

TRIBUTE

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Cunningham and musician John Cage. He created sets and costumes, composed music. He revolutionized printmaking. He created an album cover for Talking Heads and won a Grammy for it.

He traveled the world and collaborated with artists in different countries. He gave generously to various charities. He was the linchpin of the annual Arts for ACT Auction in Fort Myers, inviting celebrity auctioneers such as Sharon Stone and Lily Tomlin, donating work that inevitably drew the highest bid of the evening. He gave generously to Edison College, whose gallery held exhibitions of his work, often world premieres.

Though the world knew him as Rauschenberg, locally, he was known as Bob. All you had to do was say "Bob," and people knew who you were talking about. He was well respected and much beloved.

On Monday, May 12, 2008, at the age of 82, Bob Rauschenberg died in his home on Captiva.

His art and his influence continue on.

Here are some stories, edited for clarity and brevity, from associates and friends, those who worked with him and knew him best.

DON SAFF

Artist, art historian, friend, collaborator and artistic director of the Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Interchange

I've been with him for a long, long time, longer than anybody other than immediate family. We started working together in the early 1970s, around '72.

I finally got up the nerve to ask him if he'd do a project with me. He said, "I never thought you'd ask." Totally disarming.

I remember some of the first trips around Tampa with him, looking for material on the streets. He found material in the janitor's closet, surplus material I had purchased for wrapping paper, that he thought would be great printing paper. The things that were accessible to me, and of apparently no artistic value, became transformed by his eye and his hand. He turned dirt into gold, in a sense. He was an artistic alchemist.

Inevitably, driving around Tampa, we would get lost. I'd apologize: "I don't know where I am, Bob."

He's say, "That's fantastic! How would we ever have gotten here if you'd known where you were going?"

That's a perfect metaphor for his work and his thinking.

His process was to put himself into situations where he was experiencing things from a different perspective or for the first time. The process of thinking is the process he always applied. If he wasn't entertained by a new experience, if he wasn't creating something that he was creating for the first time, that it was new, then he just went somewhere else.

If he knew where he was, he was in the wrong place.

I remember once, we were in Beijing together, they asked me to give a lecture at the Beijing Art Academy. He said, "Why don't you show them my photographs first? Then they'll understand the paintings." So I did. I certainly studied Bob's work a lot; I was by him when he created it. But you look, and you're lecturing, and you're sometimes seeing for the first time as well.

None of the photos are manipulated, and seldom cropped. And all these images are there for the taking. He could show you something that was part of your environment, and you had an epiphany, a way of thinking you hadn't thought before.

You look at the side of a truck with wrinkled metal and a side mirror reflecting another image, and all of this is right there, and all of a sudden, you have his combines, the paintings, these seemingly random relationships, which make all the sense in the world, if you're open to it.

His syntax was an open syntax, the syn-

tax of his imagery was not limited by grammar. It's a syntax that has no limit, because you can stack meanings, rather than string words. And so he stacked meanings in such a way that everything was closer to the way in which you think, rather than the way in which you speak. Much of it, in a way, had its origins in Cubism. You have a kind of Einsteinian simultaneous experience; you can see something from the front and side and back, of the same image.

ROCI (Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Interchange) was a remarkable activity. What was it all about? Global communication and this fight for the freedom of the people. It all started with being in China, and realizing that people could not go 25 miles without getting permission from the state to travel. He said, why don't I do a show where I show each of them their own imagery, and show that imagery to succeeding states? It was a constantly growing exhibition.

He mortgaged his house, he sold his collections of Johns, Twombly, multiple works of art. He sold all that to fund this activity.

He realized he was a citizen of the world.

He gave one work to the people of the countries, and one work from each country to the National Gallery. Significant work in each case. The purpose was to get these cultural ambassadors from Cuba, or an ambassador from Chile, and get them together in an informal setting at a party at the National Gallery.

