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National College of Art and Design

Fine Art: Painting

Rauschenberg: Past, Present and Future

by

Nicola Purcell

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS	4
INTRODUCTION: RAUSCHENBERG AND HIS IMPORTANCE	5
CHAPTER ONE: RAUSCHENBERG IN MODERNISM . . .	8
Silkscreen paintings	13
Currents 1969-1970	19
CHAPTER TWO: THE POSTMODERN AGE AND RAUSCHENBERG	21
Experiments in art and technology: collaborations in two kinds of thinking, art and science	23
Rauschenberg overseas cultural interchange 1982-91 . .	29
<i>Hoarfrost series</i> 1973-74	35
Rauschenberg's ideas and the conference	38
<i>Quarter Mile or 2 Furlong Piece</i>	44
CONCLUSION: INTO THE FUTURE	46
APPENDIX	49
BIBLIOGRAPHY	51

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Illustration

1. *Bed* p. 11
2. *Retroactive 1* p. 15
3. *Sky Garden* p. 17
4. *Mudmuse* p. 26
5. *Soundings* p. 26
6. *Solstice* p. 28
7. *Dirt Shrine: South* . p. 33
8. *Ledger* p. 37

INTRODUCTION: RAUSCHENBERG AND HIS IMPORTANCE

Rauschenberg is one of America's most important artists, his importance can be said to lie in two areas ; his work and in his social awareness and his resulting actions.

Rauschenberg has remained in this position of importance for over four decades. His staying power is due to his unceasing search for new methods of expression, while not being afraid of change or experimentation. Rauschenberg is willing to use the most technical processes and the humblest piece of scrap found in the streets. In his work everything is connected, nothing is left alone in isolation. Collage is a strong element, as is collaboration with other artists and professionals in differing fields. It is because of this continual movement, that it can be said that Rauschenberg will be seen in the future as an important figure in the advancement and evolution of contemporary art into the next century.

Robert Rauschenberg was born in 1925, in Port Arthur, Texas. He was born into a poor family, during the Great Depression. The Rauschenberg family believed in education as a means of escaping poverty while also generally bettering life. This belief has never left Rauschenberg; it is an influence that can be seen in the setting up of *Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.)* and the *Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Interchange (R.O.C.I.)* . An equally important and

early influence, which has also continued to be felt in his work, was that of his mother Dora Rauschenberg. Rauschenberg, himself has said that he learnt the art of collage from watching his mother arrange dress patterns economically and neatly onto fabric. He also inherited his mother's religious concerns and awarenesses and as a young man Rauschenberg had wanted to become a preacher, in order that he would then be able to spread the word and at the same time enrich people's lives. This calling failed because of the restrictions he found in the church. Since then Rauschenberg has not liked to work within official limitations. This sharing of the idea of truth has also remained to be a large part of his work and attitudes. It is also shown through the *R.O.C.I.* and the ideal that inspired it, the bringing together of varying countries and peoples, in peace. Leo Castelli (Rauschenberg's dealer) says, "Bob once wanted to be a preacher - he is a preacher still." (Kotz, 1990, p. 41).

Throughout his career, Rauschenberg has tried to combine many elements into a form of harmony in his work. He likes to make looking like hearing. As for Rauschenberg there are many layers of meanings or sounds to be found in a work. And each layer has to be understood individually and then collectively, in the way culture or society is also understood. "I had to make a surface which invited a constant change of focus and an examination of detail, listening happens in time - looking also has to happen in time." (Smithsonian Institute, p. 5). His work refers to life, and at all times, he wants to

connect with people directly and plainly. This is one of the reasons that has made Rauschenberg's work so important and continually so new. He could be seen as the forerunner of *Pop Art*, *Conceptual Art* and even the *Fluxus movement*. "Painting relates to both art and life. Neither can be made. (I try to act in that gap between the two.)" (Kotz, 1990, p. 7).

Rauschenberg's career has continued to change and grow. He has been able to take on board different aspects of modernism and postmodernism and then been able to combine these elements with his own unique style. His work has remained personal and responsive to the changing times and attitudes of the modern era. Because of this ability of Rauschenberg to work through different movements while at the same time never being contained by them, it can be said that Rauschenberg points a way past what is seen by some as the postmodern dead end. In this way Rauschenberg is an artist that can further and influence contemporary art.

Rauschenberg's career can be viewed from the 1950s to the present. Within that forty year span, Rauschenberg's artistic development and social awarenesses can be traced. Through the mapping of Rauschenberg's career, it may be possible to glimpse what the future might hold for both the art world and mankind.

CHAPTER ONE: RAUSCHENBERG IN MODERNISM

Modernism can be traced back to the time of the invention and general availability of photography in the nineteenth century. It grew out of the great industrial revolution and the new urban society that grew up around it. Modernism belonged to a new mechanical world view, it gloried in industry and man's technological advance. The empire (state) and the institution were the power bases that became the foundations of this movement. The general public were the onlookers and not the motivators, they did not have to understand "great art", just recognize it and appreciate it.

In the writings of Arthur Danto, philosopher and art critic, Modernism, its beginnings and endings are debated. Danto puts forward a theory, explaining the decline of Modernism. According to Danto, Modernism in itself, began to wither with the advent of Cinematography, as cinematography caused a crisis in art because in the past, art had been concerned with the imitation of life (art being painting, sculpture, printing). With cinematography this imitation could be achieved in a far more convincing and accessible way (Danto, 1987).

This crisis in the art world, produced a series of movements that questioned art, its meanings and purpose. For Danto this questioning ended with Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*, exhibited in the Stable gallery in 1964.

In its great philosophical phase, from about 1905 to about 1964, modern art undertook a massive investigation into its own nature and essence. It set out to seek a form of itself so pure as art that nothing like what caused it to undertake this investigation in the first place could ever happen again. There have been more projected definitions of art, each identified with a different movement in art, in the six or seven decades of this modern era than in the six or seven centuries that preceded it. (Danto, 1987, p. 217)

Warhol's Brillo boxes were exactly the same as real Brillo boxes. With the production of *Brillo Boxes*, the final question was asked, which Danto states was, what makes artworks different from real (ordinary) objects? The answer was seen to be that the artwork is what the artist decides, on the basis of some theory of art, or for some form of personal expression. So the essence of art lays in its setting (placing in context) and not in some set of properties, that can be easily identified (perspective, realism, etc.). So people must believe the artists' and the gallery owners' interpretation of art, as they know best or were seen to be better informed on the process of defining art.

