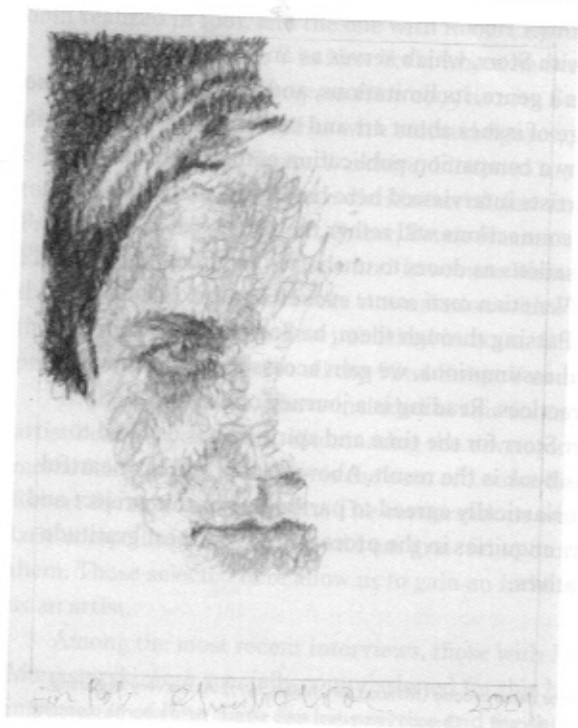


Edited transcript of a longer interview with Robert Storr conducted by
Francesca Pietropaolo on 24 September and 1 October 2016 at Storr's house,
Brooklyn, New York.



Chuck Close
Rob, 2001

Colored pencil on paper, 22.8 x 17.7 cm (9 x 7 in.)

Private collection, New York. © Chuck Close. Courtesy Pace Gallery. Photo courtesy Robert Storr

Robert Storr

Interviewing is a Form for Finding Out: Conversation with Francesca Pietropaolo

FRANCESCA PIETROPAOLO How would you describe your approach to interviewing? What makes a fine interview?

ROBERT STORR For me the key element when interviewing artists, or anybody, is

that you want to know what they think and how they think. A good interview with someone results from drawing them out, making them feel safe to say what is on their mind. Artists can be expected not to tell you where their ideas come from. Richard Serra famously told Chuck Close once that an artist is only as good as the obscurity of his sources. The point is that there are subjects that the artists don't want to talk about, that you're almost never going to get them to discuss, and you don't want to put them in a situation where you effectively say, "Got you!"; I've prepared the way for Gerhard Richter and other artists to say things that I didn't expect they would say, but it wasn't me versus them in a sort of prosecutorial relationship. It was me and them as two people with a common interest – art, generally, their work, specifically – trying to account for the texture of it and the reasons for it. So my general approach is not to cross-examine artists, but to ask real questions to which I would like to have the answers.

FP Interviewing is also about psychology in the sense of being able to establish a relationship.

RS It's absolutely about that. And in many cases I have done two, three, four, or five interviews with an artist – in the case of Louise [Bourgeois] perhaps twenty. So it really is about forming a relationship. One which fluctuates between deeper layers and shallower layers, the way most real relationships do. I think people have great interest in thought processes of artists and therefore, when talking to them, you're doing something on behalf



Peter Moore, Photo of Jerry Neuzer, Karen Meyerhoff, Robert Storr, and Louise Bourgeois at MoMA, New York, 1991, during the installation of the DISLOCATIONS exhibition. Photo: Peter Moore © Barbara Moore / Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

of your reader. Of course what an artist says about his/her work is not the first word, is not the last word. It is a word. A singularly well-informed word but one of many. It doesn't control interpretation, but it does give you useful information as you make your own interpretation of the work.

FP A common thread among these dialogs with such a diverse array of artists – of different generations and of different formal and poetic inclinations – is that you ask questions without showing off. You're an attentive listener and that allows you to gain trust and thus give readers remarkable access to the artists' methods and thinking. Is this a deliberate strategy on your part?

RS Yes. It's a combination of my temperament and my sense of what an interview is as a genre. The interview is a form for finding things out. An important component is resisting the temptation to show the artists how much you already know about their work, as well as the temptation to show off to the reader how smart you are. Academics are too often prone to ask questions that make the artists' answers more and less superfluous. I don't think it's a constructive way to work so what I do is try to learn as much as I can beforehand and make extensive notes about what is relevant and pertinent. I look for key transitional moments in a person's work or life. I plan it out and then I set it all aside. I only look at the notes when I get lost or when I need to check a fact. So thereafter it's just a conversation. It's a way of saying, "Now, tell me about yourself. Who are you? What do you do? Why?". As I said, I try to put the person I'm questioning at ease. Of course, I am not entirely innocent in the sense that the more you make people feel comfortable, the more they are likely to take risks in what they tell you. I do press for answers sometimes when necessary, and sometimes I press to go into areas that are uncomfortable for the person being interviewed. But in general I avoid grilling the subject. What would be the purpose if you can be pretty certain that they'd clam up?

FP These interviews are of a remarkable range. They span from the early 1980s to the present. Brought together in a book, for the first time, they will have a new dimension to them: sparking dialogs with or against each other. Do you imagine your readership, at all, for such a collection of primary sources?

RS No writer knows who reads them and certainly none has control over who reads them. I am trying to produce sources that are useful to intelligent people who are not specialists but are acute enough to expect and make the most of the best information. I avoid professional jargon and gossip – insiders' talk and insiders' topics – and instead focus on the "art part". And I try to do it in a way that is inclusive of a variety of possible readers – from very sophisticated to very unsophisticated but intelligent. What you can control is whether you rise to the level of what the intelligent reader wants and deserves.

FP Next to the in-depth conversations, where you tend to have the artists talk about their work since their beginnings to give a sense of its development, there are more focused, shorter interviews occasioned by artist's commissions – notably the Richard Serra interview about his *Monumenta* installation in Paris (2008) – or shows of new work – for instance the Tatiana Trouvé conversation about her exhibitions at the Migros Museum in Zurich (2009–10) and at Gagosian Gallery in New York (2010). How do you see this more occasional kind of interview and its possibilities?

