



Robert Grosvenor in conversation with Hans-Ulrich Obrist

June 16, 2015, New York

HANS ULRICH OBRIST

Let's begin with the beginning. How did you come to art, or how did art come to you?

ROBERT GROSVENOR

I spent my young years in Newport, Rhode Island, near the water. The water there is always in the distance—a flat, horizontal line. Then we spent a lot of time in Arizona, which has a similarly horizontal landscape. I was lucky to be in the desert where Frank Lloyd Wright houses were going up. That was a great inspiration for me as a boy.

HUO

Which houses?

RG

Smaller private houses, some of which still exist. We were very close to Taliesin West.

HUO

So before any artist, Frank Lloyd Wright was an inspiration?

RG

Definitely. The desert, the ocean, and architecture. Not only Frank Lloyd Wright's buildings, but others that we didn't see so much in Rhode Island. Arizona was just "out there". We got good new stuff.

HUO

And then you went to Dijon, France, in the 1950s. What took you to Dijon?

RG

Just a matter of chance. Paris felt a little scary to me at that time and Dijon was a great, exciting, small city with an art school. I met some of the teachers, and it seemed like a place where I could fit in.

HUO

Which artists inspired you at that time?

RG

I thought a lot of Alexander Calder.

HUO

Nobody in France?

RG

Not so much. I remember the names of the artists but no painters who inspired me particularly, I'm afraid.

HUO

Then you went into the army and there was an encounter with Mark di Suvero that was significant.

RG

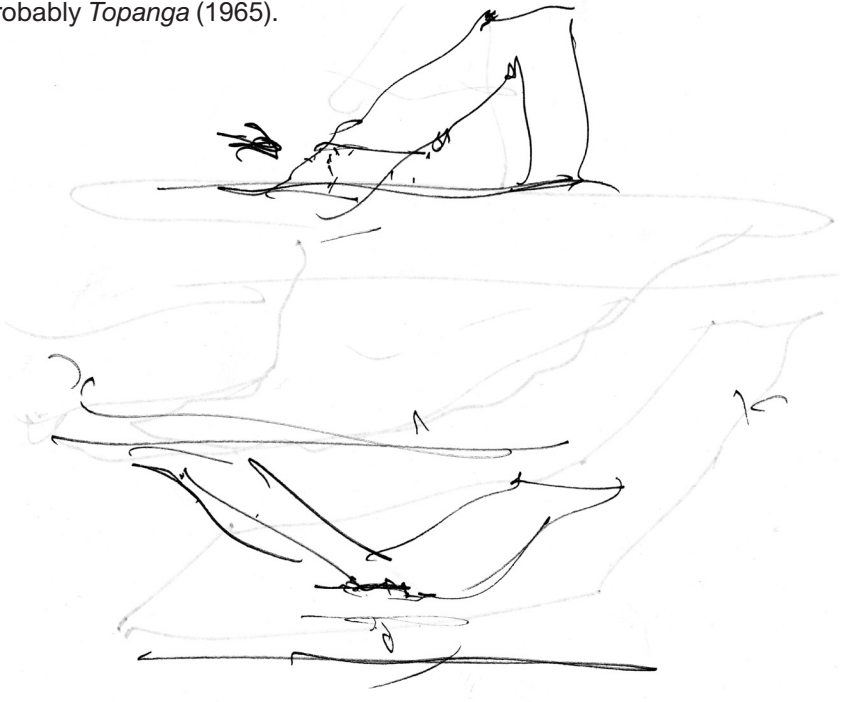
While I was in the army I was able to pick up some art magazines and saw an article on Mark di Suvero. I'd never seen such things, with the great beams at different angles. When I left the army and went to New York along with a friend of mine, the video artist Peter Campus, I found the address for di Suvero's studio and knocked on the door. So he was one of the first people I met in New York, and it was very fortunate. I helped him out around the studio, sort of as an assistant, and rented a room, a studio, in the building. Through him I got to meet Dick Bellamy and some of the artists at Green Gallery: Claes Oldenburg, James Rosenquist.