Modernism established and worked within truths which were seen to be important. These included man's triumphs in technology, his command over nature, the art object being sacred for even if misunderstood it is always art, if it is backed by an institution or artist. The idea that an everyday object can be transformed into art did not die with what is seen as the demise of modernism and the beginning of postmodernism, Jeff Koons is an example of the

continuance of this ideal, but it certainly was strongest within modernism. Examples include Jasper John's targets, Warhol's brillo boxes, Campbell's soup cans and cookie jars.

This transformation of the ordinary and mundane can also be seen in Rauschenberg's work, the cardboard series being a prime example of this transformation. The series is a group of works made of found cardboard, in varying different degrees of decay, roughness and smoothness. The boxes were left whole or flattened and torn up, but what always remained in their original form, was the outside printing, staples, tape and any other marks of wear or tear that belonged to the box's natural state. Rauschenberg turned an ordinary and common object into a highly praised form of art. He then went a step further and produced a series called *Cardbird*, which consisted of exact reproductions of his cardboard works. But this time instead of being made from found cardboard, these are images of the found cardboards printed onto fresh clean cardboard. The marks of the original were exactly reproduced. Rauschenberg again went a step further, he created cardboard/cardbird doors, that functioned as operational doors, one served as the door to Rauschenberg's guest room, and the other opened into Jasper John's dining room. So with this series of works he has transformed the ordinary into art and then reinvented the art into the practical and ordinary. In these pieces Rauschenberg was playing with modernism, while still being concerned with upholding its values. Another example of this play is



Illustration 1: Bed

Rauschenberg's most famous work *Bed*.

Bed (1955; Illustration 1) was a piece produced over fifteen years earlier than the cardboards, but in this work he equally displayed the same attitude towards the interchange of the common object with the art object. *Bed* was originally how it sounds, a patch work quilt with sheets and a pillow, which according to Rauschenberg became a painting one day when he had run out of canvas and all that was left to paint on was the bed. The piece hangs on the wall vertically, like a painting. Although one could not use the *Bed* as a bed it still appears to the viewer as a bed, a bed that has only recently been vacated. The bedding itself is personal, Rauschenberg's own. It has its own meanings and uses that are not described or translated to us. We are presented with a final object that gives away very little and leaves hardly any clues. It was concerned with its own motivations and ideals.

Bed has caused much controversy. It was originally found to be shocking, it was even compared to a police photo of a murder scene. Because of this controversy the Italian authorities refused to show it at an art festival in Spoleto and instead the work was left in a storage room, hidden away not to be seen by anyone. Rauschenberg succeeded in turning a bed into *Bed*, a work that has been seen as a turning point in Rauschenberg's career, a work that turned a quilt and a pillow into a controversial landmark. It is not often that bed clothes are written down in the history books.

Silkscreen paintings

The silkscreen paintings of 1962-64, mark another departure for Rauschenberg, an abandonment of assemblage and the collaging of found objects, to the celebration of the photographic image and the technical age. The manmade world is presented through architectural details, airplane control panels, helicopters, space rockets, clock parts, mountain climbers, keys and keyrings.

The images come from Rauschenberg's own photography and from images found in magazines and art books. This allowed him a freedom to play with composition and the relationships between the images and their sizes. The silkscreens also gave Rauschenberg the freedom to manipulate images through colour while also being able to by superimpose images on to one another.

Space flight was a very important symbol in these works, because explorations into space opened up new horizons and experiences for mankind and all of this was possible through technology and collaboration. This faith in technology and the unchecked advance of man, is very similar to the feelings found during the industrial revolution concerning the advent of steam power, the construction of the Eiffel tower and other various engineering feats. In this series of works, Rauschenberg celebrated all that was American. Another important symbol of that period for Rauschenberg

was President Kennedy, whom it seems Rauschenberg saw as a hero, a myth that unified modern day America with its history.

In *Retroactive I* (1964; Illustration 2), Kennedy is shown in a very distinctive way, looking straight ahead with his finger pointed (not unlike Kitchener). Falling from what is seen as the sky is a parachuting astronaut, who appears to be falling into a basket of oranges. Beneath both of these images is a repetition of Kennedy's hand. To the right hand side of Kennedy, two ghostly figures are walking towards the edge of the page. It has been said that all this imagery is connected with the Adam and Eve story, therefore Kennedy must be God and the astronaut an angel from God. The message must be seen to be that technology and the man behind it, have somehow evolved into God like beings.

Kennedy's image is used in eight other works by Rauschenberg. In each of these pieces, it is the same image used as the one in *Retroactive I*. In this series of works, Rauschenberg seems to have become caught up in to the institution and symbols that are America. He seems to be celebrating, and not in anyway questioning what is seen as one of man's great inventions (space exploration), he is glorifying in this assumed power, while also identifying with Kennedy and his America.

Die Hard (1963) also presents images of America, that glory in spaceflight and American history. He uses easily recognizable images like photos of the statue of liberty, American flags and

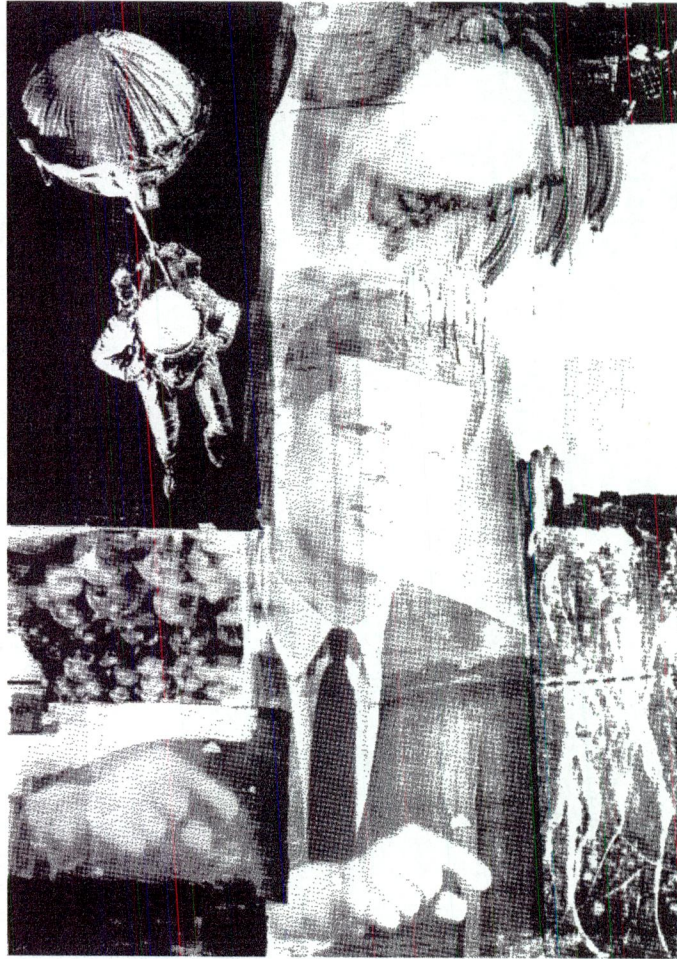


Illustration 2: Retroactive 1

Houdon's statue of George Washington, to name a few examples.