RS When art writing is good journalism it is both well-informed and critical. But being occasional writing, it is not in-depth scholarship and needs not be ponderous. It may be done by scholars, but it's not by its nature scholarly. So I accept comfortably that in doing

occasion
appears.
to artist
standar
in anoth
FP Tha
others –
RS Tha
from the
unravel
occasion
poser wh
writing
writer sh
how mu
they are
they spe
using the
get their
are alrea
immedia
in interv
neither is
understa
FP You
to the pu
and an a
RS As y
all on the
four min
to get to
FP Wha
fore a plu
of the bic

occasional writing and interviewing, the occasion should play a part in the way the text appears. And it's often the way life enters into the back-and-forth, because if you talk to artists and you don't use the occasion to the fullest extent, the results tend to hew to the standard kind of press responses artists are prone to giving, responses that are on record in another place already.

FP That way, interview after interview, artists create – some more strongly than others – a narrative of their own.

RS That's right. So if there is a special occasion, often that's the way to get away from the habitual narrative and move into something that is on their mind that you can unravel into a discussion about their background, their motivation, and so forth. I see the occasional nature of journalism as a good thing. Virgil Thomson – the American composer who worked with Gertrude Stein on two operas and for many years made a living writing musical reviews for the kind of daily newspaper straphangers read – said that a writer should never underestimate the intelligence of the reader and never overestimate how much they know. The difference between how much people know and how intelligent they are is a crucial thing because for many people culture is a small portion of what they spend their time with – they can't afford to have it be any larger because they are using their primary mental activity to do whatever they do in life. Therefore, when you get their attention you have to meet them where they are. One shouldn't assume that they are already up to date or privy to critical debates. But if they are quick-witted, they will immediately detect condescendence, or an insider's exchange that ignores them. However, in interviews the opportunity exists to democratize the discourses of art for a reader who neither is, nor aspires to be, an expert, but who does have a broad, deep commitment to understanding – what Virginia Woolf called the “common reader”.

FP You approach the craft of making exhibitions in much the same way in relation to the public. You wear many hats in that you are a critic, an art historian, a curator, and an artist yourself. Are these vantage points in permanent dialog with each other?

RS As you know, I have many hats and some good ones too! [both laugh] But they are all on the same head [both laugh]. They argue with each other. I am often of three or four minds about many things. And I do my interviewing and my writing in an attempt to get to the heart of those disagreements.

FP What's interesting about the interviewing that you do is also that it brings to the fore a plurality of approaches in interpreting art: you draw attention to the importance of the biographical element in relation to the artist's way of thinking and working;



Robert Storr and Talana Towel, Paris, 2015.
Photo courtesy Robert Storr.

first word, of many; you make your artists – is that you allows you and interview is as a ment is resisting work, as well re too often us, I don't I can before- for key tran- aside, I only it's just a ? What do course, I am able, the more times when the person the purpose 1980s a new imagine your reads them. specialists and profes- n the "art –from very either you talk about re more Richard s of new t the (2010). But being may be t in doing

you address the artistic and cultural context as well as issues relating to the very process of art-making. Are these all elements that together inform your method?

RS Absolutely. I simply do not believe that art is a by-product of superstructural factors as many academics currently profess – rather, art is created by real people in real time. Each artist is born in a certain era, concerned about certain issues, and he or she works on or around them in a place that conditions what they're likely to do. Artists don't just follow the dictates of the episteme or the zeitgeist. It may be that the interpreter of art can explain the work by using the episteme to frame it, but that's a convenience that academics have. They have a distance from the activity in general and a distance from the individual creative event. But art happens in the present. People make things this morning, made them yesterday and will make them tomorrow. I am an existentialist in the sense of being a person who believes philosophically that it's the decision-making of a unique individual, in unique circumstances, at a specific moment that accounts for how art comes into existence. Those are the conditions that Walter Benjamin set down for the creation of "aura": the experience of art occurs in unique individuals, in unique circumstances, at a specific moment. Of course that doesn't mean that that's where all the discourse ought to be. But it's where I want to be. And it's where I think most artists are.

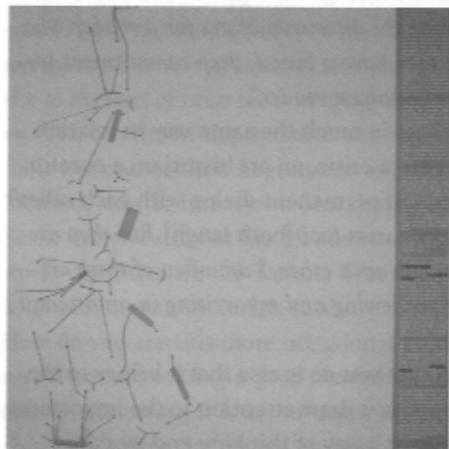
FP As an artist yourself, you initiate insightful discussions with the artists about the making of their work, providing the reader with important information in that domain.

RS Honestly, if I were a well-known artist, I think that probably they wouldn't do it in the same way. However, because I have explored many of these things to some considerable extent on my own, and I know what the difficult aspects of the problems are, I can have this conversation without getting into a contest with them over our respective responses to it – because my response is not known to them. I don't push it. They can hear in the way I talk that I am paying close attention to familiar problems.

FP You're almost side-by-side with them, in some of these conversations. Again, it's to make others, the reader, understand.

RS Yes. From the reader's point of view, I'm on the inside inviting them to come inside. Whereas from the artist's point of view, I'm enough on the inside that they will feel comfortable saying things that go beyond the bare basics granted to total outsiders.

FP In previous interviews you have said something to the effect that artists are your universities, which I think is very beautiful. Would you expand on that?



Robert Storr
Untitled, 1992a
Introductory page (loosely based on Alfred H. Barr's diagram on abstract art), from the portfolio 10: Artist as Cartographer by various artists, lithograph, 66 x 66 cm (26 x 26 in.)
Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St. Louis, university purchase, 1994. © Robert Storr.
Photo courtesy Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum

RS Peter Saul, for instance, was somebody I argued with when I was a student and have

argued with ever since – which is to say, on and off for thirty-five years! – and sometimes I find the arguments frustrating because I think he avoids expressing his self-consciousness

about his work by wearing the comic mask of a total, know-nothing, provincial. While

that's half true, Peter's father sent him to a very severe English

boys' school where, as was customary, he was frequently beaten for misbehavior. So he has

experienced a lot of abuse early in his life. If you know that, then the stuff that he puts in

his pictures is not so hard to understand. You may never grasp the nitty-gritty of it, but if

you are aware that his fascination with extreme violence is the synthesized effect of genuine

trauma in his life then his over-the-top sight gags are no longer just vulgar comedy, the

grotesque in his work is no longer merely self-indulgent caprice. The paintings of his that

I like the most are those inspired by the execution of Caryl Chessman, a murderer who

was gassed in California in 1960, though Peter recasts it as an electrocution [Man in

Electric Chair, 1966 and others]. Chessman was the subject of work by many other artists

1. Storr was artistic director of the Grand Venice Biennale (2007), for which he organized the exhibition Think with the Senses – Feel with the Mind.