He didn't feel it would bring peace in our time, but it was his humble effort to try to do something in terms of some back channel effort in how you get people together. He did it through the universal language, art. Everybody understood that. There was no language barrier. The images from each country were the images of that country. What he did was in a sense, was interpret what they were seeing all the time and feed it back to them through his particular parallax.

They saw their own images, in their own environment, which they'd never conceived of as material for art. He provided them with a completely different palette, and a complete break with tradition.

He went to Tibet. He was very touched by them. He parted there saying, "I'll never forget you, and if I have my way, the rest of the world will never forget you." He funded activities there, as he did elsewhere in the world.

In China, they talk about art before Rauschenberg and art after Rauschenberg. It's incredible, what a pivotal moment that was, a change from what was accepted, and a tradition that had to be honored, to be licensed to think differently. That's what he provided with ROCI.

The world lost a giant. And I lost a good friend.

RON BISHOP

Director of the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery at Edison College

Bob Rauschenberg's been associated with Edison College for 30 years. I've been here 9 years, and I did 6 shows with Bob at the gallery, I think. And most of them were brand new work that hadn't been shown elsewhere. These were the freshest pieces with him, and I think he just wanted to share them with us, with the community. He loved Southwest Florida. He wouldn't have been here for 30 years if he didn't.

I was sitting with the Foundation department one day, and we were talking about how much Bob had done for us. We realized it'd been really an astronomical amount, in just dollars and cents, that he'd given to us. It seemed to make sense, in 2004, to name the gallery after him.

Bob was the cornerstone of art in the 20th century. I read something pretty nice. I think it was in the *New York Times*...that Picasso was the first half of the century, and Bob's the second half. And that's pretty smart, because he touched on so much. I don't think we're going to realize for maybe generations, how influential he really has been.

He was very creative with what he



COURTESY PHOTO

Actress (and guest auctioneer) Sharon Stone with Robert Rauschenberg at the Arts for ACT auction in Fort Myers.



FLORIDA WEEKLY PHOTO CAROL HARTMAN

Rauschenberg with artist Darryl Pottorf at the 2007 Arts for ACT auction at the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery on the campus of Edison College

had at hand. Just incorporating everything. And that led to the freedom that he accepted and used in his work. Everything on the planet was available for him to use, and he did. That was his perspective. And the really wonderful thing was about how he used the materials. There was a certain honesty to the usage of the materials. If it was fluid, it remained fluid. We saw the fluidity of it in the artwork. If it was fabric, it remained fabric; he used it as fabric -- it draped, it hung, it was able to move in the wind, in the breeze. So he really approached the materials in a very honest, non-manipulative way.

He had such a remarkable sense of structure; all of these materials that he did choose to use, he knew, intuitively, how to put them together. I don't know if that is in part, having worked with Albers, who was extraordinarily tight in his structural approach. To me, that's sort of the skeleton of Bob's work, that strength of his structure in all of them.

I think Bob was able to find the art in everything. Once you see anything through Bob's eyes, you realize that getting to see an individual piece is getting to see the materials through his eyes, you realize that everything's possible.

The art lives on. We get to celebrate a really remarkable life, and we get to share in the time that we got to spend with him.

Living here in Southwest Florida, what a gift to be able to come to the gallery, see Bob's work repeatedly, see work that goes from here straight to New York City and up on the walls, or to a museum. To get to talk with him!

He would go to events down at the ACT gallery, he would come to events here. He was always at the Arts for ACT events. He was a part of the community. He wasn't aloof and hiding out on the island. He was one of Southwest Florida's own, and he loved it here.

He was lighthearted and playful. But at the same time, he was deadly serious at all times about his artwork, and about art in general. He had a great sense of humor. You never knew where it was going to go. He always, always had a different perspective.

He won a Grammy! What didn't the guy touch? He changed how we looked at sculpture, he changed how we looked at painting. Every material on the planet became available for art.

This was a giant. I don't think there's an art student, an art person, who's been to school from the 60s on, who hasn't been under Bob's influence in one way or another, whether they know it or not.

I was talking to somebody earlier in