The silkscreen paintings in some ways, form a bridge for Rauschenberg. A bridge between, what can be called modern or postmodern. In these works Rauschenberg was certainly involved with the institution, be it with historical reference or images related to the government and its technical projects. Rauschenberg was documenting his adoration for these achievements, while also at the same time he was doing this through the use of photography and the placing of random images in some form of relationship. Rauschenberg was forming the picture plane into what seems like a moving picture (film) surface. He was making different images collaborate while forming new associations (parachutes with beach umbrellas), associations that could lead farther afield. Rauschenberg has used history and pride in modern conquests to form a viewing point into other areas and possibilities.

Following on from the silkscreen paintings, Rauschenberg produced another series of prints, but this time using lithography. These works were inspired by the Apollo 11 space flight. Rauschenberg was invited by NASA to record this historic event, mainly because of his silkscreen images and his admiration of spaceflight, and his history of working with technical processes. This series is called *Stoned Moon*, 1969.

The Apollo 11 series consisted of thirty-three lithographs, two of which *Sky Garden* and *Waves* were the largest lithographs ever

produced up to this time on a hand press. Rauschenberg responded to man's greatest breakthrough, by making one of his own.

Sky Garden (1969; Illustration 3) is a black and white print. In the center is a white diagram of a rocket, with many of its parts neatly and clearly labelled in technical terms. Surrounding the rocket are images taken from the surrounding areas of the launch pad, images of birds, palm trees, people from the control center and other space related images.

The placing of the rocket in the middle of these various images was very important. It suggested the importance that Rauschenberg was giving to the Apollo 11 mission and the admiration he held it in, placing it almost in the center of creation. The image of the rocket seems to be naturally placed and even to be a dominate force, but not a destructive one. This acceptance of technology as being an element of the natural world, and not in any way portraying its destructive qualities, was a one sided approach to these new wonders. There was no mention of space debris, rocket fuel pollution, and wasted materials from failed attempts, or even failed attempts that had ended in death.

This one sided emphasis and unquestioning acceptance of the "good" of the Apollo 11 did not last out the year. By the end of 1969, Rauschenberg was producing another series of works, this time dealing with the destructiveness of industry and the technical age. Could this change have been influenced by events that occurred after the *Stoned*

Moon series - the Kennedy scandal of Chappaquidick island, the American invasion into Laos and the murder of Vietnamese civilians by American troops in the village of Mylai? It had become acceptable to question the establishment, to try and break down old truths. Rauschenberg started work on a new series of works at the end of 1969. These works dealt with topical issues of that time. The series was called *Currents*.

Currents 1969-1970

This series deals with current affairs and the social currents of modern life. These works were far more politically aware. Rauschenberg used headlines, news stories, photographs and adverts from newspapers. He was directly using life as an art form. The images from the newspapers were used directly; cut, folded or torn and collaged together to form the world's largest silkscreen drawing six feet high and fifty- four feet wide. Again Rauschenberg was making a statement with the size of his work. This time though, the work is not celebrating technology but warning us against its abuse/s. It seemed fitting that this piece was many times larger than his earlier work in the Apollo 11 series, the earlier breakthroughs of *Sky Garden* and *Waves*. In one year Rauschenberg's view changed. He had moved from a seemingly total awe of (American) technical achievements to a realization that with the benefits there are also negative side effects.

Rauschenberg was not afraid to change his mind and to open up to new possibilities. *Currents* shows the growing awareness of Rauschenberg that education and integration of both people and ideas can help us to identify and probably cure abuses that are being inflicted unnecessarily on both the planet and the human race. "An active protest attempting to share and communicate my response to and concern with our grave times and place. Art can encourage individual conscience." (Rauschenberg, 1976, p. 160).

Currents uses images from society. It is a mixed up and media ridden series of works, that is beginning to suggest the modern day age of mass media and information; an age of confusion that some call Postmodernism, an age that was beginning to become aware of the side effects of technology. The side effects that were both positive and negative.

CHAPTER TWO: THE POSTMODERN AGE AND RAUSCHENBERG

The Postmodern era is one that can be seen to open up new aspects of understanding; a kind of new world view that can be all encompassing and global. On the one hand, it is seen by many as a destructive and final the age of Revelations. This is due to the approaching millennium and the growing concerns about nuclear arms, nuclear waste disposal and toxic pollution. As Carl Oglesby writes in his essay *Art at the Apocalypse*,

Now it becomes at least a part-time imperative for anyone who thinks seriously about society to think about the possible human destruction of the human and the natural world...and to think about what this means to us personally, professionally, morally. (*Art and Reality*, 1986, p. 36)

Some believe that it is possible that a new awareness of the needs of Mankind, beyond Capitalism and the Industrial society, and a growing global consciousness will save the day and ensure a future for the world, its concerns and inhabitants. Some people feel that the act of creation, be it in art or life will be the force to awaken Mankind to a fuller understanding of the present situation, while also providing a means of bettering this situation and increasing the awareness of

people in general. As David Bohm the quantum physicist says in his essay *Postmodern Science and a Postmodern World*,

I suggest that if we are to survive in a meaningful way in the face of this disintegration of the overall world order, a truly creative movement, to a new kind of wholeness is needed, a movement that must ultimately give rise to anew order, in individual and society. (Jencks, 1992, p. 384)

Collaboration, participation and communication are all important ingredients in postmodern thinking. The creative mix defines what action is needed to bring about a fundamental change in our relations with others and the approach we have to our surroundings. They involve action and interaction.

Robert Rauschenberg's art and life can be said to exhibit the results of collaboration, participation and communication. As Rauschenberg has said, "...working together sharing information technology and art could be away of awakening the conscience of people to avoid a crucial disaster". Rauschenberg has dedicated most of his life to these maxims, the evidence can be seen throughout his work and by his actions, which are explored in the following pages.