Peter Saul, Robert Storr, and Sarah Carrington visiting the Whitney Museum of American Art, 2015.
Photo: Francesca Pietropoli. Courtesy Robert Storr

FP Oh, really?

to terms with.

RS All of the interviews have fed my thinking to some extent. Some of them I did because the person I interviewed was a person that I had long thought about but couldn't come

lary fed your own thinking?

Venice Biennale exhibition? Are there some interviews with artists that have particu-

FP You told me once about how Bruce Nauman inspired you in thinking about the relationship between the conceptual and the perceptual that you tackled in your

being inarticulate is an old-fashioned prejudice.

behind my saying, "These people are obviously smart and articulate." The idea of artists

people rather than going straight to secondary sources. That was part of the impulse

in others. So in approaching art it seems natural to me to go and ask questions of creative

value of first-hand witness in history was disputed in some ways, as well as confirmed

So I come from a family where the historical method is a topic, and the question of the

are you
feel com-
ne inside.
Again, it's
in the
responses
I can have
considerable
I do it in
that domain.
ts about the
to be. But
a specific
n of "aura";
s into exist-
individual,
ense of being
ng, made
the individual
hat academics
ter of art can
ts don't just
r she works
a real time.
ctural factors
method?
the very

including Bruce Conner [Child (1959–60)] and Edward Kienholz [The Psycho Vendetta Case (1960)]. Chessman was one of the famous test cases for the death penalty in this country before the death penalty was broadly abolished. I remember his execution because I was forced to listen to the broadcast of its gruesome details in school in California. It was terrible. For Peter, Chessman's execution was a metaphor of the cruelty of authority and he turned it into an absurdly funny, sadistic image.

FP You two met on the occasion of a critique he gave you of your paintings, right?

RS Yes, I met him at the Skowhegan [School of Painting and Sculpture] summer art program [in Maine] in 1978.² He looked at my work (which was abstract) and said, "It sure looks like modern art to me!" meaning "bad". I defended my painting and said, "Let me see your stuff!" or something to that effect. We went to his studio and the argument got more interesting and, over time, it produced lots of letters back and forth. That's the way it went with many artists. Al Held was also somebody I used to argue with a lot. And many people I have interviewed are ones with whom I disagree. And that's OK, that's good, you know. I am not there to clean up my thinking by only talking to people who think the same way, and I'm not there to clean up their thinking.

FP Over the years you had many public conversations with artists for the 92nd Street Y in New York, one of them being with Al Held. A small but significant selection of them appears in this book. How different for you is the experience of interviewing in a quite intimate way – going to an artist's studio or having an artist come to your house – to having a conversation in public?

RS It differs a lot. In a public situation you are really mindful of the audience. As Thomson said, you can't overestimate their information. The interview subject may take off in a direction that you and that person know about but the audience doesn't, in which case you have to stop, fill in some of the blanks as an aside, until the audience catches up, and proceed from there. Or if the interview subject has stage fright you have to manage that, coax them to open up. Or if he/she begins to toy with the audience you may have to draw a line at certain points.

FP So there are many factors to juggle with.

RS Yes, and it means you're not thinking 100 percent about the subject. You're thinking about all these other contingencies.

FP It's like a performance.

RS Yes. Sometimes it produces interesting results. This was the case of a public interview with Bruce Nauman who does very few of them. In the course of the conversation his eyes began to moisten and you could tell he was talking about something very important to him. I don't think that that would have happened in a one-on-one interview. I think it was the fact that he was sort of trapped on stage, and wanted to go some place that was in fact very emotional for him. People could see that. It was a very interesting dynamic and my job under those circumstances was to keep him talking, keep him going where he wanted to go or maybe didn't want to go but had inadvertently found himself. I wish I could remember what the topic was, but I distinctly remember the look of vulnerability on his face. And, since, once in a private conversation between us, late at night in New Mexico, I had teared up, it was like watching a friend reciprocating a confidence without knowing exactly what had triggered it at that moment. I took it as a sign of trust.

2. Established in 1946, the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Maine, comprises an intensive summer residency program of nine weeks for emerging visual artists.

FP A great show of new videos by him has just opened downtown at Sperone West-

water Gallery [New York].
rs Yeah. Bruce's work has always been more grounded in traditional studio practices that most people championing him would acknowledge. They maintain that Bruce is a radical, therefore they don't talk about aspects of his art that are in fact deeply traditional, but only about those which are paradigm breaking. But you can't talk about one without the other in his case. He did a seminal neon piece in the 1960s [Neon Templates of the Left Half of My Body Taken at Ten Inch Intervals (1966)] referencing the seven sections of the body in classical sculpture. In the new works in the show he is thinking about

and riffing on classical sculpture and its notion of contrapposto, employing brand new twentieth-century materials. In the videos that you see as you ascend the building, Bruce stacks video units and has them in different orientations so that it's as if the body were rotating on an axis. It happens to be that there are seven of those units. We come right back to the neon piece from the 1960s. The other dimension to this new work is that Bruce was sick the last couple of years, and he has been feeling his mortality and struggling with a body that doesn't want to do what he wants to do. He's always been a very physical man, a great horseman, loving the outdoors and he suddenly found himself with a body that won't obey. This prompted him to do something he hasn't done in years, which is to be the primary performer in a very physical piece. It is extraordinary.

