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25 Allan Kaprow - Jewish Museum Show (March 1963)

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THE WORLD OF ART: BY JOHN RUSSELL

Big city, big country

IF, as I believe, the function of art is to put forward a coherent moral order which has not been formulated before, then the most important show of the week is the Rauschenberg retrospective at Whitechapel. Rauschenberg has precisely the qualities which make for new art: jumping nervous energy, the ability to dominate and organise a great variety of material, a command of new visual techniques and (as important as any) a constructive sense of history.

This will seem ridiculous to those who imagine his work to be nothing but a haphazard assemblage of repulsive dead matter. But the visitor has only to study (to *study*, not to look at) Rauschenberg's thirty-four drawings for Dante to see that he is the conscious executant of an immensely complex intention. As a feat of sustained invention and re-interpretation, these drawings have few rivals in recent art.

I have space only to point out that Rauschenberg is constantly on the move and that in the paintings of this present year he combines a new openness and radiance of colour with an enhanced lightness and assurance in his cross-references and sunken allusions to the old masters, the film, the newspaper, and the apparatus of everyday life. "Tracer 1964" ought to be in the Tate.

Rauschenberg's is big-city art. It presupposes, first, pressures of a kind which exist only in a city which knows itself to be on top and, secondly, the presence of an alert and prehensile intellectual minority. These conditions do not exist in Canada and, on the evidence of the show of "Canadian Painting" which has just arrived at the Tate, no one commanding trend can be distinguished in the present state of Canadian art.

What we have instead is an evidently humane and liberal attempt to take the huge country from the Pacific Coast to the St. Lawrence Seaway, choose eleven presentable painters, and give them room to say what they have to say. (Dr Hubbard's catalogue is a model of tact, in this context.) What emerges as we go beyond the first impact of the pictures is an impression of an intense loneliness in relation to European art; a clamouring for attention, in one or two cases, which may spring from a lack of easy rapport between artist and public; a tendency, developed perhaps from this lack of rapport, to hold on to a particular and recognised manner even when the results no longer justify it; and, at the other extreme, a frantic search for the new start which might possibly pay off.

These are gloomy deductions: I should add that anyone who enjoys Derain's classicising landscapes will take whole-heartedly to Goodridge Roberts's views of Lake Orford, that the Riopelle triptych is indispensable to admirers of that artist, that Harold Town goes off with a big bang, from which subtlety is by definition excluded, and that somewhere in Graham Coughtry's at present derivative work a gift for the large-scale figure is hunting for its proper mode of expression.

I WAS at sea last Sunday in supposing that Wildenstein's "Hommage au Salon d'Automne" would consist of a reasoned historical survey of the Salon's achievement. Realistically speaking, the best homage one could now pay to that decrepit institution would be to close it down. But it would have been well within Wildenstein's capacity to assemble fifty or sixty important paintings which had been shown at the Salon d'Automne before 1914, and to add to them some of those which the timing of the Liberation prompted Picasso to send in in 1944.

The big names are nearly all there, as a matter of fact. A careful search and the use of police dogs will unearth Bonnard, Derain, Delaunay, Dufy, Marquet, Rouault, Segonzac, Valadon, Vuillard and Vlaminck and, with them, Berthe Morisot, who died eight years before the Salon d'Automne was founded. Trifling as their contributions are in relation to the scale of their achievement, they none the less stand firm against the shallow and touristy *vues de Paris* which have been allowed to swamp the show. Like the five French painters now showing at the Lefevre, these take in vain the great name of French painting: what they have to offer is not the legitimate succession to Bonnard and Vuillard, but an uneasy shuffle between magazine-illustration and an Air France hand-out.

IN A WEEK less prodigal of heavyweights, much could be said of two British one-man shows: Mary Martin at the Molton and Frances Richards at the Leicester. In Mrs Martin's reliefs a nice balance is kept between the unchanging music of numbers and the shifts and surprises which we ourselves draw from her work as we move across it. From any angle, that is to say, the architecture of the reliefs will "tell," simply because her calculations have come out right; but we are ourselves the variable factor which causes the emphasis of those calculations, and their emotional co-efficient, to vary continually.

Mrs. Richards's roomful of small tempera painting, augmented by three fabric collages from an earlier phase in her career, has a tranquil charm for which flashes of wit and irony are never absent for long. For the biggest of the paintings, "Ophelia," Mrs Richards has found an epigraph from Rimbaud, and it is a tribute to her entirely unpretentious art that the wonderchild's beautiful phrase does not put her picture out of mind. It would be a pity if, in a heavyweight's generation, work of this sort should be trampled underfoot and forgotten.

BALLET: BY RICHARD BUCKLE

Sylphs in flight

because of those ghastly pictures displayed in artists' colourmen's windows, which you'd think might put customers off painting for life, when the man in the street thinks of ballet he thinks of something like "Les Sylphides." Moonlight, long white dresses, girls making soft arm movements and standing on their toes and a man with long hair, in tights, doing a limp-wrist act.

So it is funny to recall how revolutionary Fokine's ballet was when first given in St. Petersburg in 1908, and how absolutely contrary to accepted standards of classical dance. Its curvy choreography, from which straight lines were banished, was of course a result of the young ballet master's admiration for Isadora Duncan. I was once told he thought of dressing his dancers in flowing Greek draperies.

To arrange dances to music of Chopin must have seemed pretty incredible then. It is because of Fokine and Diaghilev that we accept as natural that choreographers should make ballets to great music—Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Wagner, Mahler have all been danced to—and that scores are written for dancing by the best contemporary composers—Stravinsky, Shostakovitch, Britten and Henze—rather than turned out by the yard by the *chef d'orchestre* of an opera house.

As a matter of fact, I have never been quite happy about the orchestrating of Chopin's piano pieces, and I wish it were possible to perform "Les Sylphides" to solo piano.

The chief quality of the ballet is flow. Groups are continually dissolving and re-forming, few poses are held (there is, of course, the girl's "listening to the night" pose, hand to chin, at the end of the Prelude), drifting arms link one step to the next, and when the curtain falls nymphs are still in motion.

