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Seeing Rauschenberg Seeing

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This page, above: Robert Rauschenberg in his Lafayette Street studio, New York, 1968. Photo: Henri Cartier-Bresson. Left: Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, 1961, color photograph, 4 1/4 x 3 1/2". © 2008 Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, NY. Opposite page: Robert Rauschenberg and Susan Weil, *Untitled* (double Rauschenberg), ca. 1960, ensigned blue-pigment paper, 62 1/2 x 36 1/2".

THE LAST TIME I SAW BOB RAUSCHENBERG was this past March in Valencia, Spain. He had been unable to go the year before, when he was awarded the prestigious Julio González International Prize for lifetime achievement—but no one could keep him from attending the exhibition opening of his friend Darryl Poterf at the Instituto Valenciano de Arte Moderno. It was the usual Bob story: The doctors forbade him to go, so of course he went. He was in great form, despite being confined to his wheelchair, as he had been since his stroke in 2002. (Considering that he could never sit still, being tied down had plunged him into a terrible depression. He told me that Chuck Close had saved him by showing him how he could still work.) In Valencia, Bob stayed up through the night to see the group of Brazilian dancers and musicians that performed, keeping time with the one hand he could still move. I remember how he loved performing—which was always surprising, given that he was basically shy. But being a nervous, shy extrovert was exactly the kind of contradiction that made his art so original.

Rauschenberg did not categorize people or art. He had time for everybody, even the clueless college girl sitting next to him. I remember first meeting Bob in 1959 when gallerist Ileana Sonnabend seated me beside him at a dinner that dealer Leo Castelli was giving for Frederick Kiesler. Later, I understood why Bob was so fond of the multidisciplinary architect: It was said of Kiesler that if he wanted to hold two pieces of wood together, he pretended that he had never heard of nails or screws. Definitely Bob's kind of guy.

Bob was equally kind when I used to roll my baby carriage down to his lower Broadway studio and watch him simultaneously listen to television, silk-screen paintings on the floor, talk to friends, watch what was cooking on the stove, and have a few drinks from the omnipresent bottle of Jack Daniel's. When Sweetie, his kinkajou, hopped onto baby Rachel's carriage ready to bite her, Bob gallantly pulled his pet off by the tail and went back to concentrating on the piles of magazines from which he was choosing images to transfer to screens.

At the time, I did not completely understand what Rauschenberg was doing. But I felt it was exciting and vital in a way that abstract art no longer was. I had been pulled into Clement Greenberg's orbit by the clarity of his criticism, but I was much more attracted to Rauschenberg's commitment to opening rather than closing doors. In the 1950s, Rauschenberg was still being dismissed as a nihilistic, destructive, anti-art, and neo-Dada prankster. John Cage was fond of saying to me that the wolf did not criticize the sheep, he ate the sheep: Strong art was oblivious to the analyses of the day. Rauschenberg was clearly eating his way through flocks of sheep for years, but he was moving so fast, there was no way to evaluate his contribution until curator Walter Hopps organized Bob's first midcareer survey in 1976. That show was a revelation to everyone.

Bob did not, in fact, pay attention to art criticism. I remember when, in the mid-'60s, a group of us had gotten together and I read aloud Hilton Kramer's review of Bob's Castelli show—we all doubled up laughing. Nor did Bob have any use for theoretical or iconographic readings of his work. Of course, free association must have had something to do with his choice of imagery, but his intention was simply to snatch fragments of what was going on in the world.

Moreover, it is dyslexia that explains how he perceived that world. Rauschenberg suffered from acute dyslexia, which made reading, following instructions, and retaining textual information extremely difficult. Recent studies have shown that dyslexia displaces intelligence from the strictly verbal mode to multidimensional and sensory perception. One's focus is diffuse, taking in an entire environment rather than an isolated word or object; dyslexics think in pictures rather than in words. Given what we know about Rauschenberg, in fact, dyslexia seems far more relevant to understanding his creative process than interpretations that have focused on deconstruction, neo-Marxism, or gender studies.

Theoretical concerns and preconceived aesthetic strategies were alien to Rauschenberg's purely intuitive processes. Like many artists of the first-generation New York School that he admired—and whose works were his principal sources of inspiration—Rauschenberg was, above all, a child of the American Depression and the New Deal, a utopian idealist and an unabashed romantic. Despite his determination to use technology as a medium, there was nothing mechanical about his style, which, like that of the action painters, remained both gestural and physical throughout his career. Rauschenberg was not merely a derivative follower of Kurt Schwitters, as many held; nor was he the father of Pop art, as is often maintained. His art was indebted to graphic advertising (via Fernand Léger and Stuart Davis), Rauschenberg, on the other hand, remained a painterly artist. His art, like that of his mentors John Cage and Merce Cunningham, is rooted within the modernist tradition. All three intended not to destroy but to renew and advance received tradition by interacting with technological innovation and non-Western aesthetics.

