

## **DIALOGUE BETWEEN ROBERT WATTS, GEOFFREY HENDRICKS, AND GARY KUEHN, 1982**

As the Rutgers MFA program was coming into existence, from 1958–1963, students and faculty were actively involved in the shows and events leading to the ideas that grew from, and challenged abstract expressionism. In the exchange below, faculty members Robert Watts, Geoffrey Hendricks, and Gary Kuehn discuss early years of Rutgers program. Kuehn was a student at that time, Watts and Hendricks young faculty members whose careers were just taking off.

**Gary:** From my perspective, being in sync with the world was the most important aspect of the program. We were in the academic situation, that goes without saying, but the atmosphere was so in touch with the world that you just went about your business in a very urgent way ... You did the art that you were doing in a more connected, serious way because of the ties to New York. Most of the people, the students had that kind of push, and if there was anything special, it was one of those moments in time where you had just an incredible situation that allowed for experimentation. Some of the people who were here—Don Burgy, Keith Sonnier, Jackie Winsor, and Joan Snyder—we all influenced each other. I was certainly influenced by all the things that were going on. It wasn't that Rutgers was only a school ...

**Geoff:** People were constantly involved with the art world in the city. There were events at Judson Church and the Reuben Gallery.

**Gary:** And there were the things that Bob did for me, introducing me to different people, and the Smolin Gallery that [Allan] Kaprow was involved in ... I made a huge chair there, out of steel, that they used as a referee's chair.

**Bob:** That was at the Yam Festival. The chair went to the Kornblee Gallery for the Ping Pong game. That was all Festival.

**Geoff:** And the happenings at George Segal's farm were also part of the Yam Festival, weren't they?

**Bob:** Yes, that was sort of an off-shoot, organized by Kaprow. Gary, you also did a piece at that time, at the Hardware Poets Playhouse. You did a performance piece, or an environment, with umbrellas, or something ...

**Gary:** Yes, it was very involved.

**Bob:** It was a beautiful piece.

**Gary:** I still haven't recovered. It scared the shit out of me.

**Geoff:** That's what Rutgers can do for you.

**Gary:** The important point in all of this is that artists in New York involved in new work thought of Rutgers as a sympathetic place to do things. When an event occurred at Rutgers, such as Al Hansen's in the gym, or the Flux Games, dozens of people would come in from New York. Douglass was a primary place for experimentation where you had an audience. Now colleges are played to and after ... it's just somewhat different.

**Bob:** One of the important things about this time, I feel, was the ability of the students and the faculty to merge and do things together in a very free open way, with no pretense, no gap really between students and faculty. It was all very free and open and involving and very natural. It's very different today.

**Gary:** My connection with you, Bob, was very important too; you had a big influence on me, but finally, ultimately, I was really going somewhere else (in my own work), but it still worked all the way with you down the line, and for other students with other faculty members. I had the same relationship with Roy Lichtenstein. My work wasn't going anywhere ultimately connected to what he stood for, but it was really that something just sort of clicked between us.

**Geoff:** Was Roy there just when you came?

**Gary:** Yes, I had Roy for drawing. What he was giving me was the whole Ohio State Hoyt Sherman system which I didn't buy at all, but you know it was OK. I was just getting into painting, trying out ideas. Those were my first paintings. I can remember trying to make a formalist painting with you, Bob. Then you came in one day, and I said, "I want to make a painting without any structure," and you said, "Good luck, Charlie."

**Geoff:** We were at a point in time in our own careers where it was the most natural move to make the connection with New York, and there were graduate students who were doing it too, and different faculty going ahead and catching on.

**Bob:** That's right.

**Geoff:** Today there are graduate students still doing it, like Michael Peglau having a show not long ago. Barbara Seyda and Kimberley Lewis were the hit of the White Columns Christmas fashion show. Some are part of the post-pop punk new wave scene, at alternate spaces like Fashion MODA and "A's." Bradley Wester took charge of the programming at Inroads. Deborah Whitman and Linda Nishio had installations and have done performances at Franklin Furnace.

