I think I would have put the people down a bit for—for wanting to give me credit for their having —looked at where they were going instead of just concentrating on getting one—on leaving one place and arriving at another place, as though that in between was not part of the trip. Their wanting to compliment the painting for making them do that is kind of an escape. [They laugh.] And—

DOROTHY SECKLER: We lose that innocence very readily, however, and necessarily, because life demands that we keep our attention focused on action and jobs and so on. And, of course, the painter's privilege is to let us tear away that veil that intervenes between us in a visual sense. [Cross talk.]

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: [Cross talk.] Well, I think that it is a little more involved than that. I think a particular form of logic and an idea of progress—has, may be it is, Protestant or something, but we have been encouraged through language and philosophies of all sorts, that the important thing is to move from one place to another. And it is that point and it is getting there that is important, and getting where then gets to be the only other aspect of that, and it is only incidental how you get there.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: People are very tolerant of any means of getting there. And—I do not see that it is reasonable that there be that hierarchy of like where you go to is more important—because you are spending time. It is the same kind of time as you are going to have when you get there. And it is you. And you exclude—that falsely, cultivatedly denied the experience of what there is in between.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Paul Tillich seems to feel that is particularly an American disease because of our tendency as a people to have this dynamic movement forward.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: Oh, I do not think so. I think it may be even more so in Europe.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Do you?

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: Because they are very programmed. Thousands of years of inhibitions have forced them to concentrate on a single aspect, to understand that this is valuable, this is not valuable.

DOROTHY SECKLER: There is that hierarchy again.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, I am glad that you feel that we have some slight freedom from that in this particular environment. I think you certainly contributed to it in terms of the art world. That note of hierarchy breaking is such a very simple one, I think, from everything you said today, that I think it is not a bad one on which perhaps to wind up today.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: Okay.

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[END OF INTERVIEW]