HUO

I always ask where an artist's catalogue raisonné begins What would be the "number one" in your catalogue, the beginning of where you found your language?

RG

Probably *Topanga* (1965).



HUO

And it was prompted by a telescope you saw in Arizona?

RG

Yes, I saw a photograph of Kitt Peak Observatory and wanted to work with a vertical line and a diagonal line. It seemed like something that I could do. I have found sometimes, when I am making sculpture, that I copy things I see. A photograph in a magazine may inspire me to do something. Sometimes the thing that I do is very close to the thing I saw in the photograph.

HUO

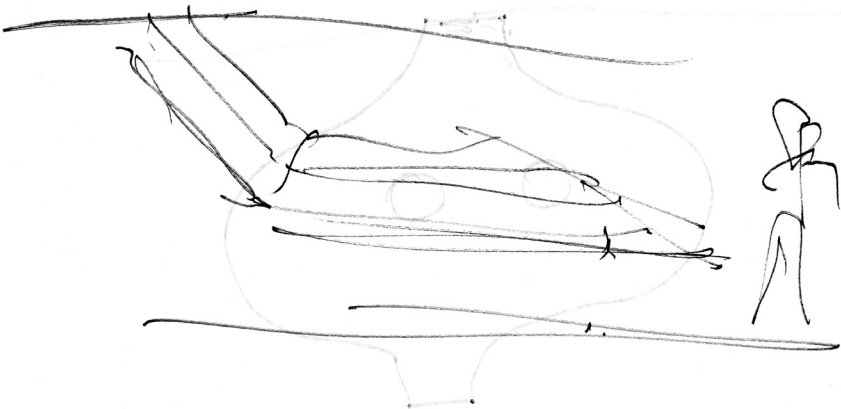
You've said that it was the cantilever idea that fascinated you. Obviously the cantilever is dynamic and very different from the prevailing minimalist aesthetic at that time. Were you conscious of your rupture from minimalism?

RG

Oh yes, absolutely. I never considered myself a minimalist, although I'm sometimes referred to as one because the structures were rather plain.

HUO

Your great piece at the Whitney, *Tenerife*, is from a year later. It almost defies gravity. How did you come to these dynamic forms?



RG

I wanted to see whether it was possible to lift the bottom of the diagonal off the floor, rather than continuing it down to the floor, which I could have done, of course. I was very interested in, and energized by, the distance between the floor and the sculpture. In that case it was maybe twelve or fourteen inches.

HUO

Where did you find the titles, like *Topanga* and *Transoxiana*?

RG

In geography books. Being a New England guy, I thought Topanga sounded romantic. I had never been there; it's near Los Angeles. And Transoxiana was on an older map. A city halfway between East and West, I believe.

HUO

Then you were in the 1966 exhibition "Primary Structures" at the Jewish Museum in New York. What are your memories of that exhibition?

RG

It was a very important show. It was a great honor to be in the large room with a Donald Judd, a Robert Morris, a Ronald Bladen, Walter De Maria's portrait of John Cage. *Transoxiana* was attached to the ceiling at one end, and cantilevered down almost to the floor and then up almost to the ceiling. But the ceiling was too high, and we lost the tension between the floor and the lower section. It should have been maybe twelve inches lower.

HUO

A lot has been written about Judd, for instance, using industrially produced materials, whereas yours look industrially produced but are actually handmade.

RG

I used inexpensive materials. Plywood was cheap; I could make mistakes and redo things. I found it had a certain structural integrity that worked for me. There was nothing to the fabrication except a screw gun, really, and maybe a hammer and nails.

HUO

Did the pieces come with instructions so that they could be refabricated?

RG

They never have been refabricated, I don't think. They could be, of course.