RAUSCHENBERG WAS BORN in Port Arthur, Texas, on the Louisiana border. He came from a deeply religious family and had originally aspired to be a preacher whose mission was to save the world, a messianic vision that he retained throughout his life. Port Arthur, Texas, was not Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi, but Rauschenberg's background had much in common with that of William Faulkner's characters. Rauschenberg's paternal grandfather, a German doctor who emigrated from Berlin to Texas in the nineteenth century, had married a Cherokee Indian who died young from tuberculosis. Rauschenberg's

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father, Ernest, worked as a farm laborer and later for Gulf States Utilities in Port Arthur, where the stretch of the oil fields mingled with that of the petroleum plants in which America's tires are produced. His mother, Dora, made a living cutting out dress patterns. As Rauschenberg later explained, this was how he learned to cut

out collage elements—and undoubtedly the swathes of fabric in the Combines, often worn and tattered, recall that experience.

There was no art of any kind in Port Arthur. When Rauschenberg was not hiding under the house and studying bugs, he drew and copied the characters in the colored "funny papers" that accompanied the Sunday papers. With a stable income in mind, Rauschenberg's parents packed their son off to the University of Texas in Austin to become a pharmacist. He was expelled after one semester for refusing to dissect a frog in biology class. As it was wartime, he immediately lost his student deferral and was drafted into the US Navy. Stationed in San Diego, he worked as a psychiatric nurse.

When the war was over, Rauschenberg was able to study art on the GI Bill. Determined to get the best education possible, he enrolled in the demanding Kansas City Art Institute. **The following year, he moved to Paris to study at the**

Académie Julian, where he met Susan Weil, another young artist. She planned to return to the US to study at the experimental Black Mountain College in Asheville, North Carolina, in the fall of 1948. She convinced him to accompany her. (They would marry in 1950.)

Rauschenberg was both schooled in and talented at figure drawing and portraiture. By the time he entered Black Mountain College, he realized that drawing was the relic of academic depiction. Rauschenberg often said that he deliberately chose to study with the authoritarian Josef Albers there because he knew he needed discipline. At Black Mountain, he also met two other painters he admired, Franz Kline and Jack Tworkov; the latter taught figure drawing and became Rauschenberg's friend and supporter. Conditions at Black Mountain were not easy. The students had to build their own classrooms and raise their own food in the school's garden; the faculty was rarely paid. (Willem de Kooning once said that if





you taught there, they tried to give you the school.) **At the end of the summer session in 1949, Rauschenberg and Weil moved to New York. There they experimented with blueprints, the most famous—an impression of the female body—being among Rauschenberg's earliest work with printmaking.**

Rauschenberg's first solo exhibition opened May 14, 1951, at the Betty Parsons Gallery in New York. Included were paintings begun in 1949, composed of white grounds inscribed with spare abstract configurations that were quasi-geometric, calligraphic, and often formed symbols—arrows, circles, and numbers—as in *Mother of God*, *22 The Lily White*, and *Crucifixion and Reflection*, all ca. 1950. The use of numerals, the division of the canvas into zones, and mirror imaging were all concerns that Rauschenberg would continue to pursue in his mature work. Albers's influence (insufficiently recognized to this day) is evinced in the reductive simplicity of the paintings: Rauschenberg acknowledged that Albers "taught me such respect for all colors that it took years before I could use more than two colors at once."¹ Most of the titles of the works exhibited at Parsons (including *The Man with Two Souls* and *Trinity*, both ca. 1950) clearly referred to Christian themes, indicating that Rauschenberg was still worried about salvation; indeed, he always would be.

In May 1951, Tworok persuaded the organizers of the "First Artists' Annual," the historic Ninth Street Show in New York, to include Rauschenberg. The group exhibition was a *salon des refusés* composed of New York School artists—including Kline, Robert Motherwell, and Jackson Pollock—in whose work neither the Whitney Museum nor the Museum of Modern Art was interested. Rauschenberg's son, Christopher, was also born that summer. Despite these happy occasions, the young artist's life was in chaos. Parsons did not renew his contract, and his marriage was dissolving. Rauschenberg's solution was to leave New York and return to Black Mountain in the summer of 1951. He continued to paint and, along with Cy Twombly (who was at Black Mountain working with Kline and Motherwell), to study photography. This became an enduring pursuit—the artist once said he wanted to photograph the world—and he eventually amassed an ever-growing archive of images, which he used for his subsequent silk screens.

