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ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG 1950 - 70

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## Introduction

For more than 25 years the American artist Robert Rauschenberg has practiced his particular type of painting. Though his style has varied considerably throughout this period, his most recent work being remarkably different from that of his early years, there is a clear manifestation of personality and talent evident throughout his career which remains essentially Rauschenberg.

Though many movements and styles of painting have come and gone, Rauschenberg has not lost the freshness of his oeuvre. This is due to the fact that he always has something active happening in his work. Refusing to keep any particular style for long, as he does not wish to identify with any particular school, he prefers to go from one development on to another while constantly working. In order to retain his freshness, he keeps a careful eye on his own progress, while keeping it in step with his surrounding environment. He has responded to the changes in his environment, be they, social, cultural or political by introducing external elements from the environment into his art. His work methods can best be described as free association, with little or no regard for classification.

Rejoicing in everything that is new and exciting, his work pertains to life and living itself, continuously introducing new ways of seeing and new methods of creating art, he has kept his art up to date by filling it with objects and images from life itself. Rauschenberg has an almost fickle care for the traditional role of art, choosing to use whatever he wished for his work, and using whatever media and material was the most suitable for the

purpose, regardless of its origins, within or outside the boundaries of art.

But what is it that makes Rauschenberg's paintings so exciting? Is it that we see in them parts of our own life that we can identify with, or is it simply the recognizable factor inherent in the work which fascinates onlookers? In my thesis I propose to discuss some of the ideas and approaches taken by Rauschenberg in an attempt to understand the puzzlement present in his work. I do not intend to interpret or find reason for it however, as it is the essential ingredient of Rauschenberg's work that everyone should find their own interpretation in it. In writing this thesis I hope to come to terms with Rauschenberg himself, as well as his work. I do not wish to penetrate very deeply into the meaning of his work, as the nature of his creations is that it should expose and draw attention, but not to urge any particular response from the viewer. As his work relies on the personal reflections of the viewer, I do not wish to infringe upon these by supplying my own interpretations, I have tried to view his work with an open mind, as his work dictates, and hope that this view will come across to the reader without bias.

## Chapter One Early Influences

Robert Rauschenberg is probably one of the best known American artists of this century. Born in Port Arthus Texas in 1925, he did not begin to take an interest in painting until after the war in 1946 when a friend suggested he went to the Kansas City Art Institute under the G.I. Bill of Rights. In 1947 he went to Paris to study at the Academie Julian, returning to America in the following year to study under Hans Hofmann and Joseph Albers at the Black Mountain College in North Carolina. It was here that Rauschenberg first came into contact with Abstract Expressionism and its techniques, some of which he used extensively in his work. These consisted mainly of the drip or spattering of paint, and the gestural brushwork which is generally attributed to the Abstract Expressionists.

After the decline of the Abstract Expressionist movement in the 1950s a number of young artists, such as Rauschenberg and his contemporary Jasper Johns, began to return to a more representational form of art.<sup>1</sup> The Abstract Expressionists as a movement had tended to ignore or exclude recognizable elements so it is no wonder that artists emerging after its fifteen year reign, began returning to a more literal translation. They felt a need to present and represent objects of the everyday world, but not without retaining many of the lessons learned from abstraction.

Though both Rauschenberg's and Johns's beginnings are caught up in Abstract Expressionism their art may be seen as a reaction against the movement itself and its theories. Rauschenberg took an objective stance towards gestural paintings believing that they

were not as personal as they purported to be. Though he continued to work in a style similar to the Abstract Expressionists his main use of gesture was as overall texture rather than spontaneous painting. One painting in which Rauschenberg demonstrated his feelings towards gesture painting is his work "Factum I and Factum II" (Ill. 1). In which he meticulously duplicated a spontaneous looking gesture painting, clearly showing that they were not so unique or individual as they could be duplicated.

Rauschenberg's theories can be seen to some extent as a reaction against the elitism associated with the Abstract Expressionists purist vein which dominated the early part of his development. As a movement Abstract Expressionism tended to be more of an art understood by artists only, not catering for the needs of society. Rauschenberg felt that he needed to relate his work to ordinary circumstances. It was his opinion that art had existed for far too long on a socially elite pedestal, available only to those cherished few who moved in these art circles. This made him want to reduce it to the level of ordinary comprehension by painting about things that were more accessible to everyone. His famous saying quoted again and again by critics is that "Painting relates to both art and life. Neither can be made, (I try to work in the gap between the two)".<sup>2</sup> This has formed a basis for his work throughout his life and helps explain a lot of his theories.

Rauschenberg's other definite reaction towards Abstract Expressionism was his decision to erase a drawing by William de Kooning<sup>3</sup> the most revered artist of this group. This action caused a great amount of reaction in the New York art circles at the time, and

also caused numerous further implications for the art world. The most obvious reason for the erasure was a need to defy the elitism associated with the spontaneous gesture. Though it may be seen as an act of destruction, Rauschenberg defended it saying "I had been working for some time at erasing, with the idea that I wanted to create a work of art by that method".<sup>4</sup>

He subsequently noted of the erasure "I was trying both.... to purge myself of my teaching and at the same time exercise the possibilities so I was doing monochrome no-image".<sup>5</sup>

He defended the erasure as being a legitimate work of art utilizing a hitherto unknown process of creation rather than those of traditional methods.

While at Black Mountain College Rauschenberg also met with the famous American composer John Cage who was working there.<sup>6</sup> Cage was an intellectual, interested in Zen and Buddhist Philosophy. Cage's theories were to have a profound effect upon Rauschenberg's work. It was around this time that he painted his "White Paintings" (ill. 2) which consisted of seven all white canvases. Though these paintings stand at the beginning of Rauschenberg's career and differ considerably from the majority of his complex later work, they serve to bring out some lasting characteristics of his career. These are often described as the artistic counterpart of John Cage's famous "silent composition for piano, 4'33", in which the pianist sits at the keyboard for four minutes thirty three seconds without striking a note, simply relying on the sound of the audience's reaction. Rauschenberg's white canvases rely on the viewer's

participation in forming the work. John Cage described them as "Airports for the lights, shadows, and particles".<sup>7</sup>

Rauschenberg wrote that they had been a means of "open composition by responding to the activity within their reach".<sup>8</sup> That is, they were to function as screens on to which the lights of the room and the shadows of the visitors to the exhibition would be thrown. But at the time he painted them he preferred to look on them with a more elaborate interpretation which harked again to the influence of Cage, he said of them

They are large white (one white as one God) canvases, organized and selected with the experience of time and presented with the innocence of a virgin. Dealing with the suspense, excitement and body of an organic silence, the restriction and freedom of absence, the plastic fullness of nothing, the point a circle begins and ends. They are a natural response to the current pressures of the faithless and a promoter of institutional optimism. It is completely irrelevant that I am making them. Today is their Creator.<sup>9</sup>

The purpose of art as John Cage saw it was as

a purposeless play.... (which) however, is an affirmation of life - not an attempt to bring order out of chaos nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply a way of waking up to the very life we're living, which is so excellent once one gets one's mind and one's desires out of the way and let it act on its own accord.<sup>10</sup>

From these associations with Cage, Rauschenberg's work began to

take on the appearance that we must associate with him. Working on the idea of integrating art and life he began to experiment with different media, he started to paint with such things as dirt and live plants, drawing again on Cage's belief that art should emulate and demonstrate nature's processes.

Through Cage, Rauschenberg also became acquainted with the theories of the French Dada theorist and artist, Marcel Duchamp.<sup>11</sup> Rauschenberg had first become interested in Dada's teachings in 1949 when he first discovered Duchamp's readymades. Though he has been labelled by many, perhaps misleadingly so, with the title of a neo-Dadaist, his work differs in the way he approaches his subject matter. Relying on Cage's interpretations of Duchamp's theories which were linked with Zen philosophy he abandoned the critical stance taken by many of the Dada artists in favour of a calm inner contemplation. This he applied to his interpretations of life and art creating a "joie de vivre" in which there were no restrictions.

This was creating art "(without) wondering am I right or doing something wrong".<sup>12</sup>

In the early fifties Rauschenberg began to work with more varied materials, experimenting with combining objects and pieces of junk in his paintings. He did not give these objects any symbolic significance however, as many of the Dada or Surrealist artists had, as he did not want to impose on them any of the romantic effulgence associated with traditional object d'art. Instead he became intrigued with their given quality, and preferred to put

them forward in the stark factuality that they were found. His work now began to take on the appearance of positively constructed paintings which reflected and included elements from his surrounding environment. (Using a system of cubist grids which he retained throughout his career, his paintings began to resemble in some ways the Merz paintings of the German Dadaist Kurt Schwitters.) Building up the surface of his paintings with bits and pieces of discarded papers, materials, different found objects and articles of interest. In some ways his work gave the status of 'object d'art' to the materials discarded by society, yet unlike Duchamp's readymades, which were exhibited as isolated works of art, Rauschenberg preferred to look at his objects as mere supports for the application of paint. Rauschenberg has been credited by Leo Steinberg with inventing the "flatbed or work surface picture plane".<sup>13</sup> Steinberg argues that whereas previous artists assumed a correspondence between our general experience of space and the world and space of art, Rauschenberg implies no spatial orientation beyond that effected by his operational process on the surface. His orientation of images is such that one no longer knows what is 'up' or 'down', though he works equally in two and three dimensional works.