**Experiments in art and technology:
collaborations in two kinds of thinking,
art and science**

E. A. T was set up in 1968 by Rauschenberg and Billy Kluver (a Bell laboratory physicist). Kluver like Rauschenberg felt that there are many parallels between modern art and science, as they are both concerned with the investigation of life. Although E. A. T existed for only two years it was an important occurrence and has helped to pave the way for further interaction between science and art and has also led to the growth of multimedia works and events. Examples of these exhibitions would be the San Francisco science fiction exhibition (1984), which was mainly a exhibition of kinetic works. *The Misfortunes of Desire* (1988), an exhibition dealing with concerns caused by the misuses of technology and also mans' growing dependence on modern technology. The last exhibition to mention was *The Future*, an exhibition held in the Clockwork gallery. This show dealt with the ways that the idea of the future has been presented in the past as well as the present.

Rauschenberg and Kluver brought together 30 bell laboratory engineers to work with artists, dancers and musicians. The aim of the project was to produce series of art works and happenings that had resulted from or had been combined with the theories of science and the practical uses of technology. This project was collectively called

"Nine Evenings: theatre and engineering". The project was sponsored by individual corporations, foundations, art dealers and collectors. Collaboration, communication and participation proved to very important for the building of firm foundations between parallel professions, while at the same time bringing this new union of art and technology out to meet the world of finance. Nine evenings proved that collaboration was possible. Even if only in a limited time scale and arena. It was not without practical problems, as coordinating the artists and the scientists to work on a similar timetable proved often to be difficult. The artists could not always rehearse, as on going technical problems were not easily solved. The scientists were not used to the artistic deadlines of an opening night for problem solving. So both artist and scientist had to learn new ways of thinking, where practical and creative aspects could interact, and they had to let go of each professions sacredness. As Rauschenberg has said, "I always like to collaborate. It is a device to fight ego."

The next project undertaken by E. A. T, came in 1967, with the design and construction of an art and technology pavilion for the PEPSI-COLA company at the EXPO'70 in Osaka, Japan. This ended in the pavilion being built, but as the budget had been exceeded the whole project was called off, before more money could be spent and the artists or artworks could be installed. The whole project was supposed to be an experiment between the public, the artist and the corporation, which in reality never took place. This of course was due

to the expense of such experimentation. This unfortunately has remained to be a problem.

During this period Rauschenberg produced work that relied on the mechanics of movement and sound. He was interested in making the viewer influence the work and therefore becoming to a degree the creator, giving people a sense of the act of creation, a view into the mind of the artist.

Mudmuse (1968-71; Illustration 4) was a piece consisting of a square tank filled with drilling mud that was activated by sound waves. The mud was injected with air, the amount of air depended on the amount of sound waves, so mud bubbles were formed as a response to noise. This noise was supplied in two ways, the first being a programmed soundtrack, the second being noises made by gallery visitors. So if you were heavy footed the *Mudmuse* might erupt violently. So *Mudmuse* is a good example of the use of art and technology to produce an earthlike product both in materials and appearance, that responds to human involvement. This might be considered a lesson in practical ecology, very much a postmodern concern.

Mudmuse used sound to create its images. People were allowed to bring influence, even if only in a limited way. This was possibly a reminder that one can still influence and effect the environment. Rauschenberg followed this work with another sound activated piece. This work was titled *Soundings*.

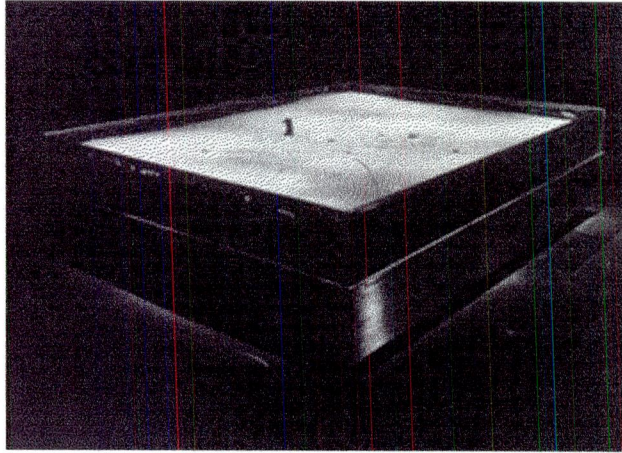


Illustration 4: Mudmuse



Illustration 5: Soundings

Soundings (1968; Illustration 5) was similar to *Mudmuse* in that it responded to human sounds. The piece consisted of three rows of plexiglass panels, with nine panels in each row. The panels had images of chairs (hard kitchen chairs, at various angles) silkscreened on to them. Sensors around the gallery which was darkened, were activated by sounds made by visitors. This level of sound generated a response from interior sensors, which illuminated the piece from within. The result of this was ghost-like apparitions of flying chairs, images that live off outside energy, like vampires living off human blood, like humans living off the world's resources. Yet again Rauschenberg was trying to inform us through our participation, while also recalling our impact on the world around us. He used several images of the one object, taken from different angles. This produced almost a confusing jumble of images of the one object. This way of confronting the viewer with confusion, also appears in another work of this time. A work called *Solstice*.

Unlike the pieces already mentioned, *Solstice* (1968; Illustration 6) was not activated by sound. It was composed of four sets of automatically operated doors. The doors were made of plexiglass, which were silkscreened with various images - from a boy's figure to the design plans of a car. *Solstice* is meant to confuse. As the viewers walk through the doors they experienced multiple images in every direction, with images overlaying images. The piece was lit by strong electrical light, that produces a feeling of starkness

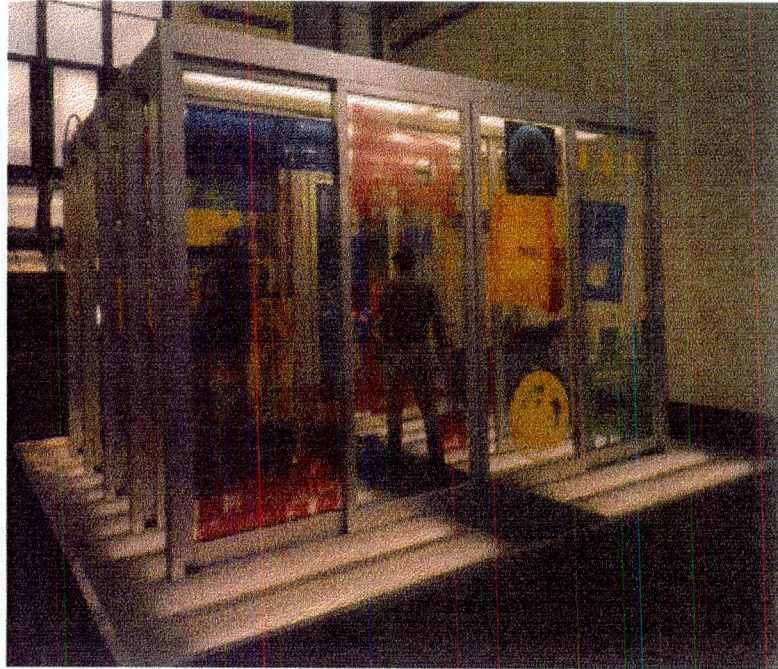


Illustration 6: Solstice

and sterileness. *Solstice* worked as a laboratory of confusing messages and images, in some ways reflecting the modern day bombardment of images from the mass media.