Yet it should be emphasized that Rauschenberg began not as a figurative but as an abstract artist. Some of his earliest works, made in his twenties, were small abstract sculptures. During that summer of 1951, upon returning to Black Mountain, he made a radical decision to abandon imagery and drawing altogether in order to produce the famous monochrome *White Paintings*. He

wanted these works, executed with ordinary house paint, to reflect the shadows of passersby. He knew he was on to something important. In fall of 1951 Rauschenberg sent Parsons an impassioned letter, "Dear Betty," he wrote, "I have felt that my head and heart move through something quite different than the hot dust the earth threw at me. The results are a group of paintings that I consider almost an emergency."²

Rauschenberg described the new paintings as "large white (1 white as 1 GOD) canvases organized and selected with the experience of time and presented with the innocence of a virgin." The young painter claimed that the works were filled 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."³ The reference to infinity was particularly resonant at a moment when Jackson Pollock was weaving his infinite all-over

webs, when everyone in New York was talking about James Joyce's late works, especially *Finnegans Wake*, which ends as it begins. In his letter to Parsons, Rauschenberg continued: "It is completely irrelevant that I am making them—*Today* is their creator [sic]." This denial of individual

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ego predates Rauschenberg's involvement with Zen through his relationship with John Cage. But it is likely that Rauschenberg became acquainted with Asian mysticism earlier at Black Mountain, where it was much in the air, although his interest in Zen clearly deepened once he met Cage.

The uninflected *White Paintings* were generally dismissed by the press and by the dour first-generation New York School artists. The works looked as if they might fall apart. Rauschenberg gained a reputation not as a great painter, but as the bad-boy upstart of the New York School. This was disheartening for him, since he saw the works as icons of purity that could lyrically respond to the conditions around them.

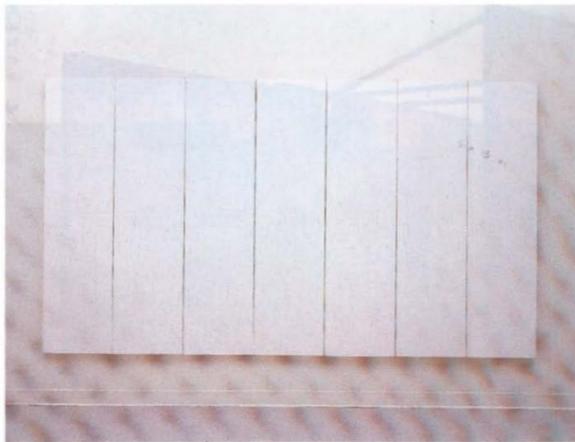
When Cage went to teach at Black Mountain in the summer of 1952, Rauschenberg's career took on radically new directions. The two had already begun a fruitful dialogue after meeting at Parsons's gallery. It is usually assumed that Cage influenced Rauschenberg; in fact, however, the influence was reciprocal. Cage recognized the natural similarities of Rauschenberg's

work with the philosophy of Zen, which he had been studying since the late '40s. And once he saw Rauschenberg's "silent" *White Paintings*, as is now legendary, Cage also began to consider silence to be essential to musical composition. Similarly inspired by Cage, Rauschenberg ventured into performance and into the inclusion of everyday, ordinary materials that changed over time (an impulse indebted to Futurist notions of noise as well as to musique concrète). The composer Peter Genia has observed that both Rauschenberg and Cage approached composition through the dispersal of material rather than concentration toward a center—a questioning of Western aesthetics that had roots in Cage's study of the mystic writings of Meister Eckhart and Ananda K. Coomaraswamy as well as the Zen masters. Genia compares the allover tension in Rauschenberg's paintings of the early '50s to Cage's disavowal of beginning, climax, and denouement in musical composition, as well as to Cunningham's choreography, which considers the entire stage as "a dynamic region with no central focus when positioning the dancers."⁴ Beyond such deep affinities in their work, Rauschenberg recalls taking heart from the fact that Cage "gave him permission" to continue experimenting at a point when everyone else was discouraging him.