Through the application of paint to the objects themselves Rauschenberg took these objects one step further than the "object trouvee", but also brought more reality to fine art painting in removing it from its illusionistic traditions, replacing its romanticism for the stark fact of reality. Like Duchamp, Rauschenberg believed that art resides more in the invention of ideas than in the act of painting itself. When Duchamp for instance, was

asked of his famous painting "The Chocolate Grinder" (ill. 3)<sup>14</sup> had it any symbolic significance he replied "None at all, unless that which consists in introducing slightly new methods into painting".<sup>15</sup>

This statement can in some way help to explain what Rauschenberg was attempting through his work. Ways of introducing something new and exciting into the traditional methods of painting. By combining objects from the real world we live in, with the illusionistic world of painting, he attempted to bring life itself into the world of art. Thus was his intention, to bridge the barriers between the elitism of art tradition, and the outside world of stark reality.

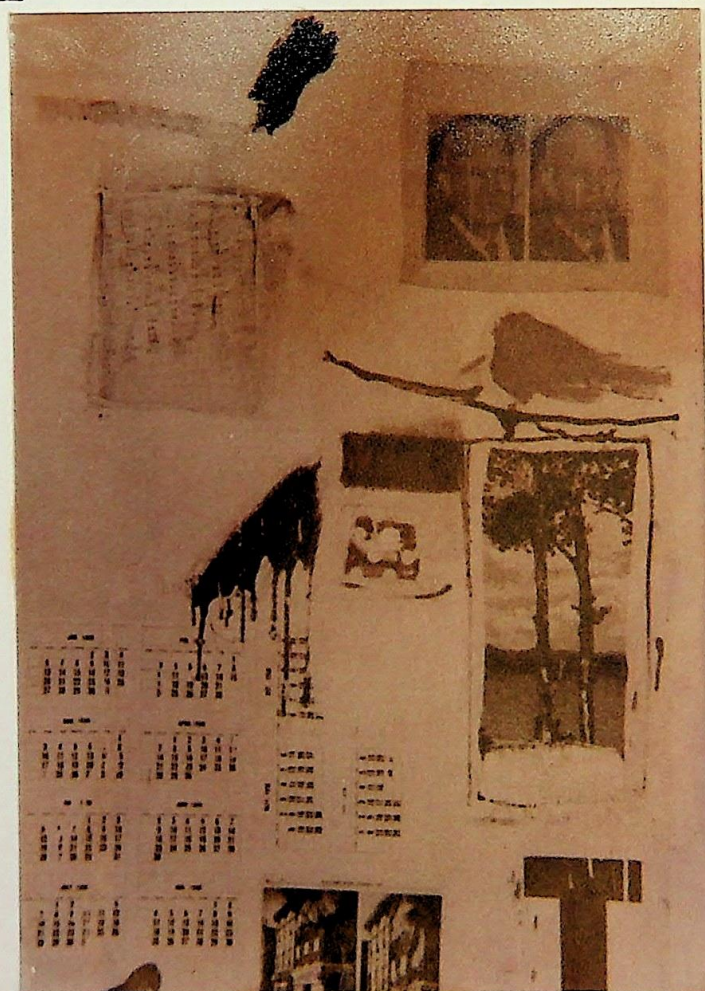
# Footnotes to Chapter 1

1. Jasper Johns: Neo-Dadaist American painter often associated with Rauschenberg due to their similarities of style, influence and also their friendship.
2. Robert Rauschenberg, Sixteen Americans ed. Dorothy C. Miller, Exhibition Catalogue (N.Y. Museum of Modern Art) 1959. p. 2
3. William de Kooning: Abstract Expressionist painter of the European school, who settled in America after the war to become a key figure in the New York art scene.
4. Robert Rauschenberg, The Bride and the Bachelors, Calvin Tomkins, p 210.
5. Robert Rauschenberg, Interview, May 1976, p 36.
6. John Cage: American composer and art theorist, whose theories were to influence Rauschenberg's career greatly.
7. John Cage, The Bride and the Bachelors, p 265.
8. Robert Rauschenberg, Exhibition Catalogue Tate Museum, p 3.
9. Ibid.
10. John Cage, Silence, p 12.
11. Marcel Duchamp: French Dadaist painter and theorist who gave up painting to play chess, his theories on art have had a great influence on many modern artists including Rauschenberg.
12. Meister Eckhart, "Rauschenberg re-evaluated", Art Monthly, No 7 p 8, 1981.

13. Leo Steinberg, "Other Criteria", Oxford University Press, New York 1972, p 83.
14. "The Chocolate Grinder" by Duchamp has been considered the first painting to exhalt a mechanical device as a work of art.
15. Pierre Cabanne, Dialogue with Marcel Duchamp. p 31

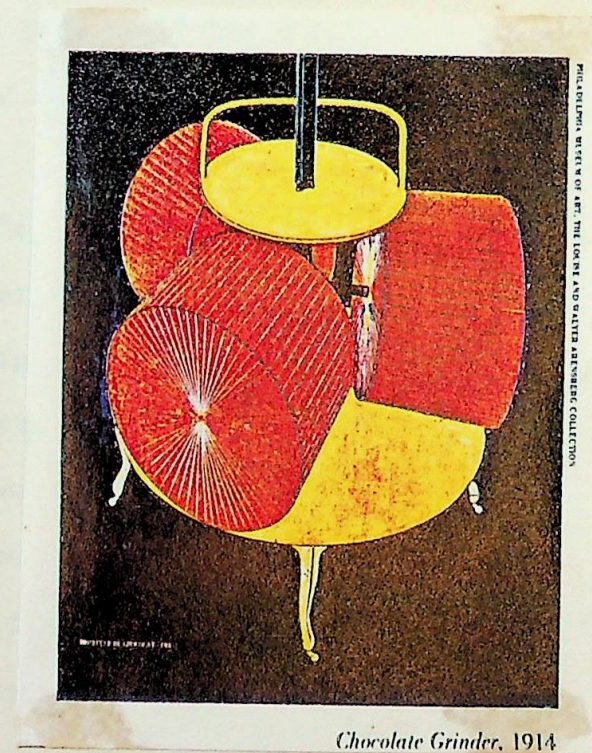


ill. 1 Factum 1 + Factum 2 R. Rauschenberg





ill. 2 White Paintings by R. Rauschenberg



*Chocolate Grinder, 1914*

ill. 3 Chocolate Grinder by Marcel Duchamp

## Chapter Two Process

A spectator confronted with a Rauschenberg painting for the first time can often feel confused as to what is being seen. Critics may form particular associations within the work, but it is virtually impossible to give an overall definition of what has been seen, or to try and explain or decode the amount of diverse imagery present, and its inter-relationship. This diversity has often caused problems for critics and spectators alike, in that they find it difficult finding meaning or logic in the work. However it is not necessary to be able to recognise and classify these relationships, as Rauschenberg did not intend his work to be read and understood as one might read a book. John Cage has given the clearest definition of what a Rauschenberg painting stands for in his description of Rauschenberg's drawings for "Dante's Inferno".<sup>1</sup>

It seems like many television sets working simultaneously all tuned differently.<sup>2</sup>

Rauschenberg's best work often sums up a state of feeling or emotion rather than a particular situation, as his work is involved with an interpretation of what he feels towards his environment.

Brian O'Doherty best describes this feeling, writing

What viewers felt, I think was not just a recognition of images, but a recognition of a familiar state of feeling that has to do with "information overload", a part of daily life everyone more or less learns to ignore.<sup>3</sup>

The term "information overload" describes the feeling generated

by modern urban living, the glut of imagery from advertising, television and magazines which we have learned to ignore, because it would otherwise over-tax our ability to cope with our environment.

Rauschenberg says of this feeling

I was bombarded with T.V. sets and magazines, by the refuse, by the excess of the world.... I thought that if I could paint or make an honest work, it should incorporate all these elements which are a reality.<sup>4</sup>

Rauschenberg showed a preference in his work methods though not constantly, in stringing together a set of associate images which were loosely connected by a central theme. The process was similar to a word association game in which each word can function simultaneously as noun and verb, leading to multiple reading depending on the spectator's state of mind. This use of word/image association is similar to Max Ernst's montages which utilised printed imagery to create works of art which both contrast and contradict each other, and yet are loosely associative. His use of cubist grids however is attributed to the influence of Kurt Schwitters who liked to organise his imagery in a structured gridwork. These systemic work methods appealed to Rauschenberg, as is evident from the many collages produced in this manner in the mid fifties. These are made up of miscellaneous photographs and magazine cuttings composed in a grid-like structure in which as he puts it: there is "nothing everything is subservient to".<sup>5</sup>

"Rebus" (ill. 4) dating from 1955 is a typical example. There is

a definite geometric grid system running horizontally and vertically through the work, this is made up of a combination of diverse images both drawn and collaged onto the canvas surface. The main theme running throughout the work concerns flight. The imagery includes, photographs of a bee, a dragonfly, a mosquito, athletes running, a fly's multicellular eye and the winds from Botticelli's Birth of Venus. Rauschenberg has referred to Rebus as one of his "pedestrian series", the images being similar to those a person might see walking down the street. For all its "pedestrian" complexity, however, there is a deliberate compositional structure in which colour and image, meaning and non-meaning, jostle each other without dominance.