All these works show Rauschenberg's desire to reveal to people the effect they have on their surroundings and equally how "objects" can influence their movements. Through this revelation, Rauschenberg wants to bring these elements together so that we can recognize the domino effect that is set and to work towards a better understanding. "My whole artistic life has been a combination of remodelling politics and dealing with scientists, trying to make everything pull together, just to broaden the horizon" as Rauschenberg himself stated in an interview in 1989 (*Art Meets Science...*, 1990, p. 45).

Rauschenberg overseas cultural interchange 1982-91

Rauschenberg's aim with *R.O.C.I.* was to show culture from one country to another, to bring about an understanding of each other. The idea being, that if countries were understood by each other, war would be less likely to take place. This in itself is not a new idea, it can be seen in a earlier postwar project of UNESCO, which was also concerned with the meetings of different cultures, mainly eastern and western. UNESCO wanted to join mankind in awareness of itself and to enrich all cultures, as culture can be seen as the outward symbol of

inner life. So if these symbols could be understood by others, then people could recognize similarities within their differences (see Appendix).

Rauschenberg originally wanted a travelling show of his work. This plan evolved into *R.O.C.I.* The exhibition would be a changing one, the works being created on the "road", as Rauschenberg would be visiting a series of different countries. He wanted to visit countries that had little to do with contemporary western culture - China, Tibet, Cuba, Mexico and other South American countries and underdeveloped societies.

R.O.C.I. started with my middle aged attitude that I have to give more to the world. I decided that if everyone had as much respect for themselves as they had for everyone else, there would be no use for war. Than peace could be a new sport. And what is missing is information, pure information through communication, with no bull. Lies don't work in art. Eyes work in art. (*R.O.C.I.*, 1991)

R.O.C.I. developed out of a growing need for a "global awareness" and also a desire for peace and communication. Rauschenberg respects the differences between people and cultures, while also respecting the similarities that exist between all people. "The language of being an artist works anywhere, there is no country that is so rich or so poor, that they don't have an artistic culture." (*R.O.C.I.*, 1991, p. 179). So through art, communication and

celebration are possible. The individual (person or country) is responsible in responding to this work, viewing other cultures and to coming to an understanding of them. So there is no room left for personal ignorance as an excuse. Therefore this brought the emphasis from the institution and brought it back down to street level, making life human or humane. "If I can possibly show to anyone that the world belongs to them, to each person, then the work is successful." (*R.O.C.I.*, 1991).

The work that resulted from these ideas, and that which was produced during his travels, was inspired by each country and its traditions. In these countries he lived and worked as a native of that place would. In China, Rauschenberg lived and worked in a paper mill, collaborating with the local workmen and their traditional methods, while also using local materials - ethnic fabrics and rubbish found on the streets. Rauschenberg also documented his stays with photography and video. This documentation was exhibited alongside the corresponding art works. By doing this Rauschenberg hoped to show the connecting threads or objects within these different cultures; images that everyone could identify with - children playing on the streets, traffic signs, traditions of religion and cultural behaviour. Through diversity Rauschenberg attempted to pinpoint unity, and by doing this to bring about peaceful understanding.

The works of this period illustrate Rauschenberg's concern with communication. He combines the techniques of painting,

sculpture, silkscreening, photography and assemblage to produce harmonious works. Colour in itself became important. Who can not recognize colour?. This was especially evident in the Cuban series of works. Silkscreening also returned to his work at this time, as an immediate way of representing culture. The new departure in Rauschenberg's silkscreened images was that he used images from his own photographs. These images documented his response to the host country of that time. He also began using this technique on new materials, for instance ceramic panels or polished metal sheets. The works made in Japan are examples of this change.

Dirt Shrine: South (1982; Illustration 7) is a huge ceramic piece that has modern and traditional Japanese images as a reference to the mixture of traditional Japanese pottery with modern technical chemical processes. *Dirt Shrine* also suggests Rauschenberg's own artistic history. A ceramic tyre print was taken from his earlier work - *Automobile Tyre Print* and the ceramic bamboo ladder was taken from *Winter Pool*.

Dirt Shrine appears almost like a children's playframe, with a ladder, peep holes and a ball and chain. Yet again Rauschenberg is concerned with connecting his work with his audience physically, while also merging histories of people and culture. Rauschenberg's use of ceramics and subtle layering of imagery was picked up later in his future work, in the *Hoarfrost* series which is discussed later.