On the whole, dancers are either good "Sylphides" dancers or not. Beriosova is an extreme example of one who is. One might think Nerina would *not* be, but one would be wrong. On Monday she and MacLeary were wonderfully matched.

She made fine gentle leaps and lyrical *port de bras*; he had perfect style and poise, an admirable flow in his linking movements and a subtle way of timing the tip-toe pose before he ran off stage after Nerina so that it seemed less a pose sustained than a split-second hesitant holding-back of the run which was to follow.

Nerina and MacLeary were superb in their double work; and at the end of the *pas de deux* when he knelt to support her in arabesque, as his arm ceased to move her head was already turning gently over her left shoulder, her eyes wondering as if at the summons of a nightingale.

Merle Park was very delicate, sensitive and rehearsed to a high degree of art in the Valse. But Annette Page (so witty a soubrette) has too clipped a style of movement to be an ideal "Sylphides" dancer.

Watching MacMillan's "The Invitation" I was fascinated as ever at his skill in turning a short scene of love-hate, irritation and appeasement between a husband and wife into expressive choreography, and at the beauty and invention of the several *pas de deux* dealing with different aspects of love and desire. Lynn Seymour and Christopher Gable were incomparable as ever. Monica Mason was the new Wife, and first-rate too. I still can't take Desmond Doyle's wig seriously.

Sunday Times – 2/9/64

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Alan Solomon

Solomon is young, bearded, enthusiastic, and very much involved with the new bunch. He set up and ran the Art Museum at Cornell for several years, also taught art history there. Put on shows of Dine, Oldenburg etc. The Jewish Museum, which had been going nowhere for years, got some money for an addition and a rejuvenation, and hired him to inject some life. Solomon's first idea was to do a Pop Art show. This collapsed when Sidney Janis signed Jim Dine -- "I knew then it wasn't new any more." So he decided to "go back to the beginning," with Rauschenberg.

Solomon has been enthusiastic about Rauschenberg for years, since seeing Charlene at the ~~Egan~~ Gallery. Has called him the "old master" of the movement, in a phrase quoted by others. Says that R. really was the beginning -- that when Kaprow prophesied the new art (in monograph on death of Pollock) he was really describing R.'s work. No one else was doing this sort of thing then.

Jasper Johns had a success before R., largely because Alfred Barr liked his first show, talked about it, sent others (Barr still doesn't really dig R., and MMA doesn't own a major R. work). For this reason many people think Johns came first, but not so.

Story about Johns' flag in the Rauschenberg combine in Stable show. Bob "never puts down another artist", and he's very generous about other people's work." Beforeshow, he kept urging them to look at Johns. When it became apparent that Johns wasn't going to be in show, he used flag in his combine. Now a source of bitterness between them; combine put away. Solomon says R. and Johns are "on very bad terms now."

Extraordinary contrast between work of R. and Johns. R's never looks quite the same (see Cage), always surprising, hard to remember; Johns' is indelible once seen. Sortof gestalt. (Note to self: If I pursue the Picasso-Braque comparison, make this difference apparent -- the work of Johns and Rauschenberg, the two leading exponents of the new art, is almost diametrically opposite).

Jewish Museum Show

R.'s was first show under new program, and the first that Solomon had hung in that space. He was unfamiliar with space, and nervous about it. He says R. was enormously helpful in hanging the show. "Whenever he made a suggestion, it was exactly right. Exactly. His sensibility is so fine, in everything he does. For example, I'd put the 'Bed' on the wall facing you as you came into the first room. It was an important piece, and I felt it should be prominent. But it wasn't right there. It fought with Charlene, for one thing. Bob took one look, and said, 'No, put it on the end wall.' That's where it went, and it was perfect. He felt it had had too much made of it already."

Technical problems were bizarre: Taxidermist for the goat (who later called to say he had a stuffed dog for Bob -- "What do you say, 'I'm not in that period any more?'"); one of the fans in Pantomime was broken, and couldn't be fixed -- the electrician wanted to sell them a new one (green, silent) -- Bob finally found an old black one to replace it with; radio repairman to fix Broadcast, etc.

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Repercussions: There was a good deal of hostility to the show, one gathers, among members of the Museum. A lot of members, who come there mainly to see ceremonial objects, wanted to know what a stuffed goat was doing in the Jewish Museum. Some considered the work sacrilegious, as well as dirty, ugly, disagreeable, etc. (Solomon implies that Barr's problem with R. stems from this sort of reaction; it does not exist, of course, with Johns). Patrons of Jewish Museum objected bitterly to radios blaring rock + roll ("Broadcast") in museum of sacred art, and even more to Goat.

Humor - An essential mode in the work of R. and some others. Freudian idea-- humor is a means of relieving tension, so that the presence of humor implies tension. Many people are unable to respond on this level, and thus don't get R. at all. Many artists are unable to achieve this delicate balance of tension and resolution. R. does it superbly. So does Cage, who works entirely in this mode.

Dada Spirit - R. must have been very receptive to it long before he even met Cage. His throwing the boxes, paintings etc from Florence show into the Arno was a Duchampian gesture. Cage's influence coincided with R's own direction. R. has told Solomon that when he met Cage, he was terribly uncertain and often depressed, because he didn't know whether the direction he was impelled to move in made any sense at all; for the first time, with Cage, he found someone who thought about things in the same way he did. Immensely reassuring.

Pelican

The event in Washington DC: During Pop Art festival there this spring, R. decided he wanted to choreograph something for ~~Carolyn Brown~~. What he did was fantastic -- dancers on roller skates, with little parachutes flying out, etc. Get R. to tell.

Solomon on R. doing the lighting for dance performances, sitting up there like an idiot, totally absorbed in doing something whose whole point is that it will not be noticeable. Perfectly content to efface himself...

(Second Lunch)

Solomon points out that two very different strains are lumped together under the misleading category of Pop Art. There is "the deadpan use of reprehensible objects," which derives from Johns and includes Warhol, Rosenquist, Lichtenstein -- "the cool side of Pop" -- and there is the more passionate side, which includes Dine and Oldenburg and comes straight from Rauschenberg. In this, there is a precarious balance between ugliness and beauty, a constant tension, and also the messy aspect that throws so many people off (Solomon says it all goes back to toilet training). In general, though, the whole business of objects, the life of objects, etc. comes from Rauschenberg, and before that from Picasso's work of the 1930s.