Rauschenberg returned to Europe in the fall of 1952, this time with Twombly. Because he was on the move in Europe and North Africa, Rauschenberg could not paint. Instead, he began making small sculptures of found stones and wires or other detritus. Known as "Fetici Personali" (personal fetiches), the portable pieces were probably influenced by the African art Rauschenberg saw while working construction jobs in Casablanca (after Twombly had spent all their money buying antiques in the flea market in Rome). These informal conjunctions of industrial and natural scraps, which anticipated *arte povera* by nearly two decades, were shown in both Rome and Florence in 1953. As Rauschenberg recently told me, he heard while in Rome that his friend Alberto Burri was ill and visited him in his Via Margutta studio, taking Burri one of the personal fetiches as a gift to cheer him up.

During this nomadic period, Rauschenberg also made collages on cardboard that prefigured the Combine paintings he would begin upon his return to the United States. These juxtapositions of divergent and often ephemeral materials evoked brief moments and fugitive experiences. They anticipated the way in which Rauschenberg would eventually cull his subjects and images from his immediate surroundings. Yet unlike the embrace of mass cultural imagery implicit in Pop, Rauschenberg's works at Black Mountain were more strongly related to the anticlimactic form of the haiku (introduced to him by Cage), just as his later silk-screen images arguably evolved from his direct experience with photography and printmaking rather than from Pop art's critique of consumerism.

Rauschenberg collaborated with Cage, Cunningham, David Tudor, M. C. Richards, and Charles Olson in 1952, the result of which was an event that has been called the first Happening. Cage described the performance's setting thus: "The audience was seated in four isometric triangular sections, the apexes of which touched a small square performance area that they faced and

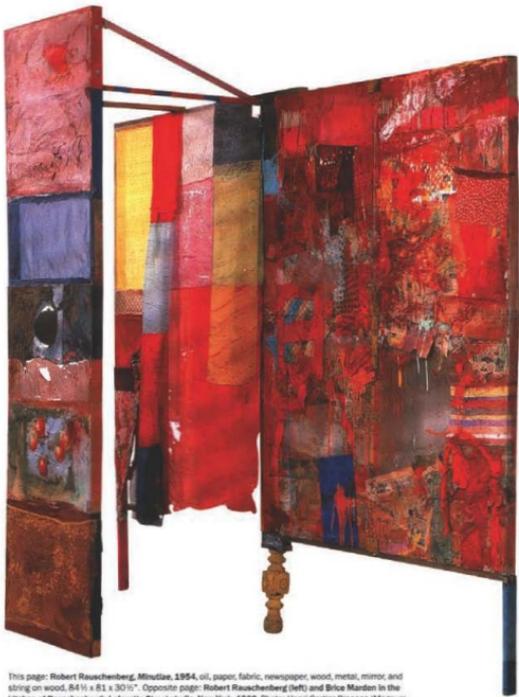


Opposite page, from left: Robert Rauschenberg, *Mother of God*, ca. 1960, oil, enamel, printed maps, newspaper, and copper and metallic paint on Masonite, 48 x 32 1/4"; Robert Rauschenberg, *22 The Ugly White*, ca. 1960, oil and pencil on canvas, 39 1/2 x 23 1/4"; Robert Rauschenberg, *Cyberflou and Reflection*, ca. 1960, oil, enamel, water-based paint, and newspaper on paperboard on wood, 47 1/2 x 51 1/4"; Robert Rauschenberg, *Eight untitled hanging assemblages*, at Pinco Giardini, Rome, 1963, from the (presumed lost) series "Fetici Personali." 1952-53. Photo: Robert Rauschenberg. This page: Robert Rauschenberg, *White Painting* (seven panels), 1951, oil on canvas, 6' x 10' 5".

that led through the aisles between them to the large performance area that surrounded them."⁵ The various activities included dancing by Cunningham, Tudor at the piano, and Rauschenberg playing Edith Piaf records on a Victrola with his white polychrome serving as a backdrop. Olson and Richards read their poetry aloud, Richards atop a ladder behind the seating area, while Cage, atop another ladder, read a lecture that included intervals of silence.