But they're not instruction pieces as such.

HUO

I just saw a film about you that the Whitney put online. Scott Rothkopf talks about walking around the works and their connection to architecture. One certainly feels your early Frank Lloyd Wright connection.

RG

I first installed *Tenerife* in Los Angeles at Dwan Gallery. It was a beautiful room to work in. I realized I was getting a bit better at putting things together, so I used lighter plywood. It was an extreme cantilever. I don't know whether I should say this or not, but that piece feels to me almost like when one is underwater looking at the keel or the rudder of a sailing vessel going by.

HUO

It's so aerodynamic. Were you inspired by car or ship design?

RG

Not explicitly, although I see what you mean. I was specifically interested in the work's height above the floor, and its relationship to somebody next to it.

HUO

As Rothkopf beautifully explains in the video, there is the viewer, there is the work, and there is the room. Those are the ingredients. And what about color? Some of your works are monolithic and black, and then white pieces arrived in 1968.

RG

Yes, there was a white one, a yellow one, purple, black, and red. I really can't tell you why, about the colors.

HUO

So you don't have a color theory like Josef Albers?

RG

No, I don't have too many theories. [laughs]

HUO

Daniel Buren always said that his works were made in situ, for a specific architecture. But I suppose these works can be installed elsewhere afterward. How is this site-specificity defined?

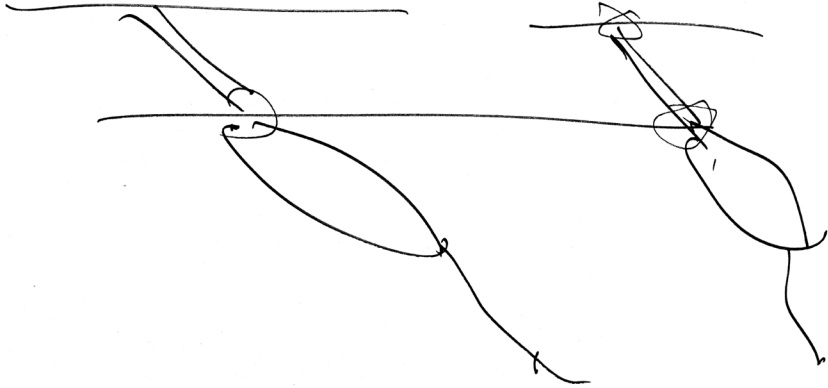


RG

Of course, if I'm able to modify the room somewhat, if I'm able to drop the ceiling, if it has a proper length that I can work with, maybe the sculpture can be contracted somewhat. I've never been asked to do that but I'm sure I could face that problem. It would be interesting.

HUO

One of my favorite pieces is *Floating Red Double T* (1965–68). Can you tell me how it worked?



RG

There was a good deal of stuff underwater to support it: invisible floatation tanks, on two separate anchors so they turned. It was a totally impractical thing but in calm weather—I never saw it in rough weather—it had a very soft, very strange sort of movement.

HUO

Was it installed in the sea?

RG

Yes, in Long Island Sound, and it didn't last long because there were just too many forces working against it.

HUO

So it was destroyed.

RG

But it looked good while it was up. It was almost a performance piece. The performance was my friends and me diving in and out of the water, adjusting it.

HUO

And now it's at the bottom of Long Island Sound. A bit like a Robert Smithson, a buried work.

RG

It'd be nice to dive down and have a look at it.

HUO

Can you tell me about your friendship with Smithson?

RG

We'd go to the movies, for instance to see *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*.

HUO

Science fiction?

RG

Always science fiction, yes. Listening to him talk, it was over my head, over a lot of people's heads, but it was amazing.