From these early collages, Rauschenberg began to experiment with the attachment of real three dimensional objects to the surface of his paintings, so that both two and three dimensional art existed in the one work. With the introduction of real three dimensional objects into his work he challenged two cherished concepts of academic art. One was that he introduced reality into the illusionary world of painting thus replacing the role of painting as an illusion on a flat surface, for the flat surface itself. With this gesture he also attacked the barrier between ordinary life and the higher echelons of art in an attempt to bring art to the level of ordinary comprehension. Secondly he bridged the age old gap between sculpture and painting by incorporating painting and sculptural elements in the one work. As painting was generally classed as the more elite of the two, by putting an equal emphasis on both he threatened the destination between them. By incorporating elements considered foreign to

painting into his work, he subsequently made literally everything available to painting. His found objects had become part of the canvas surface itself, simply another surface receptive to the application of paint, they can no longer be looked upon as external to painting.

Rauschenberg's belief that a work of art can be made out of any material, in any form, for whatever purpose the artist intends, was another of his theories on art. Having established that one part of a painting need not dominate or even relate to the others, and with the input of objects as well as imagery, his work became increasingly more complex for critic's analysis and decoding.

"I tended", he remarked two decades later, "to work with things that were either so abstract that nobody knew what the objects might be, or so mangled that you couldn't recognise it any more, or so obvious that you didn't think about it at all".<sup>6</sup>

But Rauschenberg's brilliance does not stem entirely from his intricate associations and levels of meaning, but rather from his ability to transform his feelings, and puzzlement on life and his surrounding environment, into works of art, so that he retains this degree of puzzlement inherent in reality. The critic Brian O'Doherty best sums it up when he says of Rauschenberg's work:

The show didn't help me to understand the world, but it helped me to understand my puzzlement.<sup>7</sup>

Rauschenberg is one of the most widely uneven artists in American history. In his work cliché and self parody are mixed with dazzling

spurts of invention and moments of poetic insight. He has never permitted himself for long, the pleasure of working in a particular style, and for that reason, among others, he was loathed by formalist critics. From his early beginnings in the fifties his work has gone through series of change. Not satisfied with working on one theme for periods of time, as most of his artistic counterparts have done, he prefers to skip from one situation to another as part of an on-going process of which his art is the result. As Brian O'Doherty put it:

Rauschenberg did not seem house-trained.<sup>8</sup>

Though Rauschenberg's work does not easily lend itself to classification, when it comes to critical analysis he has not been left aside. The nature of Rauschenberg's work, by its diversity of imagery and symbolic undertones, invites decodification, even the titles of his work hint at hidden meanings and references. Yet the lack of information supplied by the artist frustrates the operation. As Rauschenberg has not supplied this means of decoding the work, what the critics are left with is a multitude of information and no definition. This again subscribes to the theory of "information overload", if Rauschenberg had wished his work to be read in a literal way he would have provided a text. Critics inevitably have ascribed their own meanings to the work, but as no two people's interpretation of a work are identical no two critics analysis are alike. This is why there have been so many different interpretations of the content of Rauschenberg's work, furthermore his work does not comply with an analysis in terms of any single idea with which the imagery might seem to comply. It is necessary to keep an open mind to all avenues of thought and

levels of intelligence, analysing the whole work as a united piece rather than separate parts. Because of the relationships of the imagery within the work to each other, it is not possible to read them as separate pieces. As we cannot penetrate to an implied meaning of subordinate parts we must view the work as a whole.

The standard critique of Rauschenberg's work lies in the need to identify aspects of Americanism in his work. After the fall of the Abstract Expressionist movement which had pushed the American art scene to the forefront, critics were quick to pick up on Rauschenberg as a new champion of American painting. The climate was ripe for the return to a more literal style of painting and Rauschenberg's work seemed just that. Rauschenberg's imagery may not have been abstract, in that they were straight forward photographs and reproductions, yet it was the underlying theories, and his satirical irony which was to cause critics the most problems. Any object, image, process or situation could be used by Rauschenberg, he poked fun at everyone and everything. His satire can be seen to have Dada roots but it does not contain the seriousness of Dada, opting instead for a more humorous outlook.

The immediacy of Rauschenberg's work made it possible to even include himself, which he did by poking fun at one of his own most cherished beliefs.

"It is the spectator that makes the pictures."<sup>9</sup>

This statement by Marcel Duchamp forms the basis for Rauschenberg's theories, yet in the work "Black Market" (ill. 5) of 1961 he seems to poke fun at his own theories by inviting the onlookers to join

in and participate in the work.

The painting consists of a square canvas, complete with paint smears and brushstrokes, which has various attached objects. These include a license plate, a 'one way' street sign, and four clip boards with reflective covers. This is attached via a length of rope to a suitcase on the ground, containing a number of miscellaneous objects which the viewer is invited to exchange for articles of his own, provided he leaves a drawing of the displaced objects on one of the clipboards.

In this work Rauschenberg ridicules his spectators, by his "do it yourself" art, as if it were a child's paint by numbers game. But he also pokes fun at his own naivety, in leaving the completion of his work up to the public at large. It is as if he is saying, anyone can produce art, challenging the spectator to find out for himself.

"In brief"... Rauschenberg casts himself... "in the role of a youthful, infinitely naive Walt Whitman, encouraging us to participate in seeing the world as if for the first time, subscribing that is, to the myth of the American Adam".<sup>10</sup>

Rauschenberg's creative process in producing his combine paintings, takes the form of a stroll around town, in which the artist's sense of idle curiosity is given free play to engage, on the basis of unpremeditated chance encounter with the environment.<sup>11</sup>

Rauschenberg's work embodies such a variety of material rescued from the urban environment, that he seems at first glance to have picked them by chance. Andrew Forge however tells of Rauschenberg's uneasiness when offered the run of a junk yard. From this we can assume that not everything is suitable for inclusion in his work, whereas many other objects are continually used. It is probably because they have become familiar to Rauschenberg that he continues to use them, but these objects also contain a banal quality which is synonymous with Rauschenberg's work. He prefers to use objects which contain this naive banality and present them as objects in themselves, stark and factual with no romantic effulgence. Such objects as buckets, umbrellas, clocks, pillows and stuffed animals find their way into his work, these can easily be ascribed with symbolic labels, but this is not what is intended. Being real objects he did not want to change them into anything else saying

A painting is more like the real world when its made out of the real world.<sup>12</sup>

One object which has become synonymous with Rauschenberg's work and life since his first beginning is the tyre. This first appeared in his "Tyre Print" of 1951 (ill. 6). This was created in colaboration with John Cage by driving a motor car with an inked tyre over a roll of paper on a long strip of pavement in Manhattan. In later works it appears as a photograph, as a direct cast, as a transfer drawing, photographic silkscreen, and as a real three dimensional object in "Monogram" and "First Landing Jump". As a symbol it suggests a wheel, which can be interpreted as alluding to primary intelligence, man's achievements or industry. As a circle it becomes an unbroken line, geometrically pure, without

angles. But taken as itself, a tyre, it harks back to the Dada joy of the ordinary in that it is an integral part of modern living.

In "Monogram" (ill. 7) Rauschenberg uses the tyre in conjunction with a stuffed angora goat, the goat has been placed on a painted canvas which forms a base, thus reverting the role of painting and sculpture, by placing a painting on the floor. Here the painting is overpowered by the dramatic spectacle of the goat. But it is what Rauschenberg has done to the goat that makes this work so interesting. Not satisfied with the image alone, he alters it to make it even more puzzling and bizarre. Firstly he smears its head and muzzle with a thick impasto of paint, emphasizing that it is just another surface to paint on.<sup>13</sup> But it is the addition of the tyre around its middle that has made critics read a sexual content into the work. Roger Cranshaw and Adrian Lewis have suggested that the goat inside the tyre can be read as a sign of sexual penetration whereas Robert Hughes has described it as being "one of the few great icons of homosexual love in modern culture".<sup>14</sup>

Through Rauschenberg's early receptive attitude towards the environment and its integration into his work, it is possible to trace a development away from the traditional materials used by academic artists, to the use of more exotic materials, such as those used in industry, and the integration of mechanical devices. This process came about slowly, with its beginnings in the combine paintings of the early sixties. One such example of this can be seen in his combine painting called "Reservoir" of 1961 (ill. 8).

This consists of a combination of painting, wood, metal and fabric, on the canvas surface, but also present, in working condition are two electric clocks. The clock at the upper left, was set when he began to work on the combine, while the clock in the lower left was set when the work was completed. Many other of his combine works have contained such devices as these, including such items as, light bulbs, neon signs, wheels and radio's, all leading in the general direction of a more definite collaboration with life itself.

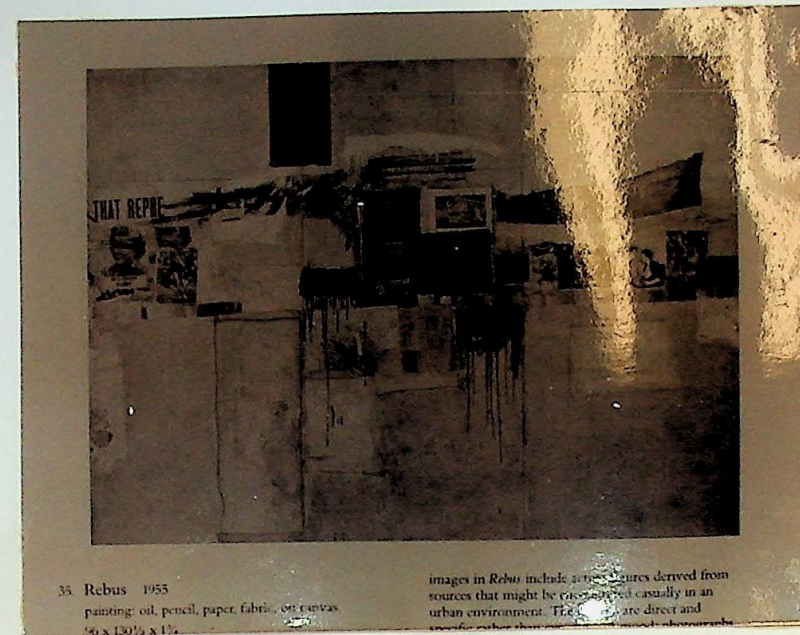
His work process resembles that of a puzzle or game in which the individual pieces are strung together around one central theme, though this is often so deeply woven into the work, with contradictions and absurdities that the theme is obscured. Though always serious, his work contains an almost childlike innocence and humour, this is why many of the objects and images he uses appear to have come from his childhood. An example of this sense of nostalgia is given to us by Irving Sandler who has related the stuffed goat of Monogram to a pet goat which Rauschenberg owned as a child. The goat was killed by Rauschenberg's father, so in its inclusion in /pet. his work it takes the place of this childhood/ The title Monogram gives us another clue to this object as being personal to Rauschenberg himself. Many such objects and images as this turn up again and again in Rauschenberg's work, giving it a sense of childhood nostalgia. This may explain the reason for Rauschenberg's popularity, the interest and curiosity that surround objects of antique or nostalgic quality. By using the contents of attics and waste this sense of the antique is already present in the objects he chooses, it is not necessary that he has any personal affiliation

with these objects, as in the case of the goat, because the viewers themselves will provide their own.

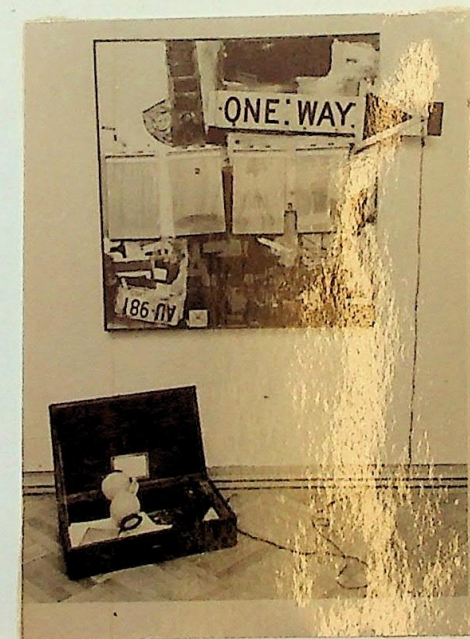
Another device which Rauschenberg tends to use in his work is that of readily recognizable imagery. This is so that the viewer, on seeing something he already knows, will be better able to identify with the work. Rauschenberg liked to work with popular imagery which he collected from magazines and newspapers, so that his work would have an immediacy about it. The combine works and transfer drawings of the mid sixties give us an insight into what was happening in the surrounding world. A good example of this is "Buffalo" of 1964 (ill. 9) in which he uses such images as a Coca-Cola bottle, which is recognised world wide, the American eagle, giving a sense of patriotism, and the photoimage of President John F. Kennedy, a very well known and popular image from this period. The work also contains the photoimage of a parachuting astronaut, which gives an immediacy to the work and hints at the excitement of new territory and adventure. These are all images which were part of the American way of life so it is little wonder that critics hailed him as being the all American champion.

## Footnotes Chapter 2

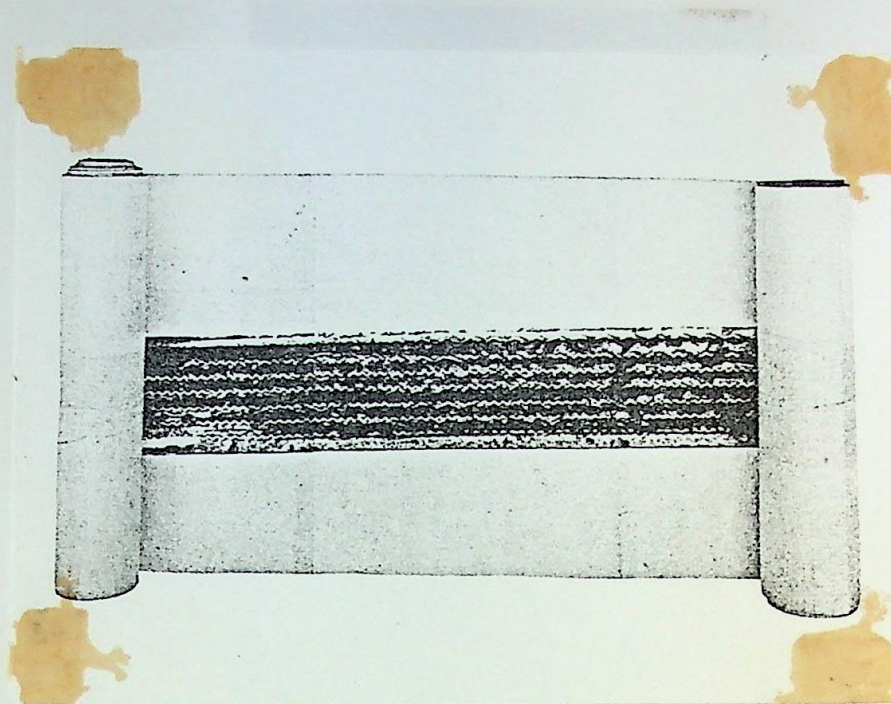
1. A series of 34 illustrations, influenced by Dante's 'Inferno' which rely on images from magazines and newspapers. c. 1959.
2. Douglas Davis, Art and the Future, p 142.
3. Brian O'Doherty, American Masters, p 248.  
The term "information overload" has been credited to Brian O'Doherty.
4. Robert Rauschenberg from article in Interview, May 1976.
5. Richard Kostelantetz, Metamorphosis in the Arts, A critical history of the sixties.
6. Robert Hughes, The Shock of the New, "Culture as Nature", p 334.
7. Brian O'Doherty, American Masters, p 248.
8. Brian O'Doherty, from The Shock of the New, "Culture as Nature", p 333.
9. Marcel Duchamp, The New York School, "The Duchamp - Cage Aesthetic".
10. Roger Cranshaw and Adrian Lewis, "Re-reading Rauschenberg", Art Scribe, June 1981 p 44.
11. Calvin Tomkins, The Bride and the Bachelors.
12. I. Sandler, The New York School. p 183
13. When later asked what were his reasons for smearing the goat's face with paint, he said he did it so as to cover up a damaged area of the goat's muzzle.
14. Robert Hughes, Art Monthly, Michael Newman article, p 9.



ill. 4 Rebus by R. Rauschenberg



ill. 5 Black Market by R. Rauschenberg



ill 6 Tyre Print R. Rauschenberg



ill. 7 Monogram R. Rauschenberg



ill. 8 Reservoir R. Rauschenberg



ill. 9 Buffalo R. Rauschenberg

### Chapter Three Shock-Content/Technology

It is evident that Rauschenberg has used the public at large as a vehicle to proclaim his work. This is not necessarily saying that he has ridden on the crest of popularity, but by allowing the viewer to play a large part in the interpretation of his work he harks back again to Duchamp's famous remark that "It is the spectator that makes the pictures".<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, leaving his work so open to criticism has created a large amount of contradictory interpretations, as viewers need to find their own associations and personal concepts in what they have seen.

While critics have found it difficult to analyse the content of Rauschenberg's work its familiarity has made it very popular with the public at large. Though its interpretation is consciously left open, Rauschenberg often feels personally responsible when a spectator finds it difficult to understand his work. One such experience is related by Calvin Tomkins in "The Bride + the Bachelors", of an opening at the Jewish Museum in which several people brought their dismay to Rauschenberg's attention. Rauschenberg always tried to get to the bottom of their queries in an attempt to explain their bewilderment.

One such conversation he remembers in detail. A middle-aged woman came up to him midway through the evening and asked why he was interested only in ugly things. "She really wanted to know", he recalls. "You could see that she wasn't just being hostile. Well I had to find out first of all what she

meant by 'ugly', and so we talked about that for a while, and it seemed that what bothered her was the materials I'd chosen to use and the way they were put together. To her all my decisions seemed absolutely arbitrary - as though I could just as well have selected anything at all - and therefore there was no meaning, and that made it ugly. So I told her that if I were to describe the way she was dressed, it might sound very much like what she'd been saying. For instance she had feathers on her head. And she had this enamel brooch with a picture of the blue boy on it pinned to her breast. And around her neck she had on what she would call a mink, but what also could be described as the skin of a dead animal. Well, at first she was a little offended by this, I think, but then later she came back and said she was beginning to understand.<sup>2</sup>

The bed has long been an image common to academic art, whether it was seen as a support for the reclining figure as in, for instance the "Naked Maga" or as a solitary piece of furniture as in Van Gogh's "Room". However Rauschenberg in his work "Bed" of 1955 (ill. 10), "literally" transformed "his" own bed into the work of art. He substituted the canvas for the bed clothes complete with sheets, pillow and quilt, stretched on the frame as a canvas would normally be. The cloth which he often applied to the canvas surface with glue or impasto, has now become the canvas itself, being already coloured by its patchwork pattern, which now becomes the work itself along with the dripped and spattered paintwork. At first what is seen is a familiar object in three dimensional space, but this is not what it is this is what it was. It can no

longer be looked upon as a functional bed, as it has assumed the role of a work of art, by its application to the canvas stretcher and the splattering and dripping of paint on its cover. The fact that paint has been applied to it takes it out of its ordinary context, it is no longer a piece of furniture, it has become a piece of art.

Though the bed, in context, is undoubtedly a real three dimensional object, the fact that it is painted on, and framed, takes it out of its ordinary everyday context so that it is seen differently. It now becomes a painting because it is hung on the wall. But if he had decided to place it on the ground as in the support in Monogram, would it have become a sculpture or reverted to being a bed, such was the way that Rauschenberg worked, posing questions through his work so as to make the spectator question what he already knows and to re-evaluate this knowledge in terms of art.

In "Odalisque" 1955-58 (ill. 11), the title makes reference to the concubines of an oriental Harem, whereas the imagery is mostly erotic. Many of the more naive objects also allude to eroticism, for instance, the soft pillow at the base is squashed in the middle by a shaft like support column for the hollow box. On the box are collaged images of males and females, a dog-lust-barking at a nude pin up. The body is illuminated by a light resembling a red light or hinting at the sexual metaphor of the 'turn on'. The box is crowned by a stuffed cockrel, a traditional symbol of male sex. Though there have been many disputes as to the verification of these interpretations, it is noticable in many of Rauschenberg's work that he does use eroticism and sexuality as a shock treatment.

This is to shock the spectator into awareness of what he is confronted with.

What can be said of Rauschenberg's work is, because the materials he uses are so strange to the world of art, and so out of context in their role as art object, people cannot comprehend or justify their presence. What Rauschenberg was doing, in some ways, was to make people more aware of the things that surround them, by turning them into art object, he changed their whole existence. Things which would normally have been overlooked, due to their normal function and context in the environment, now confronted the viewer in what was traditionally held as a position of beauty and aesthetics. This brings into the argument Plato's assertion that a dustbin if functional is more beautiful than an ornate golden shield, if the shield is unfunctional. Rauschenberg's work ascribes to a different type of beauty, the beauty of truth and reality.

In talking to the puzzled onlooker at the opening, Rauschenberg was trying to teach her to look with a more open receptive mind, and to loose her inhibitions, and stereotyped attitudes in favour of a more fluid visual language. In other words to take what she saw totally, as a visual experience, like a child seeing something for the first time with no prior knowledge of its functions, just taking it for what has been seen and nothing else. Rauschenberg's appeal to those without pre-conceived ideas on art is understandable, as it was those such as the woman in the Jewish Museum, with their stereotyped ideas on art, that found his work so hard to understand and often so repulsive. In order to view a

Rauschenberg work, in the spirit in which it was created, it is necessary first to cast off any pre-conceptions about art, and to then view it in the way a child or a visitor from outer-space would. For Rauschenberg, a detachment from society becomes a necessary condition to his work. As an outsider, he is able to see things with a clarity that throws our appurtenances into proper focus.

Like Vladimir Nabokov...."(he is a tourist) from another country, with resources and a spirit of curiosity which permits (him) to observe Disneyland with Delight and amazement."<sup>3</sup>

As Bryan Robertson commented, "it opened up not so much possibilities, as lots of things to do - the opposite of an artist like Mondrian, who convinces you there's nothing more to be done. Even people who weren't artists felt this at the time and it is important to understand why. Denied familiar images in art for so long, museum-goers now found them in an art, receiving the kind of praise hitherto reserved for the mysterious realm of abstraction. The man from the streets was allowed to bring into the museum everyday feelings his wife had always told him to check at the door."<sup>4</sup>

In the mid sixties Rauschenberg had turned his hand to a more politically favoured type of work, mainly in the form of his drawings, prints and collages. Again here he relied on mass culture to a great extent, this is especially evident in his series of silkscreened paintings entitled "Currents" which reflect the general political feeling of the time. Those images taken from current newspapers and magazines, were frequently accompanied by

substantial captions or texts, which reflected the disquiet he shared with so many over such events as the Vietnam war, public cynicism and the destruction of the environment. These works with their use of printed material call to mind the collage works of Braque and Picasso, and also the object poems of the Dada and Surrealist artists. At this period in American history these works could be seen as a clear statement of commitment to the liberal, anti-racist, anti-war and conservationist movements, thus identifying with a vast majority of young Americans. Having already established himself as one of America's best known artists, his work became a rallying point for youth. His technique of transferring images from magazines and newspapers by rubbing and collage, enabled him to make use of a large amount of photographic imagery, which was generally well known and up to date. His work remained immediate and kept its popularity with the public. By using the photographic silkscreen technique, he was able to print these images not only in multiple but in different colours, and not in reverse. The same image could also be transferred from one painting to another, permitting an almost complete freedom of association. This is probably another reason why Rauschenberg chose to re-use particular images in many of his works, as once the image was on the screen it was easily duplicated. Using such a vast amount of imagery must have caused him problems in choosing subject matters, but he says of this period of his career

"The world condition permitted me no choice of subject or color and method composition."<sup>5</sup>

This brief statement helps outline Rauschenberg's theories, in that, he lets the working process and subject matter take over. Work is just a means to an end, letting his feelings take control.

Rauschenberg looked upon the artist as more part of the painting itself than the creator, he said of himself

I'd really like to think that the artist could be just another kind of material in the picture, working in collaboration with all the other materials.

He qualified this by saying

But of course I know this isn't possible, really. I know that the artist can't help exercising his control to a degree and that he makes all the decisions really finally.<sup>6</sup>

Much of the appeal of Rauschenberg's work may be attributed to the fact that he demonstrated that something new could be done after the dominance of Abstract Expressionism, but his popularity may be credited also to the climate in America at the time.

The younger generation found in him an affiliation with their own desire to escape, at a time of increasing marital influence and social mobility, from the moral attitudes of parents who had experienced the years of economic depression and war. Rauschenberg's work stands as a banner to their cause, with its pledge to immediacy and his witty play on the contradictory and absurd. In the time of a complete cultural revolution, he became a pop idol, in that he was so sharply attuned to the contemporary American scene and what it dictated, that he gave society exactly what it wanted. In his work especially at this period in time, Rauschenberg was engaged in the response to change in the social, cultural and political ambience, events in the art world and in his own private and personal circumstance. Being such a flexible artist his work has taken on the theme of 'nonmeaning'. It is

the world of simultaneous fascination, in which the daily bombardment of the media and the fury of modern life, are captured, as if in a movie still, so that it can be more closely examined. It is essentially the phenomenon of modern living that Rauschenberg is trying to represent, not so that it can be explained but that we can feel more at ease with it.

It comes as no surprise that Rauschenberg has become so involved with technology when we look at his early beginnings, working with John Cage and Merce Cunningham in their quasi-performances in the Black Mountain College in which an overall integration of art and life were attempted.<sup>7</sup> These performances or "concerted actions" as Cage preferred to call them, were performed in the main college dining hall, and consisted of forty five minutes of action which followed a very free score. "Their actions took place simultaneously, and included, Cage reading one of his lectures from the upper rungs of a stepladder; Merce Cunningham dancing, both around and amid the audience, which was seated around four sides of a hollow square so that it faced itself; David Tudor playing the piano; Mary Caroline Richards and Charles Olsen reading their poetry in turn from another stepladder; Robert Rauschenberg playing scratchy records on an ancient wind-up phonograph with a horn loudspeaker; and two other people projecting movies and other still pictures on the walls around the room. Rauschenberg's white paintings were hung from the rafters above the audience."<sup>8</sup> Not only was this "concerted action" a beginning for Rauschenberg's involvement in 'out of art' activities but it was also the prototype of an art form which he helped develop; this was "The Happening".<sup>9</sup> Rauschenberg's experiences with these collaborated performances

are related to his use of technology, whether it be through the assistance of dancers or engineers and technicians, he has tried to incorporate the visual arts with other elements of life.

A good example of both performance and use of technology can be seen in his contribution to the "Nine Evenings"<sup>10</sup> entitled "Open Score" (ill. 12) in which he used a tennis court on his stage.

.... each time the players struck the ball a loud bang - produced by contact microphones installed in the rackets - filled the Armory Hall, turning out one of the forty eight lights illuminating the game (via Acton switches), in the process. When complete darkness finally enveloped the Armory, 700 people entered from the far end, advancing slowly, their voices low and muffled. They were visible only through two infrared T.V. cameras set up in front of the audience, cameras that allowed the viewer literally to 'see' in the dark. After the 700-man throng departed, Rauschenberg appeared on the darkened court himself, carrying a girl, .... in a coarse canvas bag.... while she sang, in a high, plaintive voice.... barely audible.<sup>11</sup>

Works such as "Open Score" and other collaborations with specialist technology came about through Rauschenberg's close associations with engineers such as Billy Kluver, who helped organise "Nine Evenings" with Rauschenberg. Another good example of Rauschenberg's co-operation with technology can be seen in his contribution to the Los Angeles Art and Technology exhibition 1971 entitled "Mud Muse" (ill. 13). The initial idea for "Mud Muse" had occurred back in 1968 when Rauschenberg met with two engineers from Teledyne

(a large industrial corporation), these were Frank Le Haye and Lewis Elmore. "Mud Muse" consists of a large bath of drilling mud, which is injected with air from pneumatic pumps, these were triggered in response to, both a prepared soundtrack created by Rauschenberg and the musician Petrie Mason, and the background noises of visitors to the exhibition.

Rauschenberg said of such collaborations with technology,

We didn't want the artist to use an engineer or an industry merely to execute pre-conceived ideas but to conduct research in which both sides would share and grow.<sup>12</sup>

For all Rauschenberg's daring and open-mindedness, perhaps his best results of working in a technical area are to be seen in a less adventurous medium such as print in which he is thoroughly at home, and throughout his career has continually relied on. Rauschenberg's associations with the medium of print can be traced back to his very earliest pieces, such as his "Female Figure" of 1949 (ill. 13), which is a blue print image obtained by shining a sun lamp around a nude model as she lay on a large sheet of blueprint paper. When the paper was developed, the exposed areas turned blue, leaving a monotype white shadow of a naked body. Another early example of Rauschenberg's use of print can be seen in his "Automobile Tyre Print" of 1951, which I have already mentioned. His best work in the area of print is undoubtedly his series of silkscreened canvases, but Rauschenberg has also worked in lithography, at both Tatyana Grossman's, Universal Limited Art Editions, and Gemini G.E.L.

"I began lithography reluctantly," he wrote, "thinking that the second half of the twentieth century was no time to start writing on rocks."<sup>13</sup>

From U.L.A.E. Rauschenberg issued a number of exceptional lithographs, however it was his interest in the mechanical side of the process and its use of photographic imagery that led him to Gemini who have a higher technical capability. Rauschenberg drew on his use of the photoimage, together with vigorous brush strokes so as to disrupt the equilibrium of the spectator viewing the work, by providing a pictorial essay and then preventing a systematic reading by concealing it with brushwork.

Rauschenberg allows the viewer the same visual choices that are made in life, away from art, in which accumulations of miscellaneous, disparate materials are taken in by the eye on the basis of form, then ordered by the mind into learned sequences. It is the latter stage that Rauschenberg sabotages, by eliminating conjunctive pictorial elements that would allow the photoimages or accumulations of trash to make sense.<sup>14</sup>

The lithograph "Accident" (ill. 15) is a good example from this period of his work. Here the underlying photographic imagery is almost completely concealed by the broad brushstrokes that cover the entire surface of the print. To further disrupt the reading there is a large fissure running from the top left hand side of the print to left of centre at the bottom, widening as it goes. Due to an accident, (which gives the print its name), the first state of the design for the print was never printed as the stone

had fractured during the proofing. However, Rauschenberg decided to incorporate the fragments at the bottom of the fissure, and print an edition from the cracked stone, thus asserting that the process by which art is created is important in itself, also strengthening his belief in coincidence. Rauschenberg's decision to print the fragments of the broken stone was proved correct when "Accident" was awarded the grand prize at the "Fifth International Print Exhibition" held at Ljubljana, Yugoslavia in 1963.

In 1964 Tatyana Grossman approached Rauschenberg with the idea of making a book of prints, as many of the other artists in Gemini had done, but when she asked him what kind of paper she should find for it, he asked why should he print on paper? He chose instead to print an edition of lithographs on plexiglass.

"Shades" (ill. 16) is a "lithographic object" in the format of a book. Images printed on five interchangeable plexiglass sheets and one fixed colophon sheet, were inserted into a three dimensional aluminium frame constructed with six slots. The colophon page bearing a dedication to Rauschenberg's son is fixed in position, but the other five can be reversed and interchanged in over six million possible arrangements. The piece stands on a metal tripod, with a flashing electric light shining through from behind, so that all the different pages can be seen illuminated from the front. Rauschenberg in his typical essential generosity, wants the viewer to participate and make his own arrangement. It is also typical that he should abandon the traditionally accepted method of a book print, in favour of this unusual three dimensional device, which is of much more interest than a typical book print.

In 1969 Rauschenberg was invited to witness the launching of the Apollo 11 spacecraft on July the seventeenth from Kennedy Space Centre, and to later follow its journey from the Command Centre in Houston. Rauschenberg and eleven other artists had been commissioned to do a series of prints to commemorate the event, which resulted in the first successful landing of men on the surface of the moon. The resulting series of lithographs, thirty in all, entitled "The Stoned Moon Series" was executed between July 1969 and April 1970 at Gemini print studio. These prints rely almost exclusively on photoimages, drawing on a large range of inter-connecting and related material, to extract his final complex compositions. Much of the visual material was provided by N.A.S.A. itself but the series also contains many of the typical Rauschenberg imagery such as native Florida birds, an early version of a flying figure equipped with flimsy gear, written material, and other free association images. The best example of this series is the print "Sky Garden" (ill. 17) which, along with its companion "Waves" represent the largest hand rolled lithographs made until that time, measuring 89 by 42 inches. The large scale of these prints further emphasise Rauschenberg's incessant need to create something new, bigger and better than what had come before. "Sky Garden" contains a factual visual diagram of a rocket with explanatory pointers indicating the different areas of the craft, all around which are numerous associative and non-associative photographic images. Brush strokes and scumbling are also present, but not as evident as in previous works as it is plain to see that he is trying to give coherent visual expression to the theme without too much contradiction. Perhaps he tried too hard to get a message across; if the imagery were simpler the work might have

been more successful. As it is, only some of the excitement initiated by the Apollo 11 launching seems to have come across. In his brief running notation he has such outlines as

Only possible to think how big it is.

Can't feel it. Enter.

Inside larger than all outsides....<sup>15</sup>

This brief note seems to instil a lot more excitement than the print has conveyed, yet as a Rauschenberg work, its shifting imagery and brilliance of colour show how he has developed from his first combines, and also shows that he is an artist of his own time working with items of the present as distinct from the past.

Around the beginning of 1971 Rauschenberg however began to work on his own more and more, leaving aside some of his political activities. He had built a studio on Captiva Island Florida where he spent most of his time, taking him away from the New York scene. His print studio, Untitled Press, which he set up on the island was in production by April when Cy Tombly pulled the first series of prints. Rauschenberg began to return to the medium of collage with which he was so well acquainted. His first pieces were made entirely of cardboard as he said he wanted

to work in a material of waste and softness. Something yielding with its only message a collection of lines imprinted like a friendly joke. A silent discussion of this history exposed by their new shapes.<sup>16</sup>

He produced a series of works made of corrugated cardboard called

"Cardboards" using photo offset printing, silkscreen, and rubber stamps to replicate the few images found on boxes. The boxes were torn and carved into shapes, often flattened out and linked together, sometimes edge to edge, using cord and sealing tape to hold them together. The use of the limited incorporated words such as "Fragile", "Spinning", "Yarns" etc. replace the anxieties expressed in the preceding works, and share a kind of cool nostalgia with those of his fifties works. In appearance they even resemble the works of the mid fifties but that does not mean to say that they are unsuccessful, in fact they are probably the best works produced by Rauschenberg at this period of his career. One fine example of this series is "Cardbird Door" (ill. 18), which is again reminiscent of Schwitters Merz paintings of 1930-40. Built up of an interlocking grid of cardboard boxes and craft paper, held together in a rectangular frame. Published by Gemini G.E.L. in an edition of 25 they can best be described as assembled prints, as they combine both the techniques of print and collage assemblages. It is through such works as these that we begin to see the real artist at work. Though he always prefers to work with new and exciting materials and ideas, his best work is usually created with media with which he is thoroughly at home and at a very simple level. He seems to work best as an artist in his own right leaving aside his political aspirations and social commentaries. What makes works such as "Cardbird Door" and its counterparts so successful, is its honest factuality with no aspirations to anything other than what it is.

As Harold Rosenberg once said,

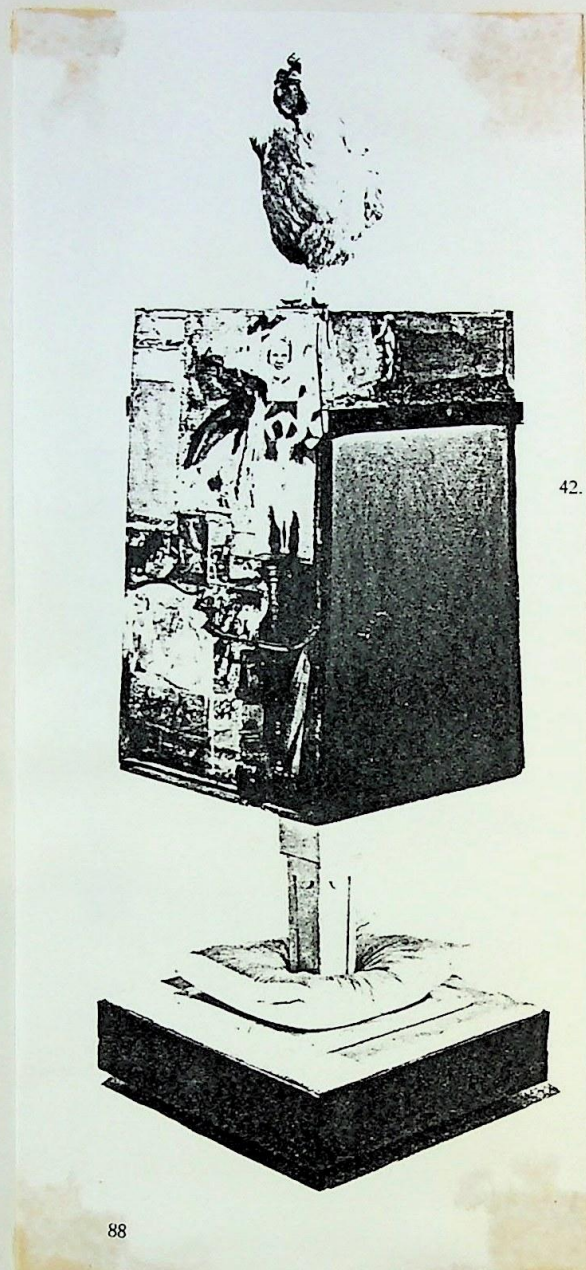
.... the most beautiful instrument an artist has to work with is his pencil.<sup>17</sup>

### Footnotes Chapter 3

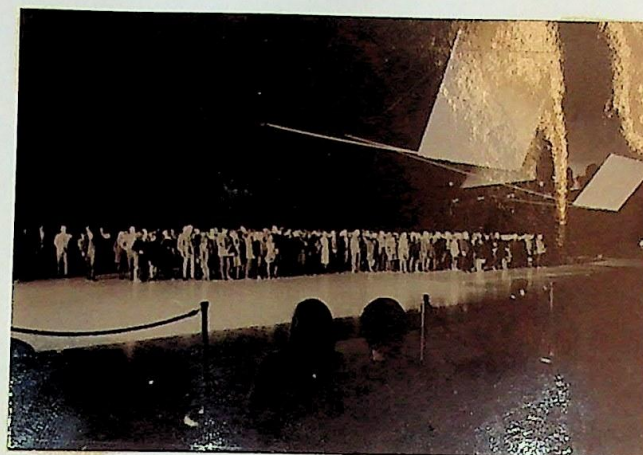
1. Marcel Duchamp, c.f. I. Sandler, New York School. p<sup>?</sup>
2. Calvin Tomkins, The Bride and the Bachelors, pp 190/191.
3. Alan Solomon, The New Art, p 196.
4. Brian O'Doherty, American Masters, p 247.
5. Robert Rauschenberg, Exhibition Catalogue, Smithsonian Institute Press.
6. Calvin Tomkins, The Bride and the Bachelors, p 232.
7. Merce Cunningham: Dance Choreographer of 50s/60s who believed in freedom of expression in all dance techniques.
8. Calvin Tomkins, The Bride and the Bachelors, p 117.
9. Happenings: a form of expression related to both painting and theatre generally associated with American Pop Artists but also having links with Dada Theatre.
10. Nine Evenings; a series of art related events held between Oct. 13 - 23 at 96th Regiment Armory, New York.
11. Douglas Davis "Technology as Nature", Art and the Future, p 141.
12. Douglas Davis, "Technology as Nature", Art and the Future, p 144.
13. From Contemporary American Prints, The Rapp Collection Art Gallery of Ontario.
14. Riva Castleman, Prints of the Twentieth Century - A History.
15. Ideas and Images of the 1960 and 70s, p 183.
16. Diane Kelder, "Made in Graphic studio", Art in America, March/April 1973.
17. Douglas Davis, Art and Technology, p 145.



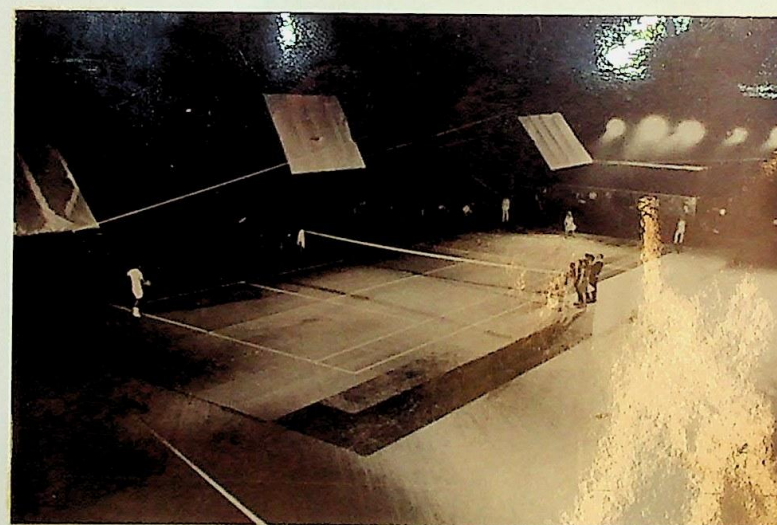
ill. 10 Bed R. Rauschenberg

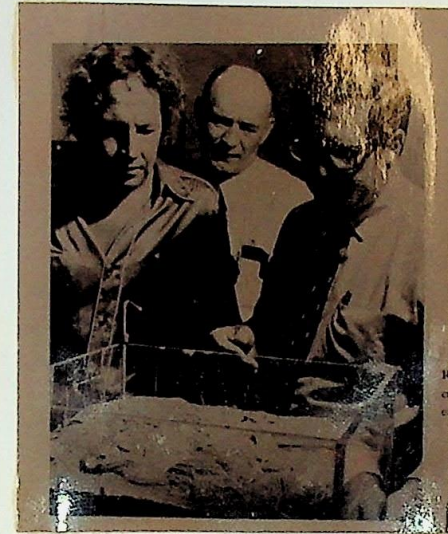


ill. 11 Odalisque by R. Rauschenberg

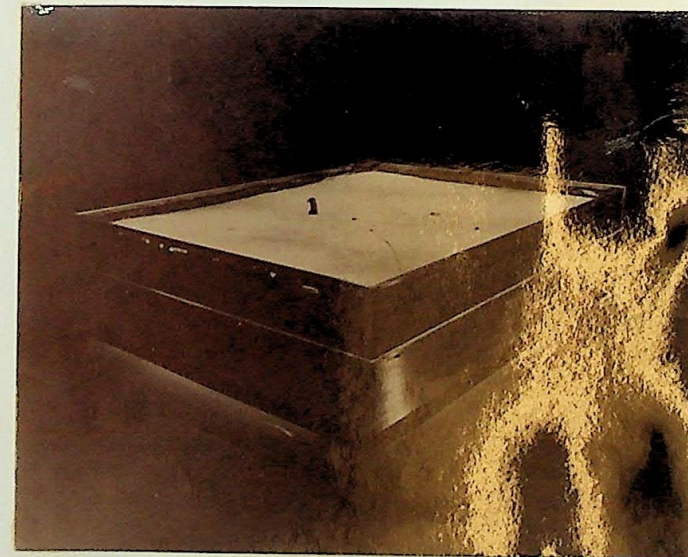


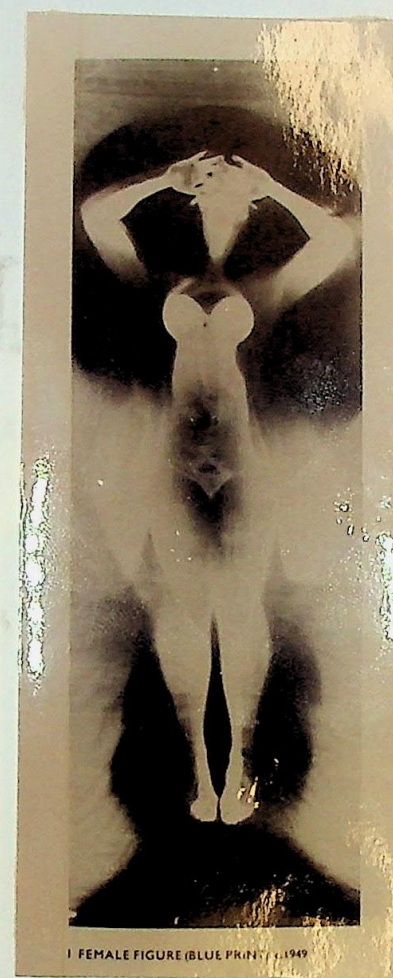
ill. 12 Open Score by R. Rauschenberg





ill. 13 Mud Muse by R. Rauschenberg





ill. 14 Female Figure by R. Rauschenberg



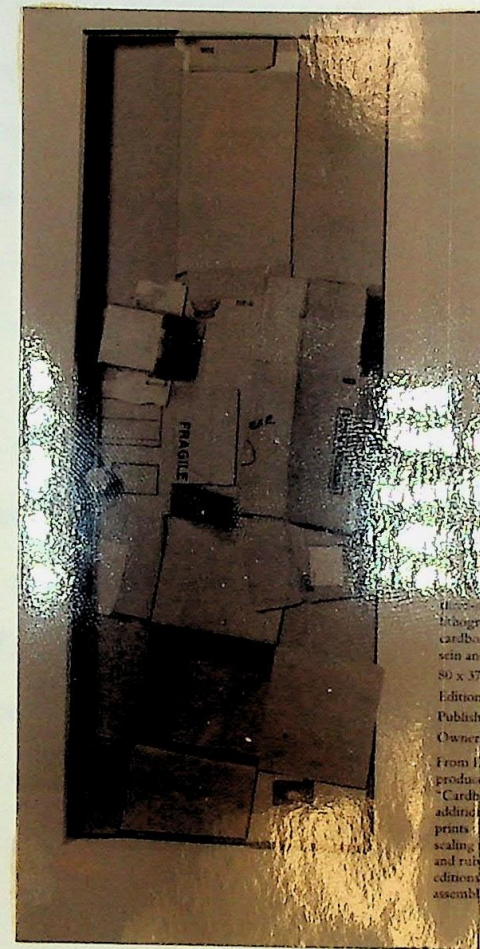
ill. 15 Accident by R. Rauschenberg



ill. 16 Shades by R. Rauschenberg



ill. 17 Sky Garden by R. Rauschenberg



ill. 18 Cardbird Door by R. Rauschenberg

### Conclusion

In looking at Rauschenberg's career it is evident that he achieved success at an early stage. However his constant change, together with the amount of work produced makes it difficult to form opinions about it. As he gained respect at such an early age many critics have scorned him for jumping on the bandwagon of success, and using this to further his art. However before judging Rauschenberg's achievement we must remember that the period in which he appeared on the art scene was one of cultural revolution and media 'hype'. Artists working in the late 50s and 60s were undoubtedly affected by the circulation between high art and public media, as is evident from the success of the Pop Art movement. This was the era which saw, and benefited from, the rapid growth of mass media which had taken place since the end of the war. American companies were in the middle of a new export drive to sell the American way of life, this was brought about primarily by the mass exportation of visual media - Hollywood movies, T.V. series and the illustrated news magazines from which Rauschenberg culled his images.

The publicity machines of large operator's concerned with the sale of works of art.... moved into the scene with a vengeance. The artist (was) no longer left in comparative obscurity and poverty to go through his initial studies as a young man, as he did even as late as the time of Jackson, Pollock and de Kooning.<sup>1</sup>

Rauschenberg may in one way or another, have taken advantage of what was there for the taking, but it can be equally said that

the appeal of his imagery, like the illustrated magazine played a large part in his success. The mask of subject matter allowed him to develop a firm persona which interacted amusingly with the public's reception of his work as it was recycled into the popular media, that is, become just subject matter again. He was certainly one of the first artists to involve himself seriously with subject matter of this kind, as is seen as far back as the early 50s, so we cannot say that he chose this subject because of its popularity. He cannot be accused of inciting the interest in popular imagery, as that is always present, but he can be said to have used it to his own advantage. At the same time his quick rise to fame does not seem to have affected him, though he was receiving large amounts of attention he did not let it interfere with his work, he has always welcomed criticism and seemed to thrive on whatever critics have thrown his way. Though he did not cut himself off as many artists do, instead he preferred to continue with his life as usual. During this same period, having established himself as one of the best internationally recognised figures in art, he continued to support and encourage younger or lesser known artists, by his constant presence at exhibitions, openings, performances and events.

Being an artist continuously involved with change and inventiveness has led Rauschenberg into many diverse fields of work, always looking for new avenues of expression, whether it is in politics, technology or theatre. His experimentation has made literally anything available to art. Through his attitude Rauschenberg has opened doors for other artists to continue what he has started. It has long been accepted, for instance, that his influence, along

with that of Jasper Johns, was partially responsible for the emergence of the 'Pop Art' school of the 1960s, which took its highly realistic subject matter from commercial advertising, comic strips, and mass-produced commodities.

Apart from his various influences on other groups and individuals, Rauschenberg has also, via personal influence, been responsible for a number of schemes aimed to further the development of art. One such scheme being E.A.T. (Experiments in Art and Technology), which he co-founded with Billy Kluver whose aims were

the possibility of a work which is not the pre-occupation of either the engineer, the artist or industry but a result of the exploration of the human interaction between these three areas.<sup>2</sup>

E.A.T.'s basic interest was in the integration of art with "external" activities. But was also responsible for such projects as Artists in India, which

hoped to send artists to India to work with young Indian artists as well as in the creation of video "software", relayed via satellite to remote villages.

Another scheme, "Projects Outside Art"

brought artists, engineers, scientists, and educators together on problems in the real world - among them, experimental learning environments for children and hydroponic roof gardens for inner city areas.

As Rauschenberg says

Artists can very well employ themselves in such ways.<sup>3</sup>

Some critics have found his involvement with the non-art world distasteful, saying that he is not involving himself with an artistic medium, therefore what he is doing is not art. He replies by saying

It has never bothered me a bit when people say that what I'm doing is not art. I don't think of myself as making art. I do what I do because I want to,<sup>4</sup>

I like to do all sorts of things that aren't painting, you see, I have this feeling that I'm never not working, that whatever I do is just well, part of what I'm doing.<sup>5</sup>

Being an artist involved with immediacy, most of Rauschenberg's work contains elements of his immediate environment. However as times change so does the environment. Things which were familiar 10 years ago are looked upon as dated now. Such is the pace of modern living that items are constantly being up-dated and replaced by a newer model. Young people now looking at a Rauschenberg combine will find it more and more difficult to recognise particular imagery which would have been commonplace when the work was first created. Will this fact, however have an adverse affect on the popularity of Rauschenberg's work? If the identifiable elements are removed will the work retain its interest? To answer these questions we need first to analyse what we consider a work of art, and what it is that makes it so. When Marcel Duchamp states that

"It is the spectator that makes the pictures."<sup>6</sup>

what he is saying is that though an artist may proclaim that his work is great and that he is a genius, this verdict cannot be verified by anyone except the spectator and posterity. Duchamp

defines this process in which art, which is still in a raw state "a l'etat brut", whether it is good bad or indifferent, must be "refined" as pure sugar from molasses, by the spectator. It is the verdict of the spectator that finally brings the work into contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications. This can already be seen to have happened with Rauschenberg's work as it has long been deemed art by the spectator, and shall grow old gracefully like an old master, its imagery, though no longer identifiable will retain its intrigue and brilliance, because it is the artist's ability rather than the recognizability of the imagery that has made it so. But what of his brilliance?, Being acclaimed as the champion of American art, he has been given the role of a super-hero, fighting for the right of art's existence, a title which he has not altogether welcomed. When the facade of acclaim and notoriety have been removed what we are left with is an ordinary man. As has been admitted by the critics Roger Cranshaw and Adrian Lewis...

"Rauschenberg's work has never been formally sophisticated."<sup>8</sup>

The best of his work is that which is presented as straightforward fact, without aspirations to anything higher, and it is this work that forms the support for his art. He says himself

I think that in nearly all respects my work remains defenceless, because its always dealing with the absurdities of the outside world and misplaced by being put in a prestigious situation.<sup>9</sup>

His best pieces, undoubtedly the work of the late fifties and

early sixties, have changed greatly within the short history of their existence, but is this not exactly what Rauschenberg would have wished for in them? A constant change. This is one way that he can legitimise his conception of art as an ongoing process, by accepting the rapid change in his work's visual content and its effect on the spectator.

When we consider that his basic intention was that art should demonstrate nature's process, is this not exactly what he has achieved? His work's constant change is like nature itself adapting to its new environment. Unlike other artists who, once they have formulated a style, tend to adhere to this continuously, Rauschenberg has chosen to continue developing and improving his work, carrying it through into many different and new media, so that he is constantly engaged in something new and exciting. In looking at his work, throughout his career, whether it is painting, sculpture, theatre or print, we can see this excitement in his interpretation, that has to do with life and the joys of living. For above all this is what Rauschenberg has tried to capture in his work, his love of life itself.

### Footnotes to Conclusion

1. C.H. Waddington, Behind Appearance.
2. Written Statement of E.A.T.'s goals, Rauschenberg Exhibition Catalogue of Works, National Collection of Fine Arts, p 45.
3. Douglas Davis, "Technology as Nature", Art and the Future, pp 142-3.
4. Calvin Tomkins, The Bride and the Bachelors, p 236.
5. Ibid, p. 235.
6. Marcel Duchamp, The New York School, c.f. I. Sandler.
7. Marcel Duchamp, The Creative Act, p 47.
8. Roger Cranshaw and Adrian Lewis, "Re-reading Rauschenberg", Art Scribe, p 50.
9. Michael Newman, "Rauschenberg re-evaluated", Art Monthly, p 7.

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