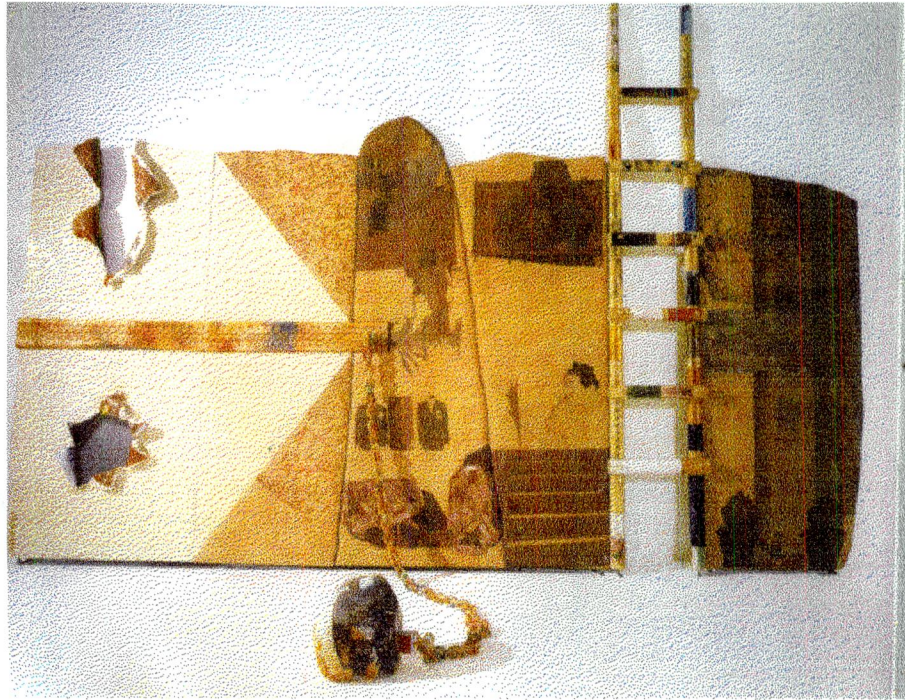


Illustration 7: Dirt Shrine: South

Collaboration and communication are at the hub of Rauschenberg's art. You feel a need of Rauschenberg's desire to re-educate people, a belief that in education, awareness and peace can be found. In many ways this belief can be traced back to Beuys and his theories of "social sculpture". Beuys believed that social sculpture freed the individual from the tyranny of the system, placing the emphasis again on the "person" and not on the institution. Both Beuys and Rauschenberg were convinced that creativity is the key to change and evolution, and equally that this cannot be limited to a small group of professionals called "artists", but needs to be brought to the people.

Beuys' way of achieving this end, was to give a series of lectures and performances, while also mainly giving up the production of "art". Rauschenberg's way was to continue to make "art", while also trying to connect with many cultures and peoples, trying to work with what is fundamental to a country's culture, be it a paper mill in China or with the Amazon indians in Venezuela. Rauschenberg's way truly connects creativity with education and people.

I feel strongly in my beliefs, based on my varied and widely travelled collaborations, that one to one contact through art contains potent peaceful powers, and is the most non-elitist way to share exotic and common information, seducing us into creative mutual understandings for the benefit of all. (Tobago statement, *R.O.C.I.*, 1991)

Hoarfrost series 1973-74

The *Hoarfrosts* were a series of works, made on unstretched fabric, which had been printed with various images, derived from silkscreen, lithography, intaglio and ceramic processes. "I read the word in Dante, hoarfrost is like a mock frost, but it is a warning about the change of seasons". (Kotz, 1990, p. 162). The *Hoarfrosts* allow for the use of the humblest cotton to the most sophisticated silks and satins. The images used can come directly from magazines, newspapers or previous prints. To print a *Hoarfrost*, Rauschenberg would lay the material to be used on his printing press. Then he would lay the images to be transferred on top of the material, than spray the whole lot with a strong solvent. All of this would than be passed through the press, the image would have than been transferred. While working with this process, Rauschenberg discovered that only natural fabrics would take the ink and therefore synthetic fabric could not be used. The sole use of natural fabrics, is again a form of environmental statement.

In this series, Rauschenberg merged contradictory elements. He was open to use anything that could respond to the process he was engaged in and also that could work with the other elements involved in the image. The images were collaged together, in an unequal balance. Some were left stronger than others, relative size being of little importance. The overall impression of this work is one of a

ghostlike unity. objects that are made from fragile materials, hung in layers, that move and float as you walk around them. So in a very natural way, they, like Rauschenberg's E. A. T works, respond to movement and although they are fragile, the imagery remains strong. This strength lays in the mixture of imagery and the surprise of connection between them and the tension that results. In *Ledger* (1975; Illustration 8) Rauschenberg uses medieval architectural details with images of space shuttles , cars and even a drawing of a human spine. Some of these images are seen through layers of fabric and some are on the surface of the fabric, almost recalling the layers of onion skins or the strata and fossils that can be found in rock.

The combinations of vague/strong images and the gentle movement of the work in space, provide haunting and confusing images of modern life and communication. Again Rauschenberg is revealing to us our effect on the world and how life is an art in itself, while also showing us that collaboration is away of unifying seemingly contradictory parts of art and life. "There is no reason not to see the world as a giant painting." (*Art Meets Science...*, p. 36).

This vision of the world as a giant painting is something that never left Rauschenberg's view of art. This approach of wholeness is also shown in his involvement in the conference *Art Meets Science and Spirituality in a Changing Economy* and also in Rauschenberg's largest collective work that he has made to date *Quarter Mile or 2 furlong piece*. Which deals with most of Rauschenberg's experiences; a sort

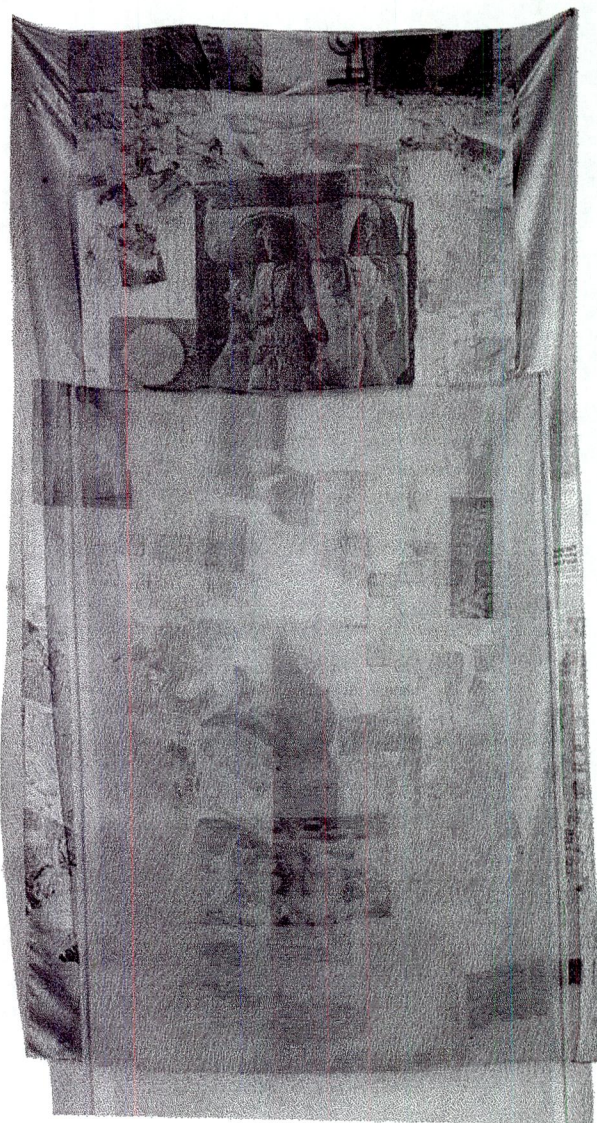


Illustration 8: Ledger

of one painting retrospective, a celebration of life and learning.