R's Facade: "He devotes a lot of thought to what he won't wear. He bought a dinner jacket for the Washington Pop opening, for example, and then didn't wear it." (Confirmed by Dine)

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Modern Museum

William Seitz: "His work is all relationships, which is the history of painting really. There are no relationships in pop art... R. is really a bridge between abstract expressionism and whatever it is that's going on now... His weakness is facility -- sometimes he just does things too fast. I like the more restrained Rauschenberg. Some of the things are just too much, like strawberry shortcake."

William Seitz - brilliant and full of ideas, and more of an influence on the scene than Alan Solomon. Selz outranked him and kept him down. But Seitz did put on the Assemblage show, based on Rauschenberg's work. MOMA then was under the influence of Greenburg and the color-field line, thru Bill Rubin.

Barr and Leo re RR
The story as I have it is garbled. Barr asked Jasper, at Bob's Jewish Museum show, for help in understanding the work. Said he knew it was important but he couldn t get it, and which were the most important paintings. Ask Jasper.

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Barge -

R. painted for twelve hours straight, with CBS camera crew filming about nine hours. "They helped me do a marvellous painting," he says, in awe. Presence of CBS crew apparently stimulated him enormously. "They didn't want it to look like something in particular, they were as open as I was. Also, I was drinking a lot during that." He feels it turned out magnificently, and he was as ~~sxr~~ amazed by it as anyone. (Note anecdote of the Velasquez Venus next to the Venus probe).

Afterwards, R. went to Niki de S-P's opening at Iolas. He began to feel as though he were burning up. His skin turned a tomato soup red. He realized he was ill, and went home. The doctor came, and discovered that he had a bad case of lead poisoning, caused by inhaling the paint fumes for such a long time. The fan in the studio hadn't been running because it interfered with the CBS sound. His paint, he later found out, was made by a firm that had been out of business for 15 years. (Now R. is worried abt poisoning from benzine used to clean silk screens: looking into water-base silk screen paint. Result of reading article by Hallery in Art News).

Dartmouth

R. was one of first established painters invited to teach at Hopkins Art Center. 6 weeks stint, which he had to spread over two months because he was on tour with Merce. "I found it so completely absorbing that I wouldn't want to do it again."

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RR - interview by Mike Wallace

Quesions with an edge - "I confess that you lose me completely, Mr. Rauschenberg, but then many artists do."

Mike asks what a picture means. RR: "If I knew that, I wouldn't have to paint it."

Bob vefy deferential, serious - neither intimidated nor combattive. Drinking vodka and orange juice, in Bway studio. Mike: "Does it help you to paint?" RR: "It helps me begin working less inhibitedly than if I didn't have a drink."

Mike: "Is that art?" RR: "I like doing this. And it's not what I do so much as what I did."

RR: "Painting a picture is a very personal experience, an adventure unique to that moment, a marvelous extravagant sense about your relation to the world that lets you feel you could possibly do anything."

RR says Alfred Barr "avoided my work as long as he possibly could."

Speaks of his materials "that within a span of two days or three days time were in my vicinity." "It's the same stuff, whether it's ground dirt for your earth colors, or metal for your more intense colors... It's like mixing your own palette."

Mike: "But what makes it art?"
RR: "Well it may not be."

N.E.T. Invu ("USA: Artists - Robert Rauschenberg")

1961 Barge - climax to six-years intense activity, anthology of his images and summation of his style. He stopped painting in 1963 and had not yet resumed. Makes sculpture, theater pieces. Touring with Cunningham for 8 months.

Oracle - asked Billy Kluver to help once "I found that my subject matter had to be a collection of details...They are one work, called Oragle, and they can't function independently."

Where He's Going: "I think the undertainty I felt with the static object goes back to the white paintings...They were like collecting evidence of the activity they were in, so they were actually environmental." Says he wants "to make something so complex and changing that just a truck going by outside will effect what you see."

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Art

Max Kozloff

Robert Rauschenberg will continue to be dismissed by many as a belated Abstract Expressionist, one whose dribbles and splatters of paint have merely thinned and shrunk to give way to objects or reproduced images of daily life. Others consider him to be a decorative practitioner of the collage technique originated earlier in the century in the *Merzbilder* of Kurt Schwitters. Perceiving that he is neither the one nor the other, a third group—one could already have guessed — makes him out to be a compromised talent who vitiates none too original ideas by sheer facility. This, however, still leaves those spectators, among them myself, who find something far more poetic than additive in Rauschenberg's sensibility, and who are kindled by an inventive genius they would never confuse with mere slickness. I am convinced that his is the most significant art now being produced in the United States by anyone of the younger generation.

It has only recently become evident that Rauschenberg is using his famed concept of "combine painting" (in which there had been a dialogue between actual objects—coke bottles or pillows, and the easel picture) as a point of departure for a whole new field of inquiry. Or rather, it is a frame of reference for an imagery that now recedes into the fibers of the canvas, from which it once had protruded. This is accomplished by the silk-screen transfer to the canvas of photographs, originally black and white, and now filtered by as many as four colors. That the new presences do not have the immediate, yet enigmatic, impact of real things is as obvious as that their range in time, space and memory is infinitely greater. Even while surrendering a good deal of physical substance, the artist remains faithful to his original premise that formal relationships alone are an insufficient reflection of reality; at the same time, he refines his intuition that raw artifacts need some further projection into the pictorial life of the work of art.

The difference between what Rauschenberg now does (which was anticipated by his rubbings, "frottages," illustrating Dante's Inferno, 1959) and his earlier bipartite constructions, is like the difference between the cinema and the theatre. Only two years ago, in *Pantomime*, two opposed fans, plugged into the picture, blew up gusts of paint between them. But at his present show at the Castelli Gallery, the air currents have been cut off, the sound of the motors has ceased, and there is only a flickering, grainy, shadowy ballet of newsprint ephemera, colliding bodilessly with one another on a surface whose continuity their disruptions refuse to acknowledge. Compared to the behavior of these vicariously perceived figurations (which are the traces of things rather than the things themselves—not even such things as pasted photographs would be), the once complex tactics of collage seem primitive and simple-minded indeed.

