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75 YEARS OF LOOKING FORWARD

Edited by
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108 ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG, *Collection*, 1954. Oil, newsprint, paper, fabric, wood, and metal on canvas, 80 x 96 x 3 1/2 in. (203.2 x 243.8 x 8.9 cm). Gift of Harry W. and Mary Margaret Anderson, 72.26

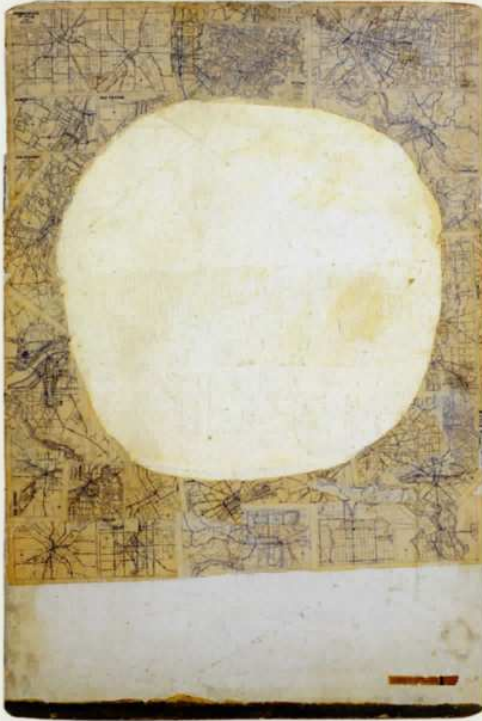
Robert Rauschenberg: *Engaging the Everyday*

RONI FEINSTEIN

The story of Robert Rauschenberg's development is one that begins with the young artist on multiple occasions literally wiping the slate clean to begin anew. It is the story of an artist who from the very inception of his career set out to redefine for himself what a work of art could be in terms of materials, processes, and attitudes about art making, most of these being in direct violation of prevailing aesthetic notions. It is the story of an artist who, after a brief period of formal experimentation during the early years of his career, developed an inclusive and multifaceted art—the Combine, a hybrid form that “combined” aspects of painting and sculpture—that was at once fully expressive of himself and of his time. In these works, an endless array of objects and images drawn from the everyday world were intermingled with painted passages and engaged in iconographic games. The story then continues with the now well-established artist who, after an extended period of involvement with the Combines, grew restless—his methods too familiar, his work too widely imitated. It was at this point that he began to make silkscreen paintings, yet another hybrid form, which featured a vigorous melding of painting and photography and set the course for much of his later art.

The story begins in 1949 when the twenty-four-year-old Rauschenberg arrived in New York and found the art scene energized by the recent emergence of Abstract Expressionism, an art of high moral purpose in which artists used an abstract universal language to respond to, among other things, the horrors of World War II. The dominant branch of Abstract Expressionism was Action Painting, as represented by Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, who used large painterly gestures as vehicles of angst. At this time, the Color-field painting of Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still, and Barnett Newman, Abstract Expressionism's alternate branch, in which impersonally rendered expanses of color (and noncolor) were employed to spiritual ends, was often denigrated and misunderstood. It is the latter that initially captured Rauschenberg's attention.

The earliest painted work by Rauschenberg in the SFMOMA collection is *Mother of God* (ca. 1950; pl. 109), which was included in his first solo exhibition in New York, held at the Betty Parsons Gallery in 1951. The work's form—a large, flatly painted white orb floating above a similarly painted horizontal plane—evokes the paintings of Rothko, while the religious title recalls those given by Newman to the paintings included in his show, which immediately preceded



Rauschenberg's at the same gallery: *Eve*, *The Voice*, *The Name*, and *Joshua*. Collaged upon the horizontal element in *Mother of God* is a quotation from the "Catholic Review" clipped from a newspaper, which reads: "An invaluable spiritual roadmap . . . as simple and fundamental as life itself." The clipping ironically overstates and thereby seems to mock the work's supposed symbolic intentions. This interpretation is reinforced by the fact that a collection of cheap, blue and white roadmaps of twenty-two American cities covers the painting's surface, the exploitation of found printed material for its subject matter anticipating the Combines. *Mother of God* reveals a young man of literal bent who rejected the spiritual and expressionist intentions of his elders in favor of a concentration on everyday realities.¹

Rauschenberg's next body of work, the *White Paintings* of 1951, represented in the SFMOMA collection by a triptych, was conceived as a contiguous series of modular works, each of a different size, proportion, and number of panels (one, two, three, four, five, and seven). In these paintings, ordinary white house paint was uniformly applied to canvas surfaces using a housepainter's roller. Once again, Rauschenberg "demythified" Newman's transcendental art; the older artist's paintings *The Way* and *The Name*, exhibited in the aforementioned Betty Parsons show, were all-white paintings, each with a single, unpainted vertical line, or "zip," intended to evoke a supernatural force. The younger artist replaced Newman's uninflected but nevertheless hand-painted canvases with mechanically generated surfaces and substituted mathematically determined edges for Newman's intuitively placed zips. Rauschenberg's formalist reinterpretation of Newman's work was probably the result of his having studied with the Bauhaus master Josef Albers at Black Mountain College in the late forties. It also demonstrated his willingness to court extreme controversy, as the criticism leveled against Newman's paintings in 1951 was so harsh and devastating that Newman did not exhibit again in New York until 1959.

Among the earliest admirers of Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* was the experimental composer John Cage, who declared them "airports for . . . lights, shadows, and particles," recognizing them as surfaces of infinite potential open to real-world phenomena.² Rauschenberg's black paintings sought to further actualize this potential. *Untitled* [glossy black painting], an early work in the series from about 1951, is composed of two- to four-inch flakes of newspaper that flutter and flare out from the canvas surface, the whole uniformly covered with glossy black enamel paint. Although the work's looming presence and impenetrable blackness may evoke the symbol-laden monochromes of Clyfford Still, Rauschenberg's interest resided in the literal and sensual value of the physical, allover activated surface. As the black paintings progressed, the handling of paint

109 ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG, *Mother of God*, ca. 1950. Oil, enamel, printed maps, newspaper, and copper and metallic paint on Masonite, 48 x 32 1/8 in. (121.9 x 81.6 cm). Fractional purchase through a gift of Phyllis Wattis and promised gift of an anonymous donor, 98.299

and materials became more improvisational and the surfaces more variegated; accent tones in red, white, and brown began to appear. In his *Untitled* [black painting with portal form] of 1952–53, long, ripped pieces and open, facing sheets of newspaper are flatly applied to the canvas surface, establishing a loose grid structure and a sense of scale. An architectural allusion—the so-called portal—can be identified in two sheets of newspaper placed one above the other and slathered with shiny black paint. Elsewhere in the work, sheets and fragments of newspaper are left exposed, the newsprint's typography and illustrations connecting the painting to the everyday world.

Rauschenberg's second exhibition in New York, a two-person show with his friend Cy Twombly held at Stable Gallery in 1953 (see pl. 110), included two *White Paintings*, several black paintings, and a collection of early sculptures made of found natural materials like wood, stones, and rope.³ The exhibition created a sensation due to the seeming casualness with which Rauschenberg departed from traditional artistic discipline and processes (the greatest offenders being the *White Paintings*), and it went far in establishing his reputation as the enfant terrible of the New York School. Solidifying this reputation were two infamous works of that same year: *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (pl. 107) and *Automobile Tire Print* (pl. 111). In the first, Rauschenberg erased a drawing given to him expressly for this purpose (at

Rauschenberg's request) by Willem de Kooning, the leading gesture painter. Rauschenberg later put it in a gold-leaf frame with a label handwritten by his friend Jasper Johns: "Erased de Kooning Drawing, Robert Rauschenberg, 1953."⁴ This was an iconoclastic gesture on the order of the Dadaist Marcel Duchamp's famed *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919), in which a moustache and goatee were drawn on a reproduction of the *Mona Lisa*, both works seeking to topple art world heroes and ideals. To produce *Automobile Tire Print*, Rauschenberg had John Cage drive his Model A Ford over a twenty-three-foot-long strip of paper (consisting of twenty sheets of drawing paper glued together) while Rauschenberg continuously inked one of the rear tires. The result was an undulating linear abstraction that is immediately recognizable as a tire print. Subsequently rolled at each end in the manner of a Chinese scroll, it is at once shocking and profound in its reconsideration of what a print and work of art

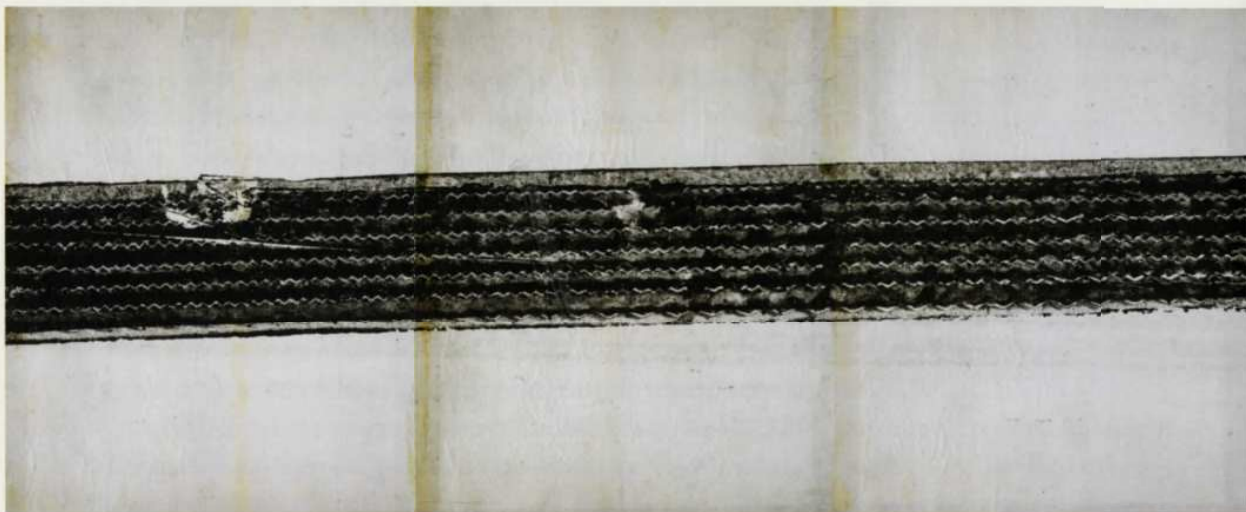
can be—and unexpectedly beautiful. The piece involved a removal of the artist's hand that echoed his earlier use of a housepainter's roller and looked ahead to his incorporation of actual tires into a number of his Combines.



110 Robert Rauschenberg at his exhibition at Stable Gallery, New York, 1953. The artist is seated on one of his untitled *Elemental Sculptures*, and another is on the floor behind him (both 1953). A seven-panel *White Painting* (1951) hangs on the wall.

In 1954 Rauschenberg exhibited *Collection* (pl. 108), a large-scale triptych that marked the emergence of his Combines, which were produced between 1954 and 1962. The artist's self-proclaimed aim in the Combines was "to make a surface that invited a constant change of focus and an examination of detail,"⁵ a surface sufficiently rich in form and content to reward scrutiny by both the mind and the eye. *Collection* started relatively simply, with its three panels initially painted (from left to right) red, yellow, and blue.⁶ The bottom third of each panel was then further subdivided into three sections through the application of taffeta fabric, creating a podium of sorts that raised the seemingly frenzied accumulation of wood and metal objects, flat elements of collage, and painterly marks closer to the viewer's field of vision.

As in the other Combines, the collage materials here function like elements in a pictographic language, engaging in an associative dialogue across the surface of the work. The viewer is invited to participate in discerning clusters of references, which serve as aspects of a multidirectional, underlying content.⁷ In this case the viewer may note a recurrence of portrait images, one in which hierarchies of printed matter are leveled (i.e., the fine-art reproductions, which are ostensibly images of "high art," are equated with others that are cheap, ephemeral, and "low"). Among them are the image of King Umberto I of Italy on two food tins at the upper left, a reproduction of Pierre-Auguste Renoir's *Girl Holding a Watering Can* (1876) from a Metropolitan Museum of Art scarf, multiple newspaper photographs of anonymous people (many of these, save for a strongman flexing his muscles, positioned upside down), an image of an eighteenth-century sculptural relief at Versailles of *Louis XIV Crossing the Rhine* by Nicolas and Guillaume Coustou, an illustration of the god Neptune, and a photo of a round-faced gentleman peering out from behind the drips of white paint at the center.⁸ In this context, the thinly veiled circular mirror



111 ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG, *Automobile Tire Print*, 1953 (detail). Black paint on twenty sheets of paper, mounted on fabric; overall 16 1/2 x 264 1/2 in. (41.9 x 671.8 cm). Purchase through a gift of Phyllis Wattis, 98.296

positioned to the right of the last gentleman serves either through implication or in actuality (depending on the height at which the work is hung) to draw the viewer's visage into the "conversation" and portrait-gallery collection.

Rauschenberg once said that one of his interests at this point in his career was trying to imply "with the different ways the paint went on that even though I might know only seventeen ways that there were thousands."⁹ He thereby differentiated himself from his elders and, in a sense, once again "deflated" their art—in this case, the work of Action Painters such as de Kooning—by using paintwork as a means not of self-expression but of impersonal mark making. To this end, Rauschenberg cultivated a repertory of paint marks that he would draw from and

expand over the course of the next several years, which included drips, splatters, graffiti-like scribbles (partly inspired by Cy Twombly), flatly painted areas, heavily impastoed strokes, and dry encrusted passages. Other characteristic markings found in *Collection* are the thick red line of paint, squeezed directly from the tube, that sits on the surface like a rope, extending across and uniting the two left-hand panels; the white "hinge" stroke (a horizontal line made with a loaded brush from which rivulets of paint drip down the surface, uniting the collage materials and other brushstrokes in their wake) that marks the painting's center; and the aggressively brushed passages in blue-green and blue at the upper left and upper right that visually connect the sides and hold the work together.

In 1960 Rauschenberg stopped using found photographic matter in his Combines, producing instead more painterly paintings on the one hand and more purely sculptural works on the other.¹⁰ Then in the fall of 1962 the artist embarked on an extended series of works devoted exclusively to photographic images—the silkscreen paintings—which occupied him for the next two years. In these works, commercially produced screens were used to transfer to canvas images derived from mass-media sources, such as *Life*, *Newsweek*, and other contemporary magazines, and from his own photographs, Rauschenberg having been engaged with photography since his student days at Black Mountain College. On canvas, these images were joined with other silkscreened images and hand-painted marks. Like photographic negatives, each image could be reproduced multiple times. Whereas Andy Warhol, who had begun working in silkscreen a few months before, used the process to create repetitive, gridlike compositions so impersonal as to be made by others, for Rauschenberg the mechanical process became malleable and highly variable, open to improvisation and the touch of his hand (via the squeegee used to spread ink through the



screens). Rauschenberg worked on the series exclusively in black and white until August 1963, at which point he turned to color silkscreen. *Scanning* (1963; pl. 112) is a transitional work in this regard, as all of its images are screened in black and white with the exception of one—the post-cardlike image of a beach scene turned on its side at the painting's left edge—which is screened in yellow and blue, colors that the artist used in gestural accents elsewhere in the work.

Scanning features a wide range of images of varying scale and depth, some being deep and recessive, others flatter and more graphic; also, some photographs are reproduced as a rectangular whole, while others are image fragments. Many deal with modes of transportation or movement, among them sequential images of a flying mosquito, an army truck, a rocket blasting off (albeit lying on its side), a satellite, birds in a cage (with the face of a man peering through), and a barge going under a bridge. The image of dancers, members of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company in rehearsal or performance, which may have been derived from a photograph taken by Rauschenberg, would have been of personal significance to him, as he designed sets, costumes, and lighting for the company from 1954 to 1964. In *Scanning*, the image of the Cunningham dancers is overlapped with that of a newly constructed highway cloverleaf interchange (appropriated from *Life* magazine), which connotes the path of the dancers' circuitous motion. Contributing to the theme of movement is the set of paw prints that meander down the left side of the piece; it is unknown whether these marks, seemingly made by a dog, were deliberate or a happy accident that the artist chose to preserve in the work, a result of the painting's having been produced while it was lying on the studio floor. The paw prints, like the artist's hand-painted marks, assert the literal flatness of the picture surface in the face of photographic illusionism.

Over the course of the next four decades, Rauschenberg experimented with new materials and methods of art making, including performance, lithography, and technology-based work, while extending his engagement with photographic images. The SFMOMA collection features works ranging from the lithograph *Front Roll* of 1964, which included images found in the silkscreen paintings and was at the time the largest lithograph ever made; to *Sand* from the *Hoarfrost Editions* of 1974, in which photographic