Now, if writers conversant with critical theory want to talk about The Body in the abstract and immediately start quoting other sources – Judith Butler and so on – I have no objections to it but, before doing that, they should talk about what is actually there, what the particular artist – Bruce or Yvonne Rainer, for example – has self-consciously put there. Or what an artist may put out there without being totally self-conscious but will not deny once you point it out to him/her. And what an interviewer can do is step into that breach and say, "Yes, by all means let's give artists more credit than they generally receive for having decision-making power, for having not a predetermined program, so much as questions they want to explore and a methodology for doing it." Let's find out more about what they think before we start relating it to what other people think. Particularly if those other



Pierre Huyghe and Robert Storr on a site visit in Venice, 2002, in connection with the artist's participation in the Venice Biennale then directed by Storr. Photo courtesy Robert Storr.

people are not in the visual arts, don't know much about what the artist is doing or didn't even know the artist existed. I think an awful lot of critical writing these days is a convenience or concession for people who are extremely specialized in certain spheres but not very keyed into the visual. And they try to apply the techniques of literary criticism – of the word – to the perceptual phenomena. Too many fail to learn what they need to know about the visual grammars before they do that. They don't describe enough, they don't explain enough, they don't bring into the mind what's really there in the work. So doing that is the task of the empirical critic and the interviewer.

FP What was the most challenging interview for you to do, perhaps one where the artist resisted more or where you were too close to the artist, which sometimes makes things difficult?

RS *That's hard to say. Some of the ones with Louise [Bourgeois] were very difficult because she would go on the defensive. Especially after I learned about her lover, whom I met in the early 1990s.*

FP You write about that in the book on her life and art that just came out.³ You learned about it accidentally, right?

RS *Yes. In my early time at MoMA I went to Chile and visited the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Santiago that was directed by a man named Nemesio Antúnez who had known Louise in the late 1940s/early 50s. He was an artist too.⁴ And he had been an actor as well – he appeared in the Costa-Gavras film *State of Siege* (1972), next to Yves Montand. We went to dinner together one night and during the evening he suddenly started talking to me about Louise. He talked about their affair, which I had not been aware of, nor, I think, was anyone. He knew I knew her and, also, he was still in love with her. The details he told me about her I haven't discussed with anybody because it is nobody's business.*

FP She was married to Robert Goldwater at the time of the affair.

RS *Yes, unhappily married in some ways. To my knowledge this is the only major affair that she had during her marriage. But it went on for quite a while. And I think it may have resumed in Paris when she and her family went there. By which time he was married too, but it was a real love match. So, the day after that dinner I went to the museum to look at some more art and when I was departing Nemesio said to me, "When you get back to New York, embrace Louise de ma part sur la bouche" (kiss Louise for me on the mouth). I didn't take it literally, but when I went to see her I delivered the message verbally and she glowed and then she shut down.*

FP Was she angry with you for finding out?

RS *No. She was absolutely delighted to receive the message – plainly she still loved the man and I think it was probably her most sexually satisfying relationship.*

FP Were you surprised by the relationship?

RS *No. Hers was an odd, mismatched marriage in many ways, and I think a sexually frustrated one. We'll leave it there, but there have been suggestions by numbers of people –*

3. Robert Storr, *Intimate Geometries: The Art and Life of Louise Bourgeois*. (The Monacelli Press, New York, 2016), pp.122–3, 698–9. At the time of this interview, copies of the book had just arrived at Storr's house in advance of its publication.

4. Nemesio Antúnez (1918–93) and Bourgeois met in New York at Stanley William Hayter's experimental print shop, Atelier 17, in Greenwich Village where she had begun making prints in 1946. (At the outbreak of World War II, Atelier 17 had been transferred from Paris to New York.) Other artists Bourgeois met there include Joan Miró, Le Corbusier and Yves Tanguy.

who w
father
entirely
lander
and it
part of
FP Yo
ties, t
the ele
read B
him as
for you
RS In
and Ka
first Ba
Space.
when I
Louise,
up my e
astonish
The Po
part ser
a point
of the m
among
aggressi
mud, cl
reason.
behind
psychoa
have m
generati
one mo
interest
outspok
of Bach
artist's s
I on
de "La
That C
and Pa
tograph

5. Louise
(1948) sta
this inform
(Flammar

who would like to turn Louise into something she was not – that she became like her father who was a dragueur (womanizer). Of course she may have had other affairs. It's entirely possible though I doubt it. But I am pretty certain she was not a compulsive phlanderer. That's why the story with Nemesio was so important, her one big transgression and it was done with love, erotic excitement, and all of that. And it remained a major part of her life.

ff You pointed out to me yesterday that you suggested Bourgeois, then in her seven-
ties, to read Gaston Bachelard and gave her two volumes from his series of books on
the elements (earth, air, fire, and water). In her 1986 interview she says that had she
read Bachelard before, she would have been a different person. How did you discover
him as a writer and could you talk a little bit about the importance of his writing

for you?

rs In the late 1970s lots of my friends were reading him, for instance, Lynn Blumenthal
and Kate Horsfield of Video Data Bank for whom I did my first interviews. I think the
first Bachelard I read was the English language Beacon Press edition of *The Poetics of
Space*. Then, because I spoke French, I could find more that had not been translated. So
when I went to Paris I gradually started buying books, and then, when I got serious about
Louise, I realized that the topics of the books about the elements by Bachelard were right
up my alley, so I read them on spec. Louise said she had not known his writings. I was
astonished because she was a very well-read person. So it was like, "Wow!" Bachelard's
The Poetics of Space (1958) is the text most widely known, but he also wrote a four-
part series of books on the elements. He approached the discourse of culture and art from
a point of view of psychological tropes having to do with the phenomenological properties
of the materials that people use. He discusses the way in which earth – meaning stone
among other things – can be very hard, resistant, and how the resistance brings out
aggression in the maker. Or else the way in which it can be formless and lack resistance –
mud, clay, plaster – and can be either frustrating or satisfying to the maker for that
reason. Bachelard explores the nature of materials in relation to the psychological impetus
behind the desire to transform. Which I think is at least as interesting as Freudian
psychoanalysis, and in many cases more so. I am very aware of Freudian discourse and
have made selective use of it. And, for more or less legitimate reasons, there have been
generations of critics that tried to use psychoanalytical ideas to explain art. But it is only
one model. There's much about art that can't be explained in those terms. So Bachelard is
interesting in his own right and also as a counterweight to Freudian theory – he is quite
outsoken against psychological chauvinism. As it later turned out, Louise had read some
of Bachelard on her own, which gets us back to Serra's crack about the obscurity of an
artist's sources?

