

The Museum of Modern Art

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NO. 27

FOR RELEASE: March 25, 1977

PRESS PREVIEW: March 23, 1977
11 am to 4 pm

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG

The most comprehensive exhibition ever of Robert Rauschenberg's brash and joyful work—including more than 150 paintings, "combines," prints, multiples, collages, and photographs--will be on view at The Museum of Modern Art from March 25 through May 17. The exhibition, which originated under the direction of Walter Hopps at the National Collection of Fine Arts, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., is being installed at the Museum by Kynaston McShine, Curator of Painting and Sculpture. It will later travel to San Francisco, Chicago, and Buffalo, supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Long the enfant terrible of avant-garde art, Rauschenberg, now 51, has gained increasing recognition as perhaps the most innovative, prolific, and audacious artist since Picasso. "Painting relates to both art and life. Neither can be made. I try to act in the gap between the two," Rauschenberg has said, and his career, as Joshua C. Taylor, director of NCFA, points out in his introduction to the publication that accompanies the exhibition*, has been characterized "by a persistent creative exuberance that has the happy effect of belittling categories, invalidating definitions, and freeing the viewer to discover beauty and meaning where he might least expect it."

Painter, sculptor, printmaker, set designer, and dancer, Robert Rauschenberg has been one of those artists that the world has needed time to catch up with. He first emerged in the early fifties, the heyday of the New York School of Pollock, de Kooning, Rothko, and their colleagues. Rauschenberg took up where he thought the Abstract Expressionists were leaving off. Such early works as the all-white paintings of 1951, the all-blacks of 1951-52, or the "pictures"

*ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG. Essay by Lawrence Alloway. 216 pages, 257 illustrations (19 in color). \$15.50 paperbound. Published by the National Collection of Fine Arts, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

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made out of dirt, however notorious at the time, can now be seen as anticipating the efforts of many of today's younger artists. With his inventiveness, curiosity, and bold experimental approach to methods, ideas, and materials, Rauschenberg has spent a quarter of a century challenging the conventions and limits of art. Abstract Expressionism, Pop, Minimalism, Funk, Performance, and Conceptual Art all come together in his work.

In a catalog essay that traces Rauschenberg's development, critic Lawrence Alloway notes: "From 1955 Rauschenberg's art proposes an aesthetic of heterogeneity in which divergent parts retain clear evidence of their scattered origins. A basic assumption of traditional aesthetics, never questioned by hard edge painters and minimal sculptors, Rauschenberg's contemporaries, with their unitary forms and seamless color fields, is that homogeneity is essential to art. A Rauschenberg combine-painting, however, is a rendezvous of objects of diverse origin and looks it."

Rauschenberg is perhaps best known for his bold scavenging of everyday objects and images -- from Coke bottles, chairs, rubber tires, and a man's necktie to magazine photos of JFK, Janis Joplin, astronauts, and track stars. For Bed (1955), Rauschenberg stretched his favorite bed quilt over a frame and covered it with drips and smears of paint. Then he added his pillow: "a nice white area to paint on," he recalls. The artist claims to be perplexed by those who find Bed ugly and even deeply upsetting. "I think of Bed as one of the friendliest pictures I've ever painted. My fear has always been that someone would want to crawl into it." Equally controversial was Monogram (1956-59). While walking on Seventh Avenue one day, Rauschenberg saw a large stuffed angora goat in the window of an office supply store. Buying it straight away he took the goat home, shampooed its thick, dirty fleece, and covered the damaged muzzle with a thick impasto of paint. Finally, he encircled the goat with an old automobile tire and mounted it on a painted platform collaged with a

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tennis ball, a rubber heel, and photos from magazines and newspapers. Was it a painting? A sculpture? Rauschenberg decided to engage the ambiguity head on and called it a "combine." Monogram, which has become one of Rauschenberg's most famous works, is now owned by Stockholm's Moderna Museet.

During the sixties Rauschenberg began to focus his energies on prints, working with publisher Tatyana Grosman of Universal Limited Editions, as well as with Los Angeles's Gemini Studio. By 1963 he created a print, Accident, that was to win First Prize at the Fifth International Biennial of Graphics at Ljubljana, a year before he won the Grand Prize at the Venice Biennale. In 1967 Rauschenberg pulled Booster, at six feet the largest hand-pulled lithograph up until then.

Following from his print activity, Rauschenberg began to silk-screen large found images on canvas. Paintings such as Persimmon (1964), Estate (1963), and the 32-foot Barge (1963) fix images taken from the daily papers -- a rocket, Kennedy, a cloverleaf intersection, a clock, downtown Manhattan rooftops, a football game -- in complex and resonant compositions. Looking at these works is rather like viewing a film, with its closeups, cuts, and dissolves, or like rapidly flipping the dial of a TV.

Rauschenberg has always worked closely with other artists, including Jasper Johns, John Cage, and Merce Cunningham, for whose dance company he designed costumes and sets. In the middle and late sixties, he immersed himself in various collaborative projects: dance, multimedia, and the attempt to harness art to new developments in technology, such as Experiments in Art and Technology -- E.A.T. -- which Rauschenberg launched in 1966 with Billy Kluver of Bell Telephone Laboratories. Lawrence Alloway finds in Rauschenberg's embrace of technology an attempt to address "what is perhaps the fundamental dispute of our time, the nature of technology." Alloway observes: "It is common error to think that political and moral opposition to the military-

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industrial complex entails recourse to a simpler form of life. Problems of ecology and famine can only be handled by a more comprehensive use of the systems of technology, not by their simplification. Rauschenberg sees the artist as a model of the necessary forms of 'participation with technicians.'"

Rauschenberg has remained true to his artistic self and in the seventies he is as inventive as ever. The Hoarfrosts (1974) consist of sheerly elegant veils of silk, chiffon, and taffeta, each sheet bearing characteristic found images. Jammers (1975) is a series of delicate sewn constructions of silk, twine, and rattan cane that, sail-like, shimmer with color. "I have a need to live with the fear that comes with doing unfamiliar work," Rauschenberg said recently. "The only way to do it is to never stop."

Robert Rauschenberg was born in Port Arthur, Texas in 1925. After serving in the Navy in World War II, he attended the Kansas City Art Institute (1946-47). He furthered his studies at the Academie Julian in Paris (1947) and at Black Mountain College, North Carolina, where he worked under Josef Albers (1948-49). In 1951 he was given his first one-man show, at the Betty Parsons Gallery. Rauschenberg has subsequently had numerous one-man exhibitions at leading galleries in this country and throughout Europe. The Jewish Museum, New York, held a retrospective of his work in 1963, as did the Whitechapel Gallery, London, in 1964. Rauschenberg was awarded first prize at the 1964 Venice Biennale. In 1970 the Minneapolis Institute of Arts mounted a major exhibition of his prints. Robert Rauschenberg currently lives on Captiva island, Florida, and in New York City.

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