Initially, one is aware not so much of the contained, visually recorded, objects as of their baffling removal by reproductive means from the sensing eye. The echoing series of negative, print, plate and re-photograph almost duplicate the infinity effect of anything caught between faced mirrors, and there are at least seven (and conceivably ten) stages between Rauschenberg's image and the object "out there." It is doubtless as a comment on the way we receive news of the outer world, on how we have automated all communications as mechanized afterimages — the kinescope, the delayed broadcast—that Rauschenberg presents these works which are neither graphics, paintings, nor collages, but a piquant metaphor of all three.

And yet his statement is not unfriendly toward our technological packaging of sensations, but rather welcomes the inherent language possibilities of the mass media. He wants to make one aware of interference, of visual static for its own sake (just as in *Broadcast*, with its two radios concealed behind the surface, he once did the same with aural static). But now the effect is not cacophonic because the spectator has long been inured to the conventions of photography in tabloids, films and television, and has come to accept them as adequate substitutes for reality. Rauschenberg takes advantage of this comfort, but refreshes and vivifies it by coarsening the visualization and changing its context. If our vision is attuned to photography, even to the extent of expecting to experience paintings in that medium, then, by reconstituting the photograph within his opened-up perimeters Rauschenberg ironically arrives at a new work of art. What was once the echo has become the substance—but a substance exquisite because, and yet despite, the fact that, it is fossilized.

More than in any of his previous paintings, reality fades from sight, literally and figuratively. But it is the great paradox of the latest work that its physical energy is kept whole. Each of these tableaux is part of a continuing badinage between the assertion of paint and the claims of the outside world, now carried on through the mediation of reproductive processes. Thus, in *Windward* there is the following, rather breath-taking archetypal sequence: among color-photographed oranges, the sudden appearance of a painted orange circle; beneath are black-and-white transferred photographs of oranges, the same orange circle, and then a painted black-and-white orange, modeled in gray. Furthermore, all this is done in extremely close values, so that one is forced to discriminate hues optically with great finesse, as well as identify the actual level of existence among the competing artifacts. In assimilating the re-created matter, therefore, one is compelled to absorb the paintings both visually and logically, processes which go at two different speeds in the mind.

Far more dramatic are the analogies, say, between drips and the feathers of a photographed eagle (which recalls the real, stuffed one, in 22 *Canyon*, 1959), or between frequent rainbows and the four-color separation process. Like an oblique reference to Abstract Expressionism, these analyses and syntheses reveal how a "painting" is made. But even further, they go back, past Schwitters, to the discipline of Cubism, with its suggestion of multiple points of view. Finally, a black-and-white orange

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is inconceivable without Surrealism and, behind it, Dada. Hence this Rauschenberg exhibition is a tribute to the insights of all the great movements of twentieth-century art, but it is also a remarkable extension of them.

Within this general framework, whose implications are inexhaustible, Rauschenberg elicits some very particular associations of his own. Scenes of flag-waving patriotism, the Statue of Liberty, vignettes of sports events, the roof tops and water tanks of New York, aircraft instrument panels, capsules and nose cones, and interspersions of fluttering birds, evoke the excitability of a mind agog with a welter of current events, and vulnerable to the relentless pressure of the urban environment. But it is no inchoate mentality that presents us, in a daring stroke, with a clocklike electrical diagram superimposed upon Michelangelo's Sistine *Last Judgment*. This is, after all, the artist who has illustrated Dante, who punctuates his imagery with stop signs, and who shows the light going out in a series of four photographs of a glass of water (almost like a lamp dimming behind a film strip). It may be too vulgar to think of the overall *mélange* as hellish, but bright hints of disaster and dissolution are certainly not excluded from Rauschenberg's inconography.

Even the format he chooses—fragments, bleed outs, separations, repeats, superimpositions — mocks the integrity of any object that is caught within the field of attention. One has glimpses of the same image, in different sizes and colors, scattered over the surface, in a Marienbad simile of *déjà vu*. In fact, the whole procedure is reminiscent of the flash-backs, subliminal blips, filters, cut ins, pan shots and dissolves of the modern film, so that the spectator is forced to "read" the picture as if it were on a screen, its narrative consistency perhaps shattered, but its nostalgic poignance thereby heightened.

Other than Rauschenberg, no artist I know (even including Jasper Johns) takes such a polyvalent and imaginative inventory of modern life. It is this fullness of response which gains respect, and which is deeply moving. He stands ultimately aside from the pop art which owes so much to him, not by his methodology—the interjection of a banal motif into a new context—but by his ambition to derive as much sensuous profit from it as he can. One never feels in his work the complacent sentimental attachment to a subject, however evocative, which so easily degenerates into the frequent sado-masochism of what one apologist has recently called "anti-sensibility" painting. Such are the beauties of Rauschenberg's new colors, eliciting a chromatic transparency midway in effect between Titian and color television—that it would take another article merely to do justice to them. He satisfies an appetite for the contemporaneous, for an explicit crystallization of what art must respond to at this moment, which few can claim even to excite. But he does so in a way that is not only far from self-defeating, but gives every evidence of becoming a classic of our time.

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From "Rauschenberg Paints a Picture" (AN, April 1963)

"In 1959 he used three radios in a painting called Broadcast. I asked him how this had come about.
"'The previous summer I had been involved in a theater project which would have used them as part of the costumes; it didn't materialize, but I kept thinking about the effects of using radios. In Broadcast I was interested, academically, in the relation sound would have to looking./..I assumed that, because the picture would have a voice, it would have to be bright and loud.' At first he used large letters and strongly contrasting colors, but when he finally inserted and used the radios he found that the whole painting flattened, 'like a poster,' and that 'loud' lost its double meaning. Something visually loud and emphatic, 'which you could see from across the room,' had an opposite effect with regard to sound and noise. 'The painting went dead. All of the boldness looked superficial; it implied merely static strength. I realized that the details should not be taken in at one glance, that you should be able to look from place to place without feeling the bigger image. I had to make a surface which invited a constant change of focus and an examination of detail. Listening happens in time. Looking also had to happen in time.'"