I once gave Louise the 1984 facsimile edition of *Les démoniaques dans l'art*, suivi
de "La foi qui guérit" (*Art and Those Possessed by Demons*, followed by "The Faith
That Cures") by the late nineteenth-century French psychologists Jean-Martin Charcot
and Paul Richer, with commentaries by Georges Didi-Huberman. It focuses on the pho-
tographic iconography of hysteria produced out of Charcot's Salpêtrière hospital in Paris

5. Louise Bourgeois began reading Bachelard as early as 1952. She read his *La terre et les rêves du repos*
(1948) starting from 10 August 1952 as indicated in her journals. We are indebted to Marie-Laure Bernadac for
(Flammarion, Paris), scheduled to appear in 2018.
this information which she discusses in a chapter of her forthcoming book *Louise Bourgeois: Femme courtoise*
and

in the nineteenth century.⁶ Louise didn't know about that at all. Didi-Huberman was very pleased to know that I had done so.

FP Was there anything that Louise introduced you to in terms of readings?

RS Not so much in terms of reading but visually. Her house was this amazing place, a lair – that's the word she used – stuffed – or might one say homophonically: layered with stuff. There were all these books in many different languages because of her husband, Robert Goldwater, who was an art historian. There were a lot of picture books, cabinets and flat files full of prints. So when I was allowed to, I would look at those and discover things I had never seen. One of the really great things that Louise did for me personally was to re-legitimize works from periods that had been brushed aside as being retrograde. Goldwater was very interested in Symbolism, he wrote a book about it. Louise was very interested in it too. She lived in it, so to speak. In the 1960s and 70s symbolism had a pretty low status in the art world and in culture in general, except among the hippies. But not at all among "serious people" [both laugh]. Nobody gave it much thought. I had been lucky to see a lot of Symbolist material in Philadelphia when I was in college and had access to the collection of Lessing Rosenwald, and I experienced a kind of guilty attraction to some of it. So when Louise said, "Yeah, come on in, the water is fine," in I went.

FP You discussed Blaise Pascal with her. She talks about his writing in ways that illuminate her own perspective and work. I would like to ask you: how do you relate to Pascal? What interests you of his writing?

RS I read Pascal a lot and early on – I was seventeen and living in France at the time. I am not religious and I'm not remotely Catholic, much less Jansenist, but I like the way his mind works. I immediately knew that when I started reading him. For years and years, he and [Ludwig] Wittgenstein, and a few philosophers who are precise about language, have been touchstones for me. Pascal is the kind of writer who addresses the metaphysical questions in a way that makes you think effectively about them all together,



Robert Ryman and Robert Storr at MoMA at the time of the artist's retrospective organized by Storr, c. 1993. Photo courtesy Robert Storr

6. Paul Richer, Jean-Martin Charcot, Georges Didi-Huberman and Pierre Fédida, *Les démoniaques dans l'art, suivi de "La foi qui guérit"* (Editions Macula, Paris, 1984). It is a facsimile edition of Charcot's works *Les démoniaques dans l'art* (1887) and *La foi qui guérit* (1892), with commentaries by Didi-Huberman and Fédida.

not just take
in relation to
was like, "Oh
is partially F
in 1967-8, so
in this countr
inventor of th
an immensely
belief is separ
prove everyth
And for wha
FP That's in
RS The first
are mystics r
almost what
and Bob Ry
them enorm
each decisio
the spirit of
FP Of the
her that you
you did so
onym? I thi
up with tha
RS One of
as a joke ma
as you do in
and at that
America an
her. I was a
fied as the
for her to h
tracks. I wo
my resume'
You kn
When she d
essays – an
her way of
just a ques
which some
inist moven
with 12 W
far. On the
Paris Revi
funny in t
transcribe

not just take a position on them as generally stated. Pascal is someone I've written about in relation to numerous artists. In that conversation with Louise, Pascal came up and it was like, "Oh, yeah, great, let's do that." Hers was a wholly French education and mine is partially French - I attended a boarding school connected to the Quakers in France in 1967-8, so we were both aware of his writing. If you talk about Pascal to most people in this country they know that he was a thinker of consequence and that he was the inventor of the computer, but most people don't know a word of his writing. I think he's an immensely important philosopher. For me the most crucial thing that he says is that belief is separate from proof. And you should respect it in those terms. You shouldn't try to prove everything you believe and you should admit it when you are making a leap of faith. And for what it is worth, it's exactly what Sol LeWitt thought.

FP That's interesting!
RS The first sentence of Sol's Sentences on Conceptual Art (1967) is "Conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists. They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach." It's almost what Pascal says, right? A great deal of criticism tries to take artists like LeWitt and Bob Rymann - people who have made amazing leaps of faith and have developed out of them enormously important bodies of work - and try to rationalize them, and explain that each decision was a conscious, rational, decision. That's not only untrue, but it also violates the spirit of the work.

FP Of the interviews you did with Bourgeois, you published selected statements by her that you edited, taking your questions out. When you published a full interview you did so using the pseudonym of Trevor Rots. Why did you choose to use a pseudonym? I think it's the only time you did it for an interview? And how did you come up with that name?

RS One of my oldest friends, Mary Davies, an artist and a scholar, called me Trevor Rots as a joke many years ago. It's my name reverted and you substitute the "b" with a "v" as you do in Spanish sometimes. It's a silly game. I was doing an interview with Louise and at that time I had written already some texts on her work, for instance for Art in America and Art Press. I was a little self-conscious about becoming a spokesperson for her. I was a free agent - I wasn't working for any artist - and I didn't want to be identified as the one who simply speaks for, or speaks to, Louise. And I didn't think it was good for her to have a pet critic/interviewer. So the reason for doing it was simply to cover my tracks. I wanted to do the interview, I wanted the information but I didn't need it "for my resume".