HUO

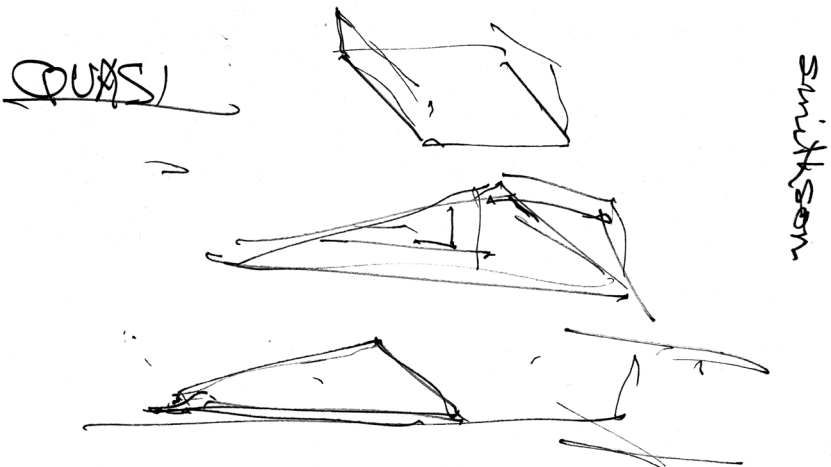
There is this interesting quote where he talked about your structures being "hypervolumes in hyperspace".

RG

Those are good words, aren't they?

HUO

I love it. Your 1969 car fits with what Smithson said: it is a hypervolume in hyperspace. How did that car come about?



RG

I was trying to make a sculpture, trying to put something together, and I had this triangular pyramidal shape. I was turning it around, looking at it, and thought, "This might make a good car."

HUO

So it potentially had a function?

RG

Yes, it became a car, a functioning thing. I am attracted to shapes that can go fast. And this car is interesting because of the height above the floor; it only has about an inch of ground clearance.

HUO

Was there a link to Buckminster Fuller's car, the Dymaxion?

RG

I don't think I was aware of it at the time. But I am very aware of it now.

HUO

And was the car tested in 1969?

RG

We always wanted to get it out in heavy traffic on Broome Street, but unfortunately it was just too difficult to carry it out there.

HUO

So that is an unrealized project in a sense?

RG

Indeed.

HUO

I always ask artists about their unrealized projects.

RG

I'm working on something right now that hopefully I can realize. It's just so big and cumbersome, almost as big as a small house, with two different levels. It's hard to describe.

HUO

Wow. So you're going into architecture?

RG

Yes, but it's non-architecture. Not practical. The way the green 1969 car is not really a car, this sculpture that I'm working on is not really architecture. It's architectural, maybe.

HUO

Quasi-architectural?

RG

Quasi, I like that.

HUO

You're drawing nonstop right now. Is that a daily practice?

RG

Not so much, no. But when I'm talking to someone I usually have a pencil and paper. It makes me a little more comfortable.

HUO

Do you ever use models?

RG

No, they don't help me too much. I try to build in real size, and strong enough so that the wind won't take it down.

HUO

You acquire a lot of found objects and then modify them in various ways.

RG

Modified or altered. Hopefully improved, fixed up. I love the vacuum cleaners of Jeff Koons, so pristine and beautiful inside the plastic boxes.

HUO

Something that is present in a lot of your pieces from the 1960s is a connection to space, in particular to antigravity or non-gravity. Did NASA and the space age of the 1960s play a role for you?

RG

Perhaps a general kind of space, not a cartoon idea of space.

HUO

And is there any inspiration from cinema? I interviewed my friend Czesław Miłosz, a Polish poet and Nobel Prize winner, when he was one hundred years old and he said that everybody, whether poet, novelist, sculptor,

painter, who lived in the twentieth century has somehow been influenced by cinema.

RG

A few things, like Jacques Tati, are important for me, and interesting and funny. But I'm not much of a film person. I like to walk around still objects, or look at still photographs.

HUO

What inspired you about Tati?