RR: "I don't like to take advantage of an object that can't defend itself./ When an object you're using does not stand out but yields its presence to what you're doing, it collaborates, so to speak - it implies a kind of harmony."

"I would like my pictures to be able to be taken apart as easily as they're put together -- so you can recognize an object when you're looking at it. Oil paint really does look like oil paint even in the most photographic painting."

Swenson: "Rauschenberg himself moves about the room at once awkwardly and deliberately, like an actor; his constant movements seem natural, not nervous..."

RR on painting: "It is physical, the whole activity; you don't begin with some divine image and end up with some divine image -- to say you do is part of the popular illusion built up around art. When you finish a picture and people like it ~~and xxxyy~~ they say, 'It's just perfect,' or, 'That's the way a real artist sees it,' I think that's a lot of bull because it could, it obviously could, be some other way. That's one reason I made four versions of Summer Rental; all four are made up of exactly the same ingredients except for a small amount of paint I used at the end to finish them..."

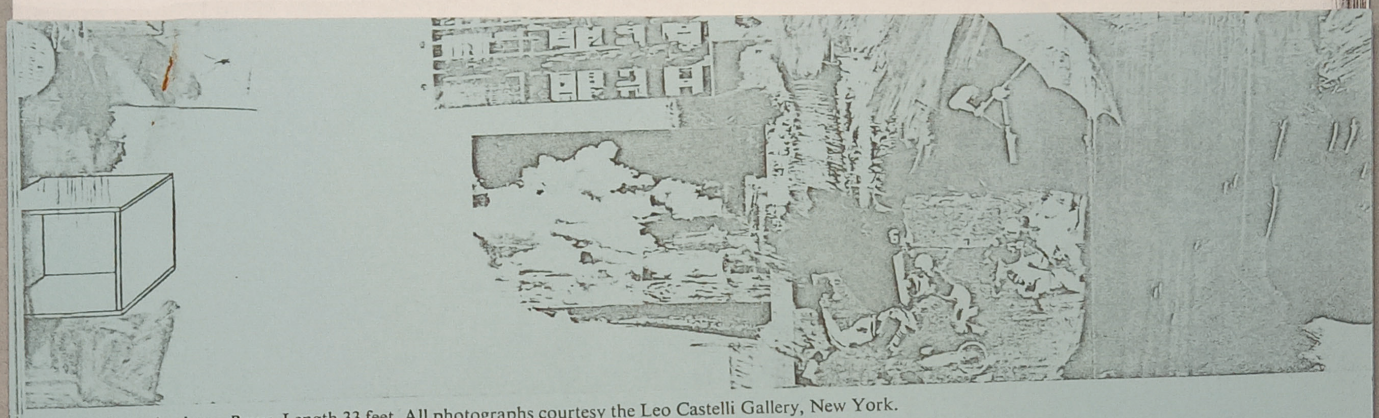
Crocus - named "because the white X emerges from a grey area in a rather dark painting, 'like a new season.'"

RR: "I don't think that you should slop around with painting and emote."

RR thinks of painting "as reporting, as a vehicle that will report what you did and what happened to you."

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Rauschenberg. *Barge*. Length 33 feet. All photographs courtesy the Leo Castelli Gallery, New York.

Robert Rauschenberg

HENRY GELDZAHLER

The Robert Rauschenberg retrospective exhibition at the Jewish Museum last Spring was the most impressive one-man show of the year in a New York gallery or museum. It is, in fact, impossible to conceive of a stronger, more consistently inventive and searching exhibition by any artist of his generation. The eighty-seven works in the show, paintings that surprise by the absolute rightness of apparently arbitrary elements, confirm both the historical position and the contemporary vitality of Rauschenberg, who, at thirty-eight, continues with each new work to meet the challenge he himself has set.

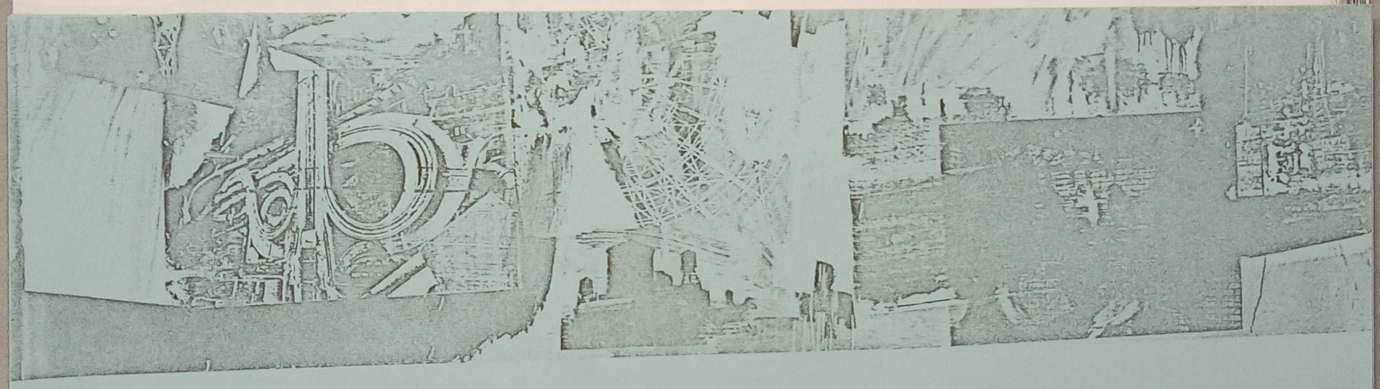
His use of disparate elements within a composition stuns us not because everything is unquestionably where it belongs, which is so, but because each element retains exactly its uniqueness and qualities as object and yet combines to form a painting; the goat remains a goat and the coke bottles are allowed to remain aggressively that, without diminishing the possibilities and complexities of their relationships within the painting (or combine). Whatever Rauschenberg uses brings to its new context the fullness of the context from which it has been ripped, enriching the associative value of his work without devitalizing it by an overly specific content.