Cage's 1952 performance at Black Mountain was Rauschenberg's baptism as a set designer; he enjoyed the collaboration as well as performing. He began to make sets for Cunningham after returning from Europe in 1953. As artistic director of Cunningham's company from 1954 to 1964, he designed increasingly extravagant sets and costumes, reveling in the theatricality considered anathema to the plastic arts. Indeed, the sets for Cunningham resembled huge three-dimensional collages. They were prototypes for the mixed-media works Rauschenberg began producing at the same time. He dubbed these pieces Combines because they combined found materials, printed matter, gestural painting, and sculpture. The result was an exciting, impastoed, encrusted, and tactile surface. Oil, paper, fabric, and printed reproductions were layered and affixed to the surface and mixed with objects found in the studio or on the street, like a broken clock without hands, worn socks, numbers from a sports jersey, or soiled shirts.

Minutiae, 1954, is one of the earliest and largest of the freestanding Combines and was originally made as the set for a Cunningham performance of the same name. It is composed of three stretched vertical panels, one of which is positioned slightly in front of the others. Newspaper clippings of Donald Duck



This page: Robert Rauschenberg, *Mimulus*, 1954, oil, paper, fabric, newspaper, wood, metal, mirror, and string on wood, 84 1/2 x 81 x 30 1/2". Opposite page: Robert Rauschenberg (left) and Brice Marden in the kitchen of Rauschenberg's Lafayette Street studio, New York, 1968. Photo: Henri Cartier-Bresson/Magnum.

and Little King cartoons, old photographs, and fragments of posters obscured by painted passages over the surface. A patchwork of colored fabric swatches bridges the two back panels, attached only on the top, so that the dancers could enter and exit through the curtained opening.

Rauschenberg left simple instructions for producing these works: "Lay out stretcher on floor match markings and join."⁷⁶ As Cage wrote of this process, "He uses [canvases] singly, joined together, or placed in a symmetry so obvious as not to attract interest [nothing special]. We know two ways to unfocus attention: symmetry is one of them; the other is the over-all where each small part is a sample of what you find elsewhere. In either case, there is at least the possibility of looking anywhere, not just where someone arranged you should. . . . 'Art is the imitation of nature in her manner of operation.'⁷⁷ This was the essential principle that

Rauschenberg would follow for the rest of his life. His distraction and attention, his enormous appetite for adventure and experience, and his near-religious zeal for embracing everyone everywhere not only created an enormous body of work but defined him as the hero he never wanted to be.

RAUSCHENBERG HAS BEEN CALLED the first postmodernist. Yet *postmodern* is an inadequate description of his achievements. He may have incorporated images of old masters, but he never imitated past art-historical styles as parody or pastiche. And this reading of his work is as mistaken as the perception, introduced by Greenberg to discredit Rauschenberg, that the artist was essentially a late Cubist who added nothing to modernist aesthetics and was little more than a rebel without a cause. In point of fact, Rauschenberg confronted every major aesthetic issue facing modern art at a time of crisis and exhaustion. Rauschenberg was an empirical experimenter who rejected calculation for the far riskier process of trial and error, in which success is predicated not on the repetition of formulas but on prior failures.

Like all authentic artists, Rauschenberg belongs to a tradition, but not to the one in which most contemporary historians have placed him. Rauschenberg's work is connected to an older tradition of the painting of everyday life. Baudelaire had championed contemporary subjects as an alternative to the academic hierarchies that exalted mythological, biblical, and historical scenes. Rauschenberg continued this study of the contemporary urban landscape. Indeed, as much as Robert Henri, John Sloan, Thomas Hart Benton, and Edward Hopper, Rauschenberg was a painter of the American Scene.

Rauschenberg's prints and silk-screen paintings incorporating contemporary news media also have antecedents in Goya's concept of the responsibility of the artist as reporter. Rauschenberg's art extends this moral tradition of the artist as witness, functioning as time capsules, a composite of what he witnessed not in a single place or country but on television, in newspapers, and in his travels all over the world. Future viewers will continue to see what he saw, but inevitably not as he saw it. Nevertheless, it is more fruitful to attempt to reconstruct the specific context within which Rauschenberg developed his vision, as opposed to projecting inappropriate theories onto his work. He was an artist who devoted himself to escaping the prison of the academy, with its rules and regulations, and the isolation of the ivory tower, with its denial of the realities, impurities, contradictions, irrationality, and disorder of the world outside.

Fittingly, one of Rauschenberg's last works was a commission from the Catholic Church to paint the Apocalypse. He painted God as a satellite dish; the work was turned down. When I asked him what the problem was, he said he could never solve the problem of how to paint a positive image of the Apocalypse. This might not have been an impediment for most artists, but for Rauschenberg, negativity in any form was unacceptable. He would—indeed he did—prefer to fail at being the positive than to succeed in a game of diminishing returns, one that negated the stuff of life itself. □

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