RG

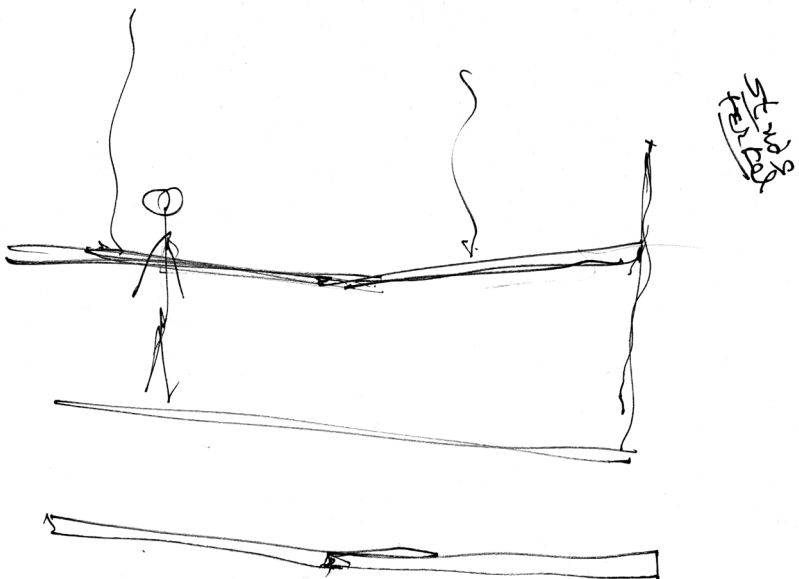
The timing, the humor, and the strangeness, and playtime. The human qualities are so wonderful, aren't they? The timing and human qualities.

HUO

Let's move on to the 1970s, when the tube, or pipe, arrives. How did this enter the work?

RG

The interesting thing about this—and you don't see it in this installation photo—is that the tube ended in a window; it was butted up against a large glass. So a person would be standing here, say, there was a long horizontal section, and then a slight angle going up to a glass. So it was the question of whether it continued through the glass or not. But it stopped at the glass. It was also another extremely fragile thing, hanging on wires. It again had to do with height and length and horizontality.



HUO

Also in the 1970s you began using wood beams.

RG

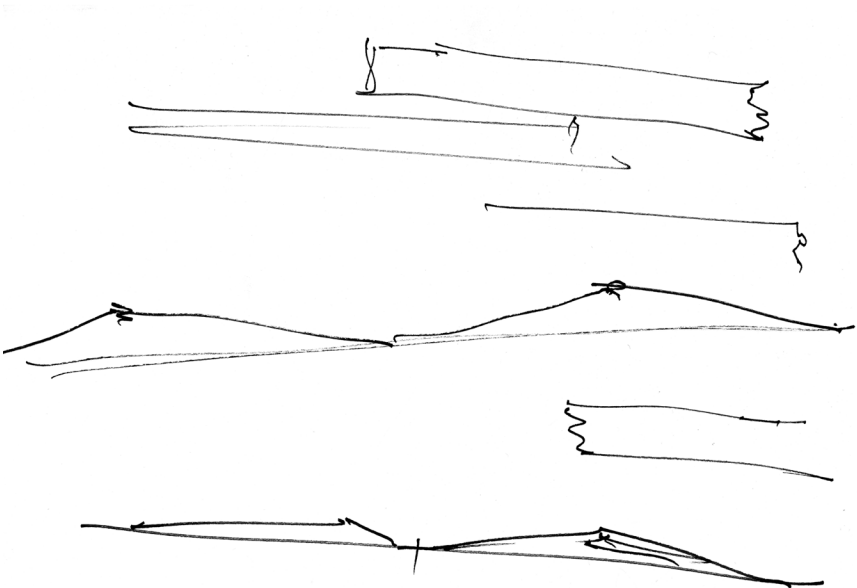
I think this is my favorite photograph of my work. That's a quiet moment on Crosby Street. It's just a very slight bend. It has something to do with that last sculpture of the pipe that had a very slight bend. This has a crack here and a crack here, and it just supports itself, barely. Again, it's very fragile. If somebody stepped on it, that would be the end of it. It's asking for somebody to step on it. There is a saw cut in the middle, making two beams that have two breaks.