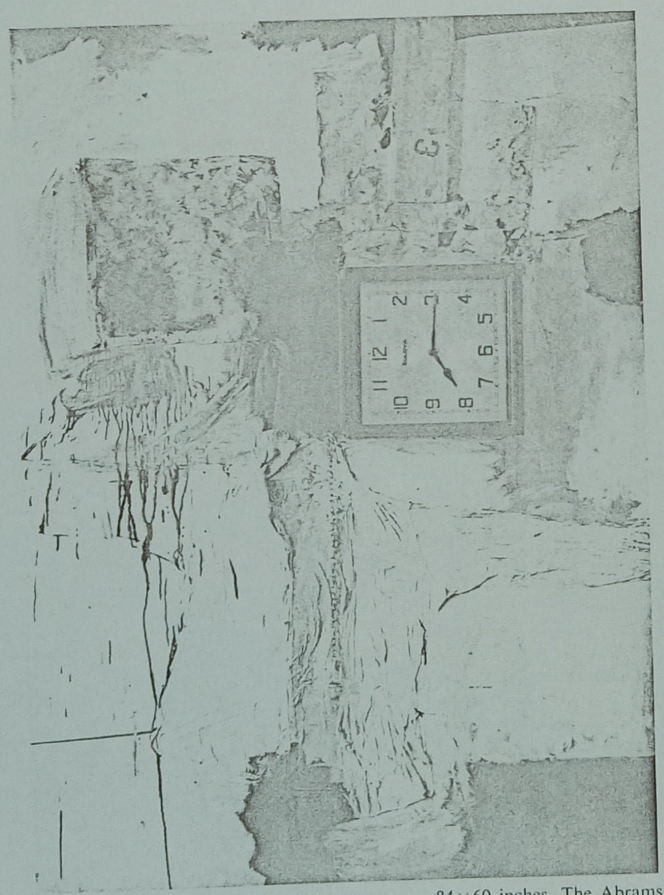
The breadth of possibilities, subject matter and materials, within which Rauschenberg moves is the widest and freest ranging of any artist now working. His latitude in working is restricted only by what he has already applied to the canvas. The question is never whether or not something is suitable; only whether it is usable. The separable elements in his work are direct quotations from his experience, which must be very like our experience, for they have a logic and inner consistency which we cannot quite grasp but which echo a sense of the organization of life and the relationship between things which we, too, feel. The shock is that of recognition, but *what's* been said is embedded only in the work and cannot be translated out of it. A clock, large and solid and square, i to a painting, just below it a shirt with its arms spread out; coke bottles stand side by side in an opening at the top rig painting, below it an exultant bull. There is no doubt tha stories and meanings, connections, can be made betwee objects, but they will serve only to deaden the work, to its possibilities. It is vain to attempt a literary equivalence work by Rauschenberg because far from exhausting its m the story will not bear comparison with the painting. In a p all the elements are visual and visible at once; in literatur necessarily, follow one another in time. Thus the open painting is not the openness of literature. We can relat object in a Rauschenberg in several combinations and dir *at the same time,* leaving room to breathe and to move i than one direction. In Gorky the organization is fluid, eac exists in many possible combinations and relations and one unending continuum; the elements in a Rauschenberg as many and more possible relations and combinations, but of merging into fluidity, they remain discrete and themselv difference is largely the difference between Surrealism (Gor Cubism (Rauschenberg). Rauschenberg posits the plane canvas, most often breaking it down into subsidiary pla more or less rectangles and all lying on the surface, or fo projecting from it. The space is not the dream space of Sur floating and endlessly continuous; it is the concrete space picture which is undeniably a two-dimensional painting an its variations within those limitations.

Rauschenberg has said, and it has become famous, that "I relates to both art and life. Neither can be made. (I try t the gap between the two.)" Artists' statements are danger in our eagerness to simplify their work, to write away the plexities, we quote them and think we've said somethin are repeated ("I see in nature the cube, the cylinder and the until they become equivalents to the work itself, and are e think and lecture about than the densities of the pain question. Rauschenberg's statement is particularly revea does work in the gap between art and life. He appropria blocks of life and uses them in his art. He presents us not interpretation of an experience (a ladder, umbrella, tire,

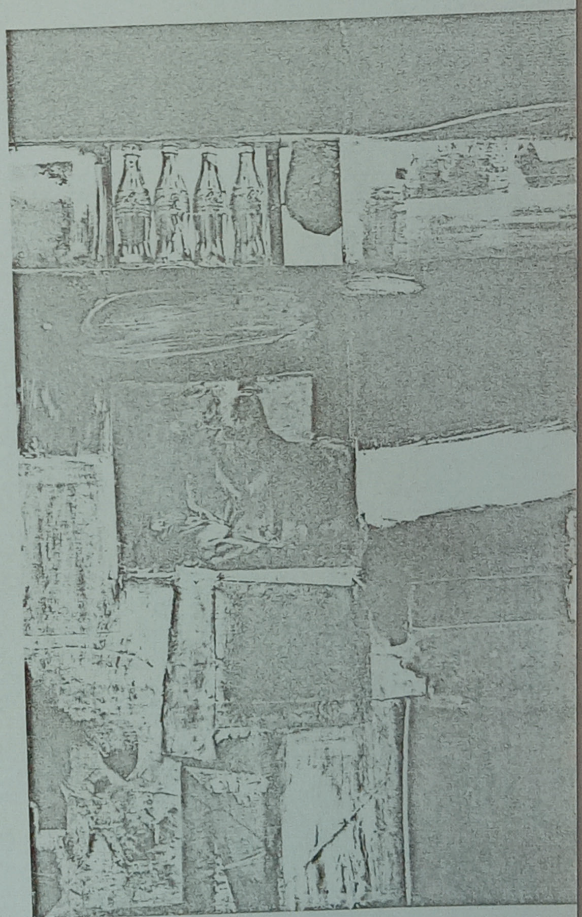
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Third Time Painting. 1961. Combine on canvas. 84×60 inches. The Abrams Family Collection.



Curfew. 1958. Combine painting. 57×39 inches. Collection: Mr. an Heller, New York.