Rauschenberg's ideas and the conference

In 1990 a conference was held in Amsterdam titled *Art Meets Science and Spirituality in a Changing Economy*. This conference was held so that the opportunity of bringing artists, scientists, spiritual leaders and economists together to meet and discuss how their different professions interlinked and how they could generally improve and stimulate their respective disciplines. This trend of communication across what had once been seen as a great divide was first identified in early postmodernism, but in recent years this trend has gathered momentum. The setting up of the Peace Biennale was originally organized by Robert Fillou in 1985. The first biennale ran from December 1985 to January 1986. On a more informal level individuals have organised one off discussions. Joseph Beuys held talks with the Dalai Lama in 1980. So did David Bohm in 1983. The 1983 meeting took the form of an open discussion set up by Bohm, to include other scientists, the Dalai Lama and Beuys.

The motivations behind all these conferences were very similar. They were fundamentally to discuss culture and the state of contemporary society, to share ideas in the hope that a way forward could be found for modern culture. The hopes were that it could continue to progress in peace and with a more global friendly attitude.

The belief was that mankind would destroy itself unless this happened. This belief can be traced back to Beuys in more recent times. In 1972 Beuys founded the Free International University for Creativity and Interdisciplinary Research with Heinrich Böll. They believed that all education should be a right for everybody and that creativity is the key to change and evolution. Beuys created a theory of *social sculpture*, which was based on three fundamental stages of creativity:- the passage from chaotic energy and the unformed mass through a process of harmony and moulding to a determined and crystallized form. These stages of creativity can be found in most areas of human life and certainly as Beuys saw it they are found in art, science and spirituality. Through the notion of social sculpture it was believed that all of mankind could evolve through creativity.

Rauschenberg throughout his working life has always been involved in collaborating with other people to produce his work to learn new approaches through these collaborations that would lead to new ways of producing and constructing his work. The conference can be seen as a direct continuation of the social concerns that prompted him to set up the R. O. C. I, as he believed that knowledge between different cultures and awareness of their differing traditions can bring peace or certainly a further understanding of each other which could breed tolerance. So a forum of open debate between various important figures in the disciplines of art, science and spirituality took the R. O. C. I principle into a new arena while still dealing with the need for

communication and debate. At the conference Rauschenberg was on a panel with David Bohm, the Dalai Lama and the economist Stanislav Messhikov. Rauschenberg had held discussions with the Dalai Lama after his Tibetan R. O. C. I trip, where he held the only contemporary exhibition of a western artist in Lhasa, since the chinese occupation of Tibet. This was a great political break through.

Rauschenberg is very much an active artist who continues to point in the direction of the possibility of new arenas for both himself and his viewers. At the Amsterdam conference he was doing this through direct verbal communication instead of his usual medium of visual representation; a sort of collage of ideas that was available for all to hear and debate. This collage of thought was another theme of the conference. Knowledge and wisdom can be passed on and in this way people can learn and then assume responsibility for their own future and also the culture that is the product of this process of knowledge.

As Paul Schafer says in his essay *The Cultural Interpretation of History* "We can define culture as all creation: past, present, and future, mental spiritual and material quantitative and qualitative." (Blaser and Dunham, 1986, p. 173). Defined this way culture is an all embracing system that takes in all of life, therefore everyone is engaged in its production. In this way Rauschenberg has tried to mirror contemporary culture to show us what it is made from, the

symbols used within it. His work has always referred to the surroundings of the time.

Currents and the silkscreen paintings are good examples of his response to the contemporary culture of their time. During the time that conference was still engaged in this theme, it took the form of interaction and the exchange of ideas between professionals that mirrored other aspects of society, in an attempt to find a balance between the scientific and artistic view points. "All art emanates from man's power of creativity. Creativity is the power to balance, harmonize and integrate, to be aware of all the parts that make a whole." (Blazer and Dunham, 1986, p. 190).

The need to find a balance is emphasised by the conflicting messages found in society. The economists tell us to buy more while the environmentalists tell us to consume less, so as to protect the world's natural resources. We have growing technology and industry that leads to huge unemployment, food mountains in Europe and famine in Africa. Debate is needed so that a balanced approach can be found. The view that there is a need for balance and integration ran throughout the conference, as it had also done in the previous ones.

The quantum physicist David Bohm also stated, "it is relevant to consider culture. Culture implies shared meaning, in which everybody participates. Culture is inherently a participatory thing." (p. 65). Bohm like Rauschenberg has had a history of talks with the Dalai Lama. He has also based a lot of his scientific works and theories on

the value of participation. Bohm's theory of reality is one of wholeness. Which includes all elements of the known and the unknown. For him a hidden order is at work beneath the chaos. This order is infinite and multidimensional. This theory suggests a form of spiritual belief and the sharing of knowledge to enable us to understand life. "I would like to see mankind establish itself as one whole with freedom for each of its parts, but with mutual participation, to come into a coherent whole." (*Art Meets Science...*, 1990, p. 62).

Both Rauschenberg and Bohm have similar beliefs about their work and their approaches to life. Even if they belong to professions that on some levels could be said to be oppositional. "I think that fundamentally all activity is an art...fundamentally art is present everywhere", Bohm stated at the conference (*Art Meets Science...*, 1990, p. 62) this attitude recalls Rauschenberg's way of seeing the world as a giant painting. Both these men understand the idea of connectedness and the conference was a forum for people to bring this idea of connectedness together. To work out a way of transferring information, a pooling of resources. This communion was seen to be necessary to combat the growing individualism and specialism of modern times professionalism.

Technology has affected the very basis of human relations, instead of dealing with people face to face we use telephones or send faxes. We also gain some of our social skills from watching television

and going to the cinema. This everyday use of technology has brought the general public into direct contact with science and its broadening frontiers. In many ways this use of technology breaks down borders between science, art and daily life. It has changed our way of viewing many things such as religion, ethics and history to name a few. Many past truths have been broken with advances in physics and the other sciences. This change in perception and understanding needs to be channelled, before mankind can take new leaps ahead. Again this is why the Amsterdam conference and the others like it were so necessary in order to try and find a path through what many theorists have called the postmodern dead-end. The aim is not to provide an ultimate answer but to produce a dialogue. To give access to knowledge through people and not only through media managed channels, recalling the idea of the master and the disciple.