HUO

You told Ulrich Loock in your interview with him that the masking tape around your drawings has a way of tearing or breaking, which you then applied to the wood beam. Can you explain that?

RG

I meant that ripping the tape, rather than cutting it with scissors, gives it an uneven end, which is similar to what happens when you break a piece of wood. You get a broken feeling.



HUO

Was there a conscious intention to break the idea of the wholeness of the minimalistic object, which Donald Judd wrote a lot about, or was it simply something that happened?

RG

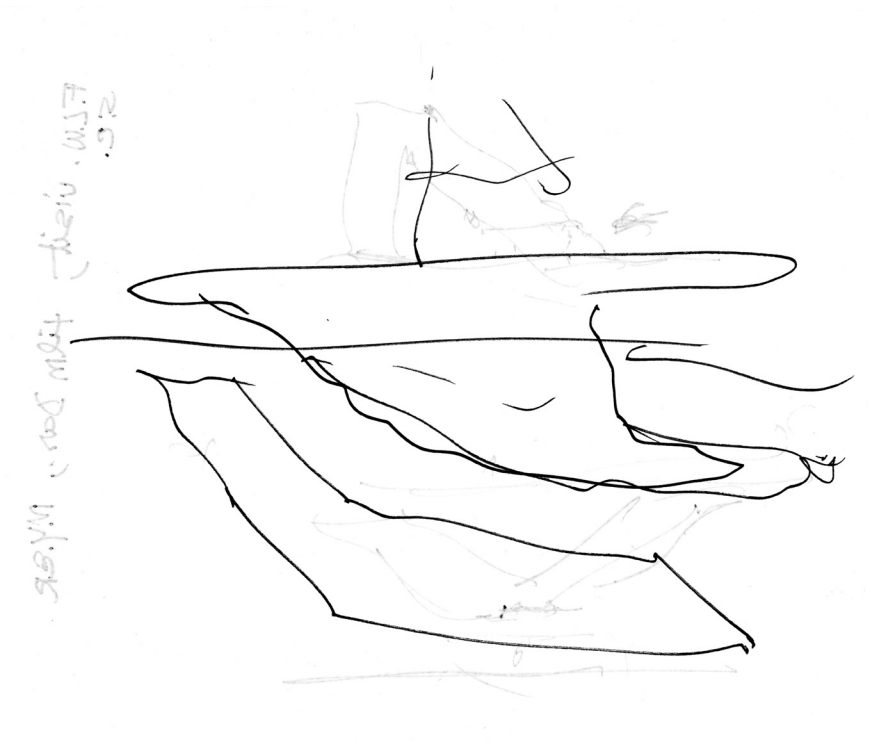
It had nothing to do with the minimalist idea, really. It had to do with how you change the direction of a piece of wood, say.

HUO

And then in the 1970s there are more of these broken lines, but some are outdoors. This is a beautiful photograph of a work in a field in Fresno. It's on the brink of the invisible.

RG

Yes. And there was an awful lot to it that is not seen. What interested me in the Fresno area was the fact that the land is called hardpan. If this is the line of the ground, the top two or three feet is a very hard surface and then it's soft down below, so that when I planted these things in the ground we had a strong point there.



HUO

And the broken line appears also here. So are these residues from a construction site?

RG

Yes, that is a piling, a heavy wooden beam that I broke in the middle.