**Gary:** I'd like to add something about the closeness with students then. It was very informal. When Helen Frankenthaler came out, you were all functioning as a faculty, but we all went to the movies together on Saturday night in Lambertville. We were informal, but at the same time, you were the professors. There were a lot of creative demands, to push work to your

limits and beyond, that remained unspoken, because nobody really tested them. I was also influenced by a lot of the other things that were going on. It wasn't a school for performance, or happenings, it was that the surrounding activities were all very interesting and fed into our work, and played off against pop art. The whole thing about Rutgers was that it skirted the edge of Minimalism, and in its own way rejected, in a very distinctive way, Abstract Expressionism. Work coming from Rutgers was based on the concrete object or image coming from real time and environments and happenings on the one hand, and Pop Art on the other. I'm not sure what it was, but something really went on that made for some distinctive work that was shaped by these factors.

**Geoff:** You, Gary, were included in the *Eccentric Abstraction* show that Lucy Lippard put together, at Fischbach. Wasn't Keith Sonnier also in it?

**Gary:** Yes, Eva Hesse and Louise Bourgeois, Alice Adams and I, sort of a funny group. I remember Lucy doing an article about a kind of abstraction that she was starting to see. I think Rutgers played a lot into that beginning of process work, and certain material-oriented sculptures. Keith's were very involved—Do you remember those motorized pup-tent shaped pieces, cloth pieces with a blower and an on/off switch. He also did a lot of work with sewing machines.

**Bob:** Probably an influence from [Claes] Oldenburg.

**Geoff:** But it's a whole mix. Maybe also an interaction with you, Gary, because you were getting into some of these hard/soft things already by that time, the whole compression of material, and contrast of forces. Happenings and Fluxus brought out that one can take something real and deal with forces that are there within it. It's not like making an object that is once removed from reality, but it's getting into the experience of the process of making art. You look at the real world, and there is your source material. Rutgers is not a program that's led into a big rich tradition of performance people—big names in performance aren't specifically from here—but our roots in performance, in happenings, and Fluxus were catalytic to other art ideas opening up. For example Oldenburg's involvement with performance was fairly short-lived. Performance was his way to get into Pop Art, and into a new kind of object-making perception of the world. When Roy was here, his conversations with Kaprow and what he was doing, and with happenings, gave him the license to go ahead and do his comic strips.

**Gary:** Bob made pieces at Bianchini, that had come out of performance work. They had grass planted in them. Mine were blank canvasses with a window-box, with things planted in it. The idea at that time was that we wanted to make a more solid, certain statement and avoid the uncertainties of Abstract Expressionism. That's where the environments, happenings, and performance became a very strong influence.

**Geoff:** I remember attending one College Art Association meeting where Segal was talking about this shift, and was comparing abstract expressionism to the monk in his cell, carrying on

a private dialogue with the canvas. Pop Art was getting out into the real world and entering into conversations with other people, a radical shift from this introspection.

**Gary:** And the other thing which is tricky is the influence of Pop Art or Segal, because there were influences. There was clearly something there in terms of attitude. Roy's paintings were very clear then and it reinforced that message that was always there in environments and performances about clarity and communication. The thing which Geoff mentioned, about being out in the world, and the need for clarity and the need for certainty, or as much certainty as one could hope for in the visual arts, I think came from these two divergent sources. I remember talking about Roy's work, and there was never any question about trying to make work like that, there was no Pop school. I think the influence came in a much more profound way, a sort of a digestion of the implications, and then there was a generation that went on to make art based on those lessons.

**Geoff:** Yes. The people there in the program were seeing the lessons of both Kaprow and Lichtenstein as one of taking leaps and trying out things that were there within their gut feelings, and going ahead. There really never was a school of performance art, and a school of Pop Art, but those influences were there, saying, "Try to see what's there and go ahead."