You know, Louise asked me also to edit interviews with her conducted by other people. When she didn't like something she would hand it to me - interviews and sometimes essays - and basically say, "You fix this." In my editing I tried to be non-intrusive, respect her way of thinking and expressing herself without adding to what she had said. It was just a question of the use of language. There was a lot of controversy about the way in which some of the interviews with Eva Hesse, as well as with some other artists of the feminist movement were edited by Cindy Nemser in her 1975 book Art Talk: Conversations with 12 Women Artists. I was attentive to that debate and probably Nemser did go too far. On the other hand, I am not a believer that the raw text is more truthful. The famous Paris Review interviews with writers were all heavily edited. And also transcriptions are funny in that many are done by somebody other than the interviewer and very often the transcribers don't know much about the material. So you can get really weird versions

of the actual conversation – and some hilarious mis-transliterations.

The miles of tapes with Louise that you've listened to were made at difficult times of my life and she herself was a very difficult person. So those are really heavily loaded tapes.

FP Emotionally loaded.

RS Yes. There are some of these that I don't want to relive. I'm glad you did it.

FP In many interviews with different artists – such as Mike Kelley, Louise Bourgeois and Paul McCarthy – you raise the question about the relevance of feminism for them. What is the importance of the feminist movement to you?

RS The personal importance and the intellectual importance are connected but they are not identical. Feminism was the single most progressive force in general culture during the late 1970s – the civil rights movement had been the previously important force and, prior to that, the Free Speech movement. When you look at what was imparting change, feminism was the essence of it in so many ways. I grew up in a household with two sisters, and, in addition to my actual mother, I was partly raised by two women – a couple. So I've always lived in a matriarchal situation. It made perfect sense to me that women have a different status in the society. Kate Horsfield and Lynn Blumenthal of Video Data Bank were active feminists and they built me a bridge to the art world in that respect, as did my great aunt who had been a friend of Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas in the 1930s. In the case of Mike Kelley, he was profoundly influenced by feminism. When he went to California from Detroit the feminist movement was in full force. It was split between the kind of first-wave feminism – organized around the essentialist idea of womanhood and goddesses, which in fact comes up in Louise's work a lot – and the theoretical feminists, who were beginning to explore the challenges to Freudianism by female psychoanalysis and then of course the linguistic challenges to patriarchy. All this was in the air and Mike Kelley found this stuff and just decided to go for it.

FP One of the most recent interviews you have done is that with Mary Reid Kelley who was a student of yours at Yale. What are the main aspects of her work that caught your attention?

RS Mary is an artist who is in the middle of the culture in one way, and at angles to it in others. I like art like that, that takes on central issues but doesn't simply ratify or critique in a straightforward way the existing attitudes. Her work rethinks those issues from a position that is very much her own, which is that of a sharply observant, ingeniously whimsical, middle-class, mid-Western white American woman. She is very well read and knowledgeable, but she's not trained or schooled in any circumscribed doctrine. Her studio, when she was a student, was filled with stacks and stacks of books – she read extensively for use in her work. Like Raymond Pettibon, she reads opportunistically and promiscuously in the best sense of both words.

FP She writes poetry and recites it in her performance videos.

RS She writes a version of nineteenth-century Romantic and Symbolist doggerel that is funny, fantastic and theoretically anarchistic.

The first pieces she made at Yale were based on gravestones. You could see someone that was a little bit odd and then blossomed, came into her own. It is great to see somebody suddenly arrive in that place.

FP So you like odd, with an edge to it.

RS I always liked odd.

FP In that respect, would you talk a little bit about your exploration of the grotesque?

Many of the artists interviewed engage with the grotesque – notably Wangechi Mutu and Kara Walker.

rs The grotesque is a category to which I'm naturally attracted. Once upon a time it was for me a guilty attraction: its very nature was taboo. It was decorative – which means minor – it was obscene – which means not for general consumption. I began to think about it more and I said to myself, "Wait a second, first of all I am attracted to it so I am not going to deny it, secondly, I am attracted to it in all, its different dimensions. What is the common thread that puts those dimensions all together?" I did a lot of reading of my own, discovering the whole series of writers on the grotesque. Its dynamics essentially show that contradictions sometime are irresolvable and, as such, they produce an amazingly complex and wonderfully convoluted dialectical third term. The grotesque was abhorred by people in the neoclassical tradition and yet we learn that the grotesque originated in the classical tradition – think of the Domus Aurea rediscovered at the beginning of the Renaissance, about Raphael and Leonardo, great classical draftsmen who also made grotesques. So

the grotesque is where all that stuff that has no place in the culture or even in our psyche goes. Surrealism is a Freud-inflected version of the grotesque, basically. Expressionism, in Germany and elsewhere, is a version of the grotesque. Many of the styles that we organize in sequence in history or by their nationality are in fact cultural manifestations of the same impulse that produces the grotesque everywhere and in every era. And it's amazingly transcultural too. The Japanese printmakers were experts in the grotesque. The grotesque is also more accurate psychologically because my desire to go to sleep listening to Bach and then reawakening in my dreams listening to the Night on Bald Mountain [by Mussorgsky] is the dynamic we are talking about! [Both laugh]

FP To shift gears a bit, you also interviewed curators such as Marcia Tucker, Catherine David, and Kirk Varnedoe. One of such interviews selected for the book is with Harald Szeemann. You showed me once two photographs with him: one taken on the Red Square in Moscow and the other during an installation with Bruce Nauman. **rs** One of those pictures was made when I did the Bruce Nauman show at the Modern [The Museum of Modern Art, New York] and Szeemann came to discuss possibly taking the show to Europe. We'd met before that in Europe, in a variety of contexts – in those days curators easily got acquainted out in the world. Now they tend to stick to their groups!



Robert Storr with Harald Szeemann and Bruce Nauman at MoMA in 1995, during the installation of the Bruce Nauman retrospective. Photo courtesy Robert Storr

I had seen a relatively small number of Harry's exhibitions before he made his first Venice Biennale. I knew of him and I liked him. I realized that he was a performance piece himself and a grand old man of the counterculture. I didn't worship him and I wasn't trying to compete for the stage with him – that would have been a losing proposition. We did the Sydney Biennale together in 2000 as part of a team comprised of Nick Serota, the Australian curator Nick Waterlow, and others. Then Szeemann, René Block, Germano Celant, Viktor Misiano, Joseph Backstein, a handful of other colleagues, and I, had meetings in Moscow about a proposed Moscow Biennial. In the end, none of us were involved in the production of that show, except for Joseph Backstein and collaborators he selected. That's when that photograph on the Red Square was taken. Moreover, he and I served on the Viennese Holocaust Memorial jury instigated by Simon Wiesenthal that, thanks largely to us, along with Amnon Barzel and Sylvia Liska, gave the commission to Rachel Whiteread. However, I have to say that I'm astonished by the cult of Szeemann that has developed. It doesn't do justice to him. He was a much more unpredictable, inventive guy than the curatorial "saint" he has become for followers basking in his reflection. Many of those now claiming him as their own are just cultural bureaucrats hoping that a little bit of his bohemianism will rub off on them, adding pizzazz to their often lackluster reputations. Make no mistake – Harry was a very, very talented and imaginative curator, as well as a fairly ruthless one. He's definitely someone one can learn from, someone to be respected, but not worshiped.

FP Could you tell me about how you and Kirk Varnedoe met and how he invited you to work at MoMA?

RS It was somewhere downtown in the 1980s at a Karole Armitage performance with costumes and decors by David Salle and Jeff Koons. I think Mike Brenson introduced us. Kirk had read things of mine and expressed a little bit of interest. Many years later when he contacted me and asked me if I'd be willing to work as a curator at the Modern I was dumbfounded. I don't know how this idea occurred to him and why. I was a writer and had no curatorial track record. Up until then I'd only organized a mid-career Susan Rothenberg show in Malmo, Sweden and one show of three painters – John Obuck, Rebecca Purdum and Glenn Goldberg – at the Studio School on 8th Street in New York where I was teaching. Meanwhile, I had been asked by Art Press to do an interview with him because he was the incoming director of the Department of Painting and Sculpture. I did the interview with him in his office at the Modern. Slightly before that, I had said to him that I couldn't take the job because I had been offered a tenure-track teaching job at Tyler in Philadelphia. He was surprised that I had said no. But he said OK to the interview. In the course of our recorded conversation or shortly before or after – I don't remember exactly – he asked me if I would write something on Clement Greenberg for the reader he was producing in conjunction with his first show at MoMA, High & Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture. I said, "Sure!" and wrote an essay that was a polemic against Greenberg and against the post-Greenberg formalist thought of which October was an example. Kirk liked it a great deal. When it came out, just before the opening of the exhibition, and a year after I had been teaching at Tyler, he said, "Would you reconsider?" This time I asked some friends and the friend who made the difference was Felix Gonzalez-Torres. I asked Felix, "What happens if I do this? Will I be completely cut off from my community? Will it mean that I joined the establishment and I will become a pariah?" And he responded, "No, no, it will be really great to have one of us inside." So I said, "Fine!" [both laugh] When I moved from being a free-agent critic and curator

to being a
on-the-job
FP You w
the musee
RS Yeah.
MoMA ha
FP The c
show grea
kind of an
RS And i
differences
of the othe
done, you
FP As on
some sort
RS There
business –
and many
tive atten
is the art
art comm
the same
getting in
anybody.
each other
to was in
of Bill Ru
Claes and
so on. A s
interesting
college in

some sort begins to take form in one's mind.

FP As one goes from one interview to the other, a dialogic artistic community of done, you find out more about both ends.

RS There is a very strange thing called the "art world" – which is basically all about business – and then there is the "art community", composed of makers, critics, curators and many others, including some dealers, with a hand in creating the focus of our collective attention. What one reads about, for the most part, in the papers and in magazines is the art world, not the art community. What I'm interested in now, as before, is the art community; I try to stay as far away from the art world as I possibly can, while at the same time functioning within it to the degree required. You know, when I started getting interested in art and its world I was a teenager and I didn't know anything or anybody. I just met people. Soon I recognized that there was a group of people talking to each other in ways that I liked; the topics and the tone. The first art party I ever went to was in 1967, just before I went to France, and it turned out that it was at the loft of Bill Rubin, although he was not there. Guests included Christo and Jeanne-Claude, Claes and Patty Oldenburg, Lee Krasner, George Segal and his wife, Jasper Johns, and so on. A star-filled crowd and I didn't know they were stars. I just thought they were interesting. My next experiences happened upon my return from France, when I was in college in Philadelphia and later at the Art Institute of Chicago, and I began to meet

FP The choices you made over the years about artists to interview and to write about show great curiosity and indicate how, for you, the objective is not to champion one kind of art but rather to keep an open mind.

RS And if you support kinds of art that resemble each other formally you explore the differences between them or among them, rather than using one to reinforce the authority of the other. If you choose things that are diametrically opposed to the one that you've just done, you find out more about both ends.

FP MoMA had ever shown comic book art as art.

RS Yeah. For instance, I did a show with Art Spiegelman. That was the first time that the museum.

FP You were able to bring in artists whose work had not previously been shown at on-the-job, on-site "institutional critique".

RS To be a temporary museum man I saw it as a larger field of activity. A place for



Robert Storr in his MoMA office, at work on the catalog accompanying his Chuck Close exhibition. Photo: Jason Schmidt

his first Venice
piece himself
n't trying to com-
did the Sydney
Australian
Celant, Viktor
s in Moscow
the production of
when that pho-
nese Holocaust
ng with
However, I have
n't do justice
"saint" he
g him as their
will rub off on
Harry was
He's definitely
invited you
ance with
roduced
years later
the Modern
was a
a mid-career
John Obuck,
New York
interview with
Sculpture.
I had said
eaching
OK to the
- I don't
berg for
& Low:
is a polemic
October
ing
d you
ence was
pletely cut
ll become
inside?"
d curator

artists at parties. That was a time when there was still a social art world where business was not the main preoccupation. The cast of characters was roughly the same but the power relationships were utterly different. You could meet anybody of any generation and have a conversation. I think such fluidity still exists but you have to go looking for it and make an effort to tap into it.

FP How did you get invited to those parties early on?

RS I had a relative who was an art collector. She was rich and stylish, unlike the rest of us – she'd "married well". She was a kind of legend in my family. When I went to New York to take the boat to France in 1967, I was introduced to her. Her name was Elizabeth "Bobby" Goodspeed Chapman. She had run The Arts Club in Chicago in the 1930s and had organized a range of exhibitions with artists such as [Max] Beckmann, [Piet] Mondrian and [Pablo] Picasso.⁷ We hit it off because we were both interested in art and she saw me as someone with the same appetites but with zero experience. She would invite me once or twice a year to come to New York and do the round of galleries and museums with her. Thanks to those trips I saw some amazing things. I discovered [Robert] Ryman's work by seeing his show at the Guggenheim with her; and with her I saw Eva Hesse's last show in New York before Hesse died. I was the skinny kid escort to this very elegant society lady. Thanks to Bobby I met Alexander Calder, James Johnson Sweeney, Alfred Barr, Roland Penrose, Lincoln Kirstein, Andy Warhol, Anthony Caro, Bill Rubin, and so on. The beginning of my writing is also tied to her: I wrote her letters about the art we had seen together. In some respects my criticism is like letters to the reader about the things that I have seen and what I have thought in response to them.



Elizabeth "Bobby" Goodspeed Chapman (second from left, standing) with (from left) Fanny Butcher (standing), Claire Dux Swift (seated) and Gertrude Stein (seated). Photo courtesy Robert Storr

FP As some of the interviews demonstrate, you have a keen interest in comics, where image and text intertwine. Could you talk about how that came about?

RS I've read comics for years and years and years. In my family I was made to feel bad about it. My father didn't like comics. He thought of them as minor, trashy stuff.

FP So it was very judgmental.

RS Oh, yes. For many people of my generation comics provided this great playground for the Id. [both laugh] Comics were taboo. They represented freedom and rebellion. I am dyslexic and had a difficulty learning how to read so comics were great because I could

7. Elizabeth "Bobby" Goodspeed Chapman served as president of The Arts Club from 1932 to 1940.

RS Yes, Bob Rymann probably more than anybody, and Ellsworth or Bob Mangold. There are a lot of artists. Or it's the abstract element to certain artists who paint figurative work where the figures almost disappear.

FP Is that the case of Phillip Pearlstein?

RS No. For me, the interest in his work comes out of the fact that I made a lot of figurative painting from the model. I got interested because what he was doing was so like what I was attempting in terms of its basic observational premise but so unlike mine in terms

Robert Storr (second from left) with David Alfaro Siqueiros and others at the Polyforum in Mexico, summer 1971. Photo courtesy Robert Storr



look at the pictures and figure the story out without having to decipher these horribly complicated things called letters. Gradually, I got to be a better reader. And the books that I wanted to read were comics such as Tintin and Asterix or the 13 Clocks by James Thurber (1950), illustrated by Marc Simont or Thurber books he illustrated himself. They were wonderful. So cartooning was an idiom very familiar to me. I am interested in how stories are told as pictures, as a problem.

FP When you speak to Raymond Pettibon, Mike Kelley, Gary Panter, and other artists to whom comics are important, it transpires from the conversations that you share this territory with them. A common knowledge that makes the conversation click faster, so to speak.

RS Absolutely. And also the culture that is behind it, in the sense that, they too, are fans of the grotesque. But in my case the irony is that, as an artist, what I respond to most is abstract art.

FP But you did both, figurative and abstract paintings.

RS Yes, I did both. At one point, when I worked for [David Alfaro] Siqueiros I thought I would go on making murals. The point is that abstract art is the one I really feel. Abstract painting speaks to me most directly – Boom! Because it's about the real world. Abstract art is materialist, it exists in actual space. And I feel that I know where I am in the world – often I don't feel that way socially but I do artistically – when I am in a room with objects of art around. If those objects are abstract, it is by far the greatest pleasure! So when I'm in a gallery installing, I shuffle the deck trying to find ways so that the works talk to each other and also do something for, and with, the room they are in. That's really the key for me.

FP Is it abstract art that has some edge to it as with Ellsworth [Kelly]'s work, for instance?

world where business
the same but the
any generation
to go looking for

unlike the rest
Then I went to
Her name was
Chicago in the
[Max] Beckmann,
I'm interested in
experience. She

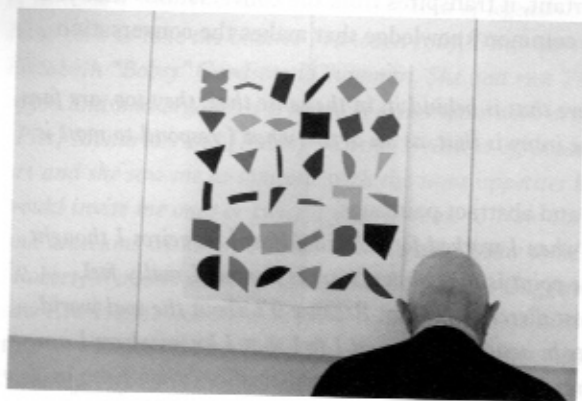
round of galleries
I discovered
and with her I
my kid escort to
James Johnson
Anthony Caro,
wrote her letters
nters to the
ense to them.

to feel bad
ut?
mics,

ound for
m, I am
I could

of the result. Also because Philip is a serious thinker who has written wonderful criticism and forceful manifestos. He makes austere paintings of naked twentieth-century people but he has a secret passion for Symbolist art and for Baroque art, and most importantly he was a huge fan of Francis Picabia – he wrote his dissertation on him while at the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University.

FP Could you talk a little bit about your friendship with Ellsworth? The closeness of it is apparent from his interview.



Ellsworth Kelly in his studio, Spencertown, New York, c.2005. Photo by and courtesy Robert Storr.



Ellsworth Kelly, Cheri Samba and Robert Storr in conversation in front of one of Samba's paintings at the Venice Biennale organized by Storr, 2007. Photo © Jack Shear

RS I don't remember exactly when we met. I had seen his work early on and I was stunned by it. I didn't really have a way of saying why. There were many, many points of contact between us. He was a very graceful and generous man. And Jack [Shear], his partner, is a very funny, smart man, whose collecting habits are akin to my own – which is to say eccentric.

FP Earlier we talked about the sense of avid curiosity that animates your interviews and writings. In a statement that you wrote for *The New York Times* in 2011 you recall a talk that Bruno Bettelheim gave to your senior class in high school in the 1960s. Significantly, what stayed most with you was his encouragement about becoming “students of everything that excited our mind”. I'm sure you found that impulse within yourself, but that must have struck a chord in you. Could you talk a little bit about that?

RS It went straight to the nerve of what I was thinking about. Bruno Bettelheim was the father of a student at my school, so he was someone we saw around all the time,