HUO

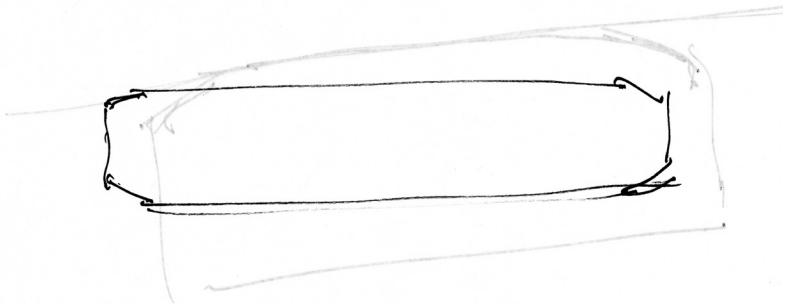
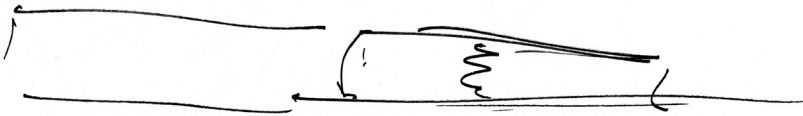
It sounds violent.

RG

But it's not very violent actually; they're very, very soft. It makes me think of John Chamberlain saying, "If I lean into the sheet metal, I make a dent. The sheet metal is like flesh." Meaning that it gives; there's no violence, really. There's strength but it's not a violent act. This work had grease on it as well. Grease seems so beautiful, you know. So smooth. Before that a lot of these things were creosoted, which also has a certain nice quality to it, a heavy odor that is sensual. It's a nice material to smooch on there. But delicate too, because if a piece of dirt gets on it, it's hard to get it off. It's delicate, the way some of the bent pipe pieces are sandblasted so that if you touch it with your hand, the grease from your hand comes off.

HUO

Then in the 1980s you moved out of Broome Street and into a studio in Williamsburg. Another incredible piece, one that is quasi-architectural, was installed in Serralves in 2005 and called The Trailer Piece. You had a trailer in Williamsburg, right?





RG

It was a rather dangerous area at the time, and in order to secure my trailer, I covered it with corrugated. I loved corrugated, and I had unlimited supplies; it was just all over the place, piles of it. And then I thought, well, this is interesting, let's remove the trailer and just have the shell. I put it on the legs to elevate it slightly. That's how that came about.

HUO

Wheels then come back in the 1980s, which is interesting. We talked already about the 1969 vehicle.

RG

I think of these as discs but they are wheel-like, that's true. This sculpture was a happy sort of accident. While removing this concrete section of wall, it happened to fall onto a blue tarp, and I thought it was quite interesting to look at.

HUO

It was a chance encounter?

RG

Yes.

HUO

Is chance important?

RG

I think so, all the time. The way things fall together: Is it half chance, and half, maybe, some kind of feeling? You put something with something else and it becomes a third thing entirely.

HUO

Whistler said, "Art happens." It just falls into place.

RG

Yes. And Chamberlain said, "Everybody's making sculpture all the time, they just don't realize it." If you throw a wet towel in the corner, that's a sculpture, isn't it?

HUO

Chamberlain did a piece for my show, "Do It", which is basically a bit like that: you have lots of pieces of cloth in the room and throw them around. And that's it. Anybody can do it. What's the role of books and printed matter for you? A lot of artists in the 1960s and 1970s did artist books. Did you?

RG

No, never. I was never asked, and I don't think I ever thought about it. My first books were the two photography books. I've always taken a lot of pictures and snapshots, and given them to friends or kept them for a while. Just to look at things and keep a record of stuff.

HUO

It's interesting that you don't build models of your sculptures, but your photographs have to do with models. It's a paradox, no?

RG

They're supposed to have a joke in them, or a trick. Like, why is that traffic cone there with those cypress trees?

HUO

Can you tell me about your more recent car?

RG

It's a triangulated, three-wheeled vehicle. It's offset, eccentric: the driver sits to one side. It's driven by a propeller. It was improved over the years so that it functions pretty well.

HUO

So it can actually go quite fast with the propeller?