This is very much in line with Rauschenberg and his method of work. He has always seen knowledge and understanding as something that grows out of personal experience. Personal experience being something that is active and therefore takes on responsibility for life. He has always tried to see the world as a series of connections, an attempt to bring all sides together in a living form of collage. Rauschenberg also comes to no final answer in his work as there is no end statement. An example would be a work that took Rauschenberg over six years to complete, it expresses his wish to unify his experiences.

Quarter Mile or 2 Furlong Piece

This is in effect a one-painting history of Rauschenberg's life. The work takes the form of an installation, he is celebrating his past. The work is in fact a quarter of a mile long and it took him from 1981-1987 to complete. As with his earlier works he has used sound within the piece to create an active experience for the viewer. The recordings used are from his R. O. C. I. travels. Street sounds from Cairo and recordings of sea mixed with birdsong, oppositional sounds in context and in reality, yet sounds that come together through Rauschenberg's experiences.

The work took one year to install in the metropolitan museum of art in New York. It was installed in order of its creation. You entered at the beginning and exited at the final work, a cycle of life completed. Quarter mile begins with an image of a pointed finger, below this image is another pointing finger but this time it is pointed in the opposite direction. This was a possible play with Michelangelo's God giving life to Adam on the ceiling of the Sistine chapel. Critic Helen Kohen writes "the extended fingers are there, but they miss. The unified spirit of the Renaissance, we are to understand, is not around to-day, though we have the components." (Kotz, 1990, p. 258).

Rauschenberg has suggested that there is the possibility for new forms of creativeness but as of yet there has not been a strong

enough connection made. More communication is required, opposites will have to meet half way. In the *Currents* series, Rauschenberg used familiar and less familiar images in an forceful and direct manner, as an expression of the constant imagery that bombards modern living. There is a feeling of being in the middle of much confusion. The first impression is of colour, pure, bold and unrelenting. Of the wide variety of imagery, recurrent images of athletes, animals, flowers and the beauty and ugliness of technology and industry is mixed with a wide variety of objects discovered on his travels. In this work Rauschenberg has collaged a whole life into a coherent composition. This is a work that can still continue to grow. It is in some ways, a retrospective celebrating the past, present and future. *Quarter Mile* was completed before the conference, and *Quarter Mile* in many ways is an illustration of its aims. It is certainly based on the same tenets, a belief in the continuation of life and form, and that through an ability to connect experiences together, comes the ability to go forward and to continue to expand.

CONCLUSION: INTO THE FUTURE

So what comes after postmodernism? or does anything have to come after it? Could postmodernism be a label that can continue to grow and change, as our approach to art and culture does?

The Amsterdam conference showed that there was a possibility of growth and change in our approach to Art and Culture. This opportunity was made possible through the theories of artists like Beuys and Rauschenberg. And as Beuys has stated, "Therefore it is time to show that art means the power of creativity and it's time to define art in a larger way, to include science and religion too." (Beuys, p. 31).

This open-ended approach to art was also reflected in Rauschenberg's activities, namely the setting up of the *E.A.T.* and *R.O.C.I.* projects. Success lay in the interaction between different professions and cultures. Rauschenberg was also one of the main players in the 1990 conference. He said "I believe that art is not a series of successful, stylistic, historical continuities but simply a means of communication." (*Art Meets Science...*, 1990, p. 38). This communication was and is seen by many as the way through the negative aspects of contemporary life. What made the 1990 conference important was the urgency and the will to debate the future, as we approach the next century having witnessed the destructiveness of nuclear energy which raised many important questions. The conference

was in many the perfect platform for Rauschenberg. It allowed him the opportunity to express his ideas to a larger audience. He used this opportunity to influence as many people as possible. Rauschenberg's influence can be detected in various contemporary artists work. His world view is one that has opened up the possibility of contemporary social comment for many artists within their work. Rauschenberg has always tried to bring the viewing public into the process of art. To cause interaction, he has enabled the increasing growth of performance and interaction-based work.

A group of artists based in New York, called *Group Material* which were founded in 1979, has shown tendencies that could be said to have evolved from influences of Rauschenberg. *Group Material* was founded in the attempt to bridge the gap between high and low art. They have stated about their aims, that they are dedicated to the creation, exhibition and distribution of art that increases social awareness. They have organised public lectures and discussion groups, in the hope that perceived ideas about art and artists can be discussed and debated by both the artist and the audience. This approach recalls much of Rauschenberg's own aims and work. Collaboration was also an important element within *Group Material*. In May 1988, they created a project called *Inserts* which consisted of a twelve page booklet of reproductions of original artworks by various artists, like Barbara Kruger, Hans Haacke, Nancy Spero and Jenny Holzer. This booklet was placed in the Sunday magazine supplement of the New

York Times. With this booklet, *Group Material* used the medium of commercial print and transformed it into a mass-media art form. This project was a reversal of Rauschenberg's *Currents* series; in which Rauschenberg had taken headlines and text from newspapers and then collaged them into his work. Instead *Group Material* had placed their art directly into the newspapers. Either way, both have reflected images of society back onto society through the use of mass media.

These works were trying to wake people up to the realities of contemporary life; realities that need to be addressed. Because Rauschenberg has never let these realities and ideals out of his work, he has become so important to contemporary art. His influence will continue to be felt and hopefully help the evolution of art and society.

APPENDIX

UNESCO, a major project on mutual appreciation of eastern and western cultural values. The reasons for the launching of this project:

a. understanding between peoples necessary for peaceful co-operation among them can only be built on a full knowledge and appreciation of one another's cultures.

b. Among the peoples and nations of the orient and the occident, there is special urgency of increasing mutual appreciation of their respective cultural values.

c. A profound and objective study of the radical changes which have recently taken place in the life of both eastern and western nations is necessary for a proper understanding of their national cultures and to an appreciation of the values inherent in them.

(Art and Reality, 1986, p. 197)

The concept of this major project, was based on three new ideas:

a. from a knowledge of facts concerning other countries and nations the emphasis shifts to the values of another culture. This broadens the scope of education to include what goes under the name of culture.

b. The objective is not merely understanding, which is largely an intellectual process, but appreciation that goes beyond understanding, requiring the use of the moral qualities of sympathy and reverence. Appreciation is a deeper experience than understanding and belongs to the realm of love.

c. The element of mutuality in the process of appreciation calls for equality and togetherness. It also implies an encounter of two great cultures in search of a new synthesis (*Art and Reality*, 1986, p. 198).

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