

## Saff and Voytek share rich personal stories about Bob Rauschenberg with ArtSPEAK audience

By TOM HALL  
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At the behest of the Rauschenberg Foundation, Donald Saff was in town this week to capture an oral history of Bob Rauschenberg from his long-time studio assistant Lawrence Voytek. On Saturday, the two men capped off their hours of in-depth conversations with an hour-long reminiscence of the artist they both idolized.



Spurned by Columbia (“which didn’t have the providence to hire me”), Saff joined the faculty of the University of South Florida in Tampa in 1965. Three years later, he landed a grant from the Florida Arts Council to establish a printmaking operation under the name of GraphicStudio. In the years that followed, Saff invited a stream of iconic artists to work in the state-of-the-art facility he and his staff created at USF. In addition to Rauschenberg, the list included James Rosenquist, Jim Dine, Roy Lichtenstein, Richard Anuszkiewicz, Shusaku Arakawa, Nancy Graves, Ed Ruscha, Lee Friedlander and Philip Pearlstein. But he formed a particularly close working and personal relationship with Rauschenberg, who he accompanied to China in 1982, which gave rise to the Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Interchange. Saff served as artistic director for R.O.C.I., which sought to effect positive social change through collaborations with local artists, authors, poets and performing artists in more than 21 host countries. Saff continued to work with Rauschenberg until the latter’s death in 2008.

Voytek first met Bob Rauschenberg at Edison State College (now FSW). Rauschenberg hired him that same year to serve as his sculpture fabricator. A

master of new and unusual materials, Voytek became Rauschenberg's director of production. In that capacity, he was not only tasked with welding and casting, but research and development. Like Saff, Voytek worked with Rauschenberg until Bob's passing in 2008.

As you might imagine, the two have a plethora of personal stories, anecdotes and deep insights into Rauschenberg's art, persona, temperament and creative elan, and they shared a sampling of their memories and recollections with a rapt audience inside the gallery that today bears Bob Rauschenberg's name. It was a magical hour which Voytek capped by reading a poem he composed for Bob's memorial in a voice that at times faltered with thick emotion. But Voytek left the audience to ponder something Rauschenberg once told him that puzzles Voytek to this very day.

"If I do my job correctly, we won't need artists anymore," Bob said. The throw-away comment provides deep insight into Rauschenberg's *raison d'être* as an artist, an educator and a person. Rauschenberg's gift was his characteristic proclivity to see the world in a fresh and unconventional way and communicate to viewers around the world that people can make art from anything in any way the mind can imagine. Prior to Rauschenberg, brushes and oils were the stuff from which artworks were made. Since Rauschenberg, debris, detritus, cardboard boxes, dirt and even the nose oil can be molded into an artwork. With that realization comes the inevitable conclusion that anyone can offer new ways of seeing and interacting with the world around – not just artists like a Manet, a van Gogh or even a Bob Rauschenberg.

If you missed the rare opportunity to hear Don Saff and Lawrence Voytek reminisce about the 20<sup>th</sup> century's most innovative and, perhaps, important artist, shame on you. But take heart. Saff and Voytek recorded the discussion. It's now part of the official Robert Rauschenberg Foundation/Columbia University – Rauschenberg Oral History Project. For additional information, please telephone (239) 489-9313 or visit [www.RauschenbergGallery.com](http://www.RauschenbergGallery.com). ■