RG

Oh yes, it goes fast. I don't know how fast it goes. It has no brakes. My feet are the brakes!

HUO

So you self-tested it?

RG

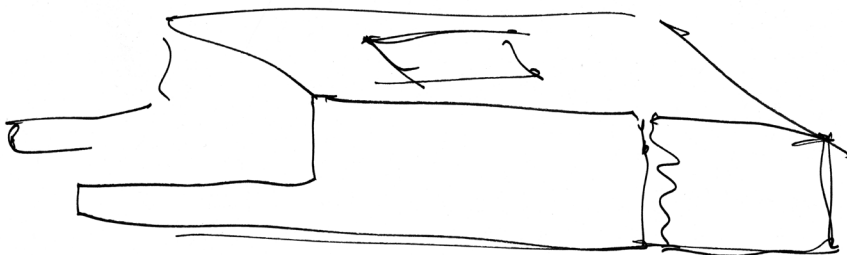
All the time. We changed propellers, changed engines, tried to get it better and better.

HUO

In the 1990s there was a transition to more building-like things that are almost like stage sets, or props. Also the works became more frequently untitled, whereas in the beginning you had the geographical titles. Why did you dispense with titles?

RG

I didn't want to pin things down, to be too specific. I didn't want to invite any association with anything. It seemed appropriate to the works to leave



them open to any reading one might have.

HUO

And at a certain point the whole room became the artwork?

RG

I guess so, yes, because the work took up the whole room, or at least what was in the room was the artwork.

HUO

Did you ever work in series?

RG

No.

HUO

So many artists work in series, but you move on.

RG

I know. I make one thing and then I make something else. You can look at it positively or negatively. Positively, let's hope. It may also be laziness.

HUO

Or resisting the idea that the work becomes a brand that is repeated.

RG

Yes, I don't like that.

HUO

Rainer Maria Rilke wrote a little book, *Letters to a Young Poet*. What in 2015 would be your advice to a young artist?

RG

Keep looking around, experiencing things, and reading as much as possible. Go places, and look and experience the whole thing. Look at the architecture. New York for instance is so full of everything. There's so much. It's wide open.

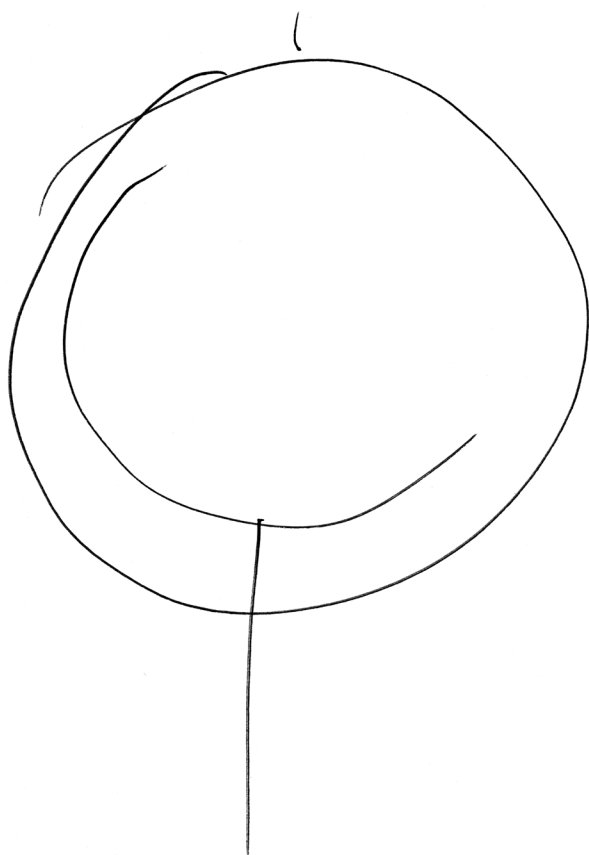
HUO

Thank you so much. It was a magical interview.

RG

Thank you.

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