**Bob:** The program was very open, and we tried to keep it open all the time. We had to fight for that, sort of a continual battle, we had to fight hard. I think there was some encouragement for students to be able to explore and not to come in with a fixed repertory of things that they thought they could continue with. They were, perhaps, overwhelmed at times by all of the things that were in circulation. But it was always indicated to them—or at least I tried to indicate to them—that they were the ones who had to survive this and had to be able to deal with it in some way, which I think meant pitching in and trying to find out what it was all about.

**Gary:** It was a very particular moment when things were very clear that something had ended. Everybody came out on the dead body of Abstract Expressionism. Maybe one thing for us was that we could really do what we wanted with nothing to lose. You could work with impunity in a way because it had your support with a lot of things going on. It was fight at a pivotal point with the ballgame wide open.

**Bob:** Another interesting aspect of this is that a few of us were second generation abstract expressionists, and we were in the process of rejecting that and doing something else in our work. When a lot of you people came into the program, we were also in transition, so you were caught in that transitional energy.

**Gary:** Another thing I would like to say about teaching—somehow you were not the teacher. Really my connection to you was that you were an artist doing these things that I had the good fortune, by virtue of the fact that I was involved with the program, to be in contact with. This teacher-student thing may work on some level, but speaking for myself, the people who have affected me the most strongly were not teachers, and if they were teachers there was always some other aspect or dimension of a relationship with them.

**Bob:** It's a way of teaching without teaching.

**Gary:** Somehow it did the whole thing. It made an atmosphere that was a no bull-shit situation—you went to school without the idea that this was school. It was getting together and working together with the right amount of competition.

**Geoff:** But then there was a second group that came along, with Mac Adams, Charles Simonds, and others, and all the activities at Billy Apple's loft in the early seventies. There were a dozen or more Rutgers people who came and were doing strong work there as stepping stones to other things. This is happening today, with the students getting to New York.

**Bob:** The Vietnam War had a great deal to do with that period, and John F. Kennedy. There were different kinds of energies.

**Gary:** Barbara Rose spoke here once about a phenomenon related to the pop times that may account for the conservatism after the sixties. Artists began doing so well that it was getting to the point where middle class families were encouraging their children to go into art, as a viable career like dentistry. I think that brings a funny kind of conservatism that may have something to do with the idea that you can really make a career out of art. It gets to be less idea-motivated and kind of career-motivated. You may have people coming into the program with the attitude that “I know that I'm going to be this kind of painter, so don't try to shake me with any kind of information about what's going on in the world or what issues might be relevant.”

**Geoff:** Early in the century, from 1912 to 1918, there was a lot going on with Dada and the beginnings of Cubism and Futurism that influenced the future course of art. The late fifties and early sixties were in a certain way also a time when certain attitudes were being challenged. By good luck or coincidence, certain people who were making a direct impact on the changes were at Rutgers and were going out from here.

**Gary:** I think some of that momentum is lost now.

**Geoff:** I think what we're saying here is that an environment for new ideas comes about when one is not thinking about a preset program, but approaches art making with an attitude that is open to questioning, and a chance coming together. People here had a range of backgrounds and a willingness to go ahead and try new things. It's interesting, however, that Kaprow, Segal, and you, Bob, all chose to stay outside of New York while challenging abstract expressionism that was the New York School. You were people trying to change the world.

**Gary:** Now it gets to the point where people want to fit into the art world that already exists rather than changing it. They're circling around, trying to fit into the art world, asking how to get onto the bandwagon, rather than aggressively saying, “I want to change the world.” It's a Madison Avenue influence. Schools want to fit into the world rather than be the center which is the jumping off point to change the world. Maybe this relates to why the program was so vital at the time—because it was changing the world. The early part of the program was absolutely involved in forming and changing the world.

First published in *Rutgers Master of Fine Arts 20th Anniversary Exhibition*. Trenton, NJ: New Jersey State Museum, 1982, n.p.