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Charlene. 1954. Combine painting. 89×112 inches. Collection: Galerie Ileana Sonnabend, Paris.

chair), but with the experience itself. The tragedy, or rather the reality that so often looks like tragedy, is how rapidly we come to accept what Rauschenberg has given us; his best work is always fresh and mind-twisting on first confrontation; we turn it rapidly into art, into something we can deal with, We do not allow a work of art to throw us very often; we tame it and domesticate it. We do not allow it to put us at a permanent disadvantage. Rauschenberg's triumph is that his work continues to function as art even after we have drained its life as rapidly as we possibly can. The shock of life it first presents us pales, and we are left with a work that has lost its brutality but retains its challenge and gains, increasingly, elegance. Rauschenberg works in the gap between life and art, but his work, as the work of all artists, moves always toward art and away from life.

The problem of focus in Rauschenberg's work is a crucial one. We can take in an entire painting or combine at one glance, see the over-all pattern, the composition and organization, but the richness of incident and detail demand a different kind of looking. Within one picture, *Rebus,* painted in 1955 and in the artist's collection, we find what is close to an anthology of the techniques of contemporary painting, dripped paint, hard rectangles of primary color, collage cloth, torn poster, comic strip, news photo, children's drawing, graffiti, mass reproduction of art (Botticelli); and this anthology is organized with an uncanny aptness and discretion into an harmonious composition that, in spite of its complexities, remains somehow spare. In one year Rauschenberg moved from the densities and happy excesses of *Charlene* to the spareness of *Rebus;* as if he had to put down everything in 1954 in order to know what he could safely leave out in 1955. Both are great pictures, but the ellision of *Rebus* makes it the greater.

In order to take in the richness of these pictures, and this is true also of the latest black and white silk screen paintings, we must be willing to examine them more carefully than the abstract aspect of their nature would make it seem necessary. The incidents and details that go to make up the whole differ greatly in size, in compositional prominence, in color and, in the earlier p in medium; their choice is never a casual one; yet the juxtapo are never obvious. We must, as it were, stand different di from the picture to focus clearly on its parts; or, rather tha forward and back, we must re-focus our vision, for the m detailed photograph three inches square affixed to a p twelve feet long demands, certainly, another kind of attentio the entire painting. In Flemish art of the fifteenth century we foreground, the middle ground and the background as sep but continuous planes, each viewed with remarkably sharp and clarity. The result is an enhanced vision, the ability details in the background with clarity and without changing Rauschenberg fragments this across his work; that which is s lies directly next to the largest element in the work; color li to black and white; a loose, abstract handling of the p directly juxtaposed to an aggressively presented three-dime object—a wheel, or an electric fan, a chair or an umbrella. we are presented with is not the ordered reality of Flemi with everything at a pre-arranged distance from everythin that is the art of a society assured of its hierarchies and its Rather Rauschenberg produces all the confusions of foc relation that Joyce and Pound have expressed and educa to in literature, and like them through his art, he raises the ap disorganization of his material to a level of intuitive comp sibility.

The relationships of photography to the painting of th hundred and twenty years are meaningful in the context o schenberg's work. The early photographs, as we know compositional influence on the work of Ingres and Degas; also told, and it seems sensible, that the photograph took of art's functions away from art; especially the idea of ar record of appearances, portrait, landscape, historical event much of the impetus to abstraction in art is laid to the move from the function of photography. It is curious that with Sch and the Surrealists, and now with Rauschenberg and Warh photograph has re-entered art; not as a compositional infl

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Satellite. 1955. Combine painting. 80×42½ inches. Collection: Mrs. Claire Zeisler, Chicago.

or as something to be copied and altered (as in Cézanne) but as exactly itself. So much of our awareness and our information comes to us through newspapers and magazines, through movies and television, that the appropriation of the photograph into contemporary art does not surprise. In the Rauschenbergs of the mid-fifties photographs and reproductions act as short-hand indications of both their subjects and the context from which they have been drawn.

With the White Paintings of 1951 Rauschenberg apparently wiped out the history of painting; after that he was free to invent art all over again; that his work has continued to reflect a wide knowledge and use of the history of art does not negate the purity of the gesture. It merely makes it more ironic. With the black and red paintings of 1952 and 1953 he rediscovered texture, brushstroke, value, color and collage. Then came the tremendously rich and varied period of *Charlene, Rebus, Hymnal, Odalisk, Curfew, Monogram, Trophy I, Winter Pool* and *Pilgrim* (1954–1960); through these years the collage elements became bolder and more spare, the abstractly brushed areas larger and more beautiful. In 1961 and 1962 it seemed as if the combines were becoming increasingly aggressive toward the viewer and his space; the tension and balance of paint and collage on the surface of the painting was broken in piece after piece *(First Landing Jump, Coexistence, Third Time Painting, Pantomime)* by the physical presence of the three-dimensional object.



Odalisk. 1955. Combine. 81×25×25 inches. Collection: Ileana S Gallery, Paris.

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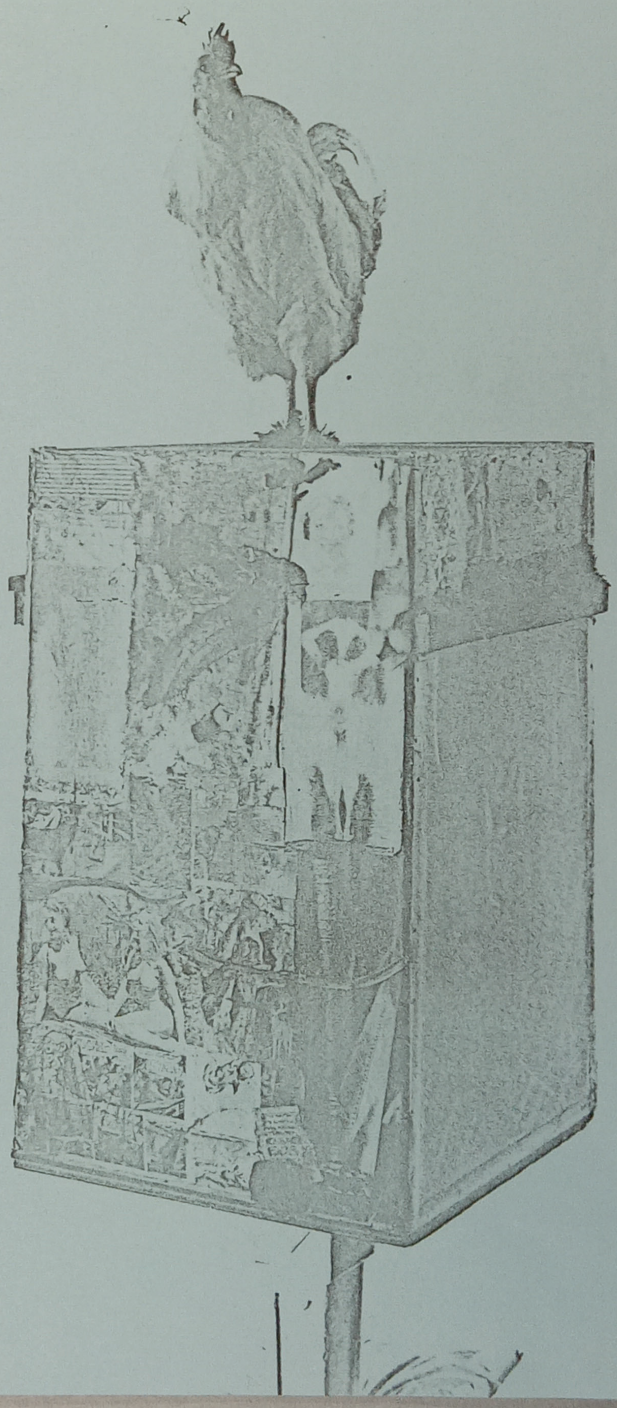


e. 1955. Combine painting. 80×42½ inches. Collection: Mrs. Claire
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The Mona Lisa drawing (and others) of 1958 pointed the way to a break in style, although it was impossible to know it at the time. These rubbings with abstractly configured hatching are of course based on familiar photographic material juxtaposed, as in all of Rauschenberg's work, according to his own non-literal logic. They led to his ambitious and successful major work, the drawings illustrating Dante's Inferno (1960). It is curious that at just the moment the combines were becoming so sculptural, Rauschenberg's greatest energy was directed toward these highly original two-

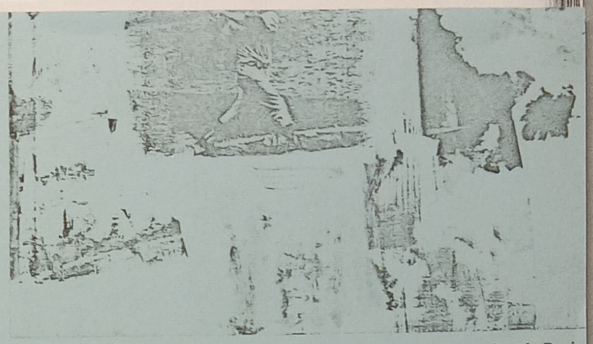


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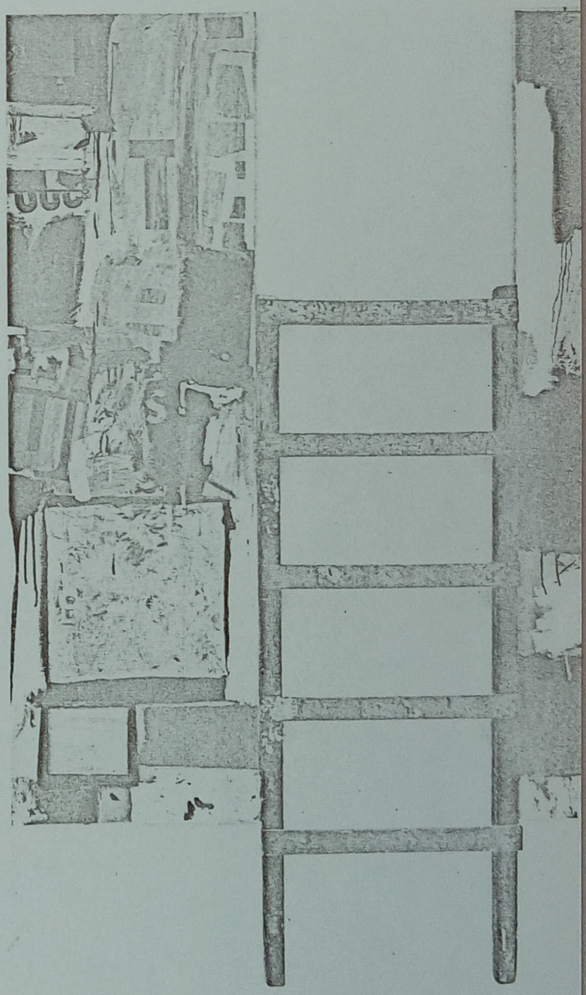
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Trophy (for Merce Cunningham). 1959. Combine painting. Private collection.



Brace. 1962. 153 × 153 cm. Courtesy Galerie Ileana Sonnabend Paris



Winter Pool. 1959. Combine painting. 89 × 59 inches. Private collection.

dimensional works, works which combined through the frottage technique Rauschenberg's characteristic specificity of image with the abstractness of meaning, organization and overall handling.

Rauschenberg had been talking and thinking about the possibility of translating photographic material directly onto canvas for some time. In 1961 Andy Warhol began using the silk screen to reproduce the popular image exactly on canvas. This technical possibility, indicated by Warhol, made it clear to Rauschenberg that he could translate the specificities and ambiguities of the drawings onto canvas. He ordered many screens made, some from photographs he had taken himself. It is obvious that Rauschenberg's use of the silk screen for his own purposes differs tremendously from Andy Warhol's. Warhol lays the screens down in repeated series, emphasizing the reiteration of our popular images. Rauschenberg uses the screens exactly as he used the rubbed newspaper photograph in his drawings of 1958, to produce his floating, yet anchored images.

The black and white character of the silk screen paintings is a happy reduction of means. The effect of the very large (thirty three foot long) *Barge* is very much like sitting in the first row of a black and white, large screen movie. The images flash by and we make connections; we end up without a story, but with something much richer—the associative and imaginative leaps that Rauschenberg's works open up for us.

Rauschenberg is an artist in mid-career at the fullness of his powers. The Jewish Museum and Dr. Alan Solomon are to be commended for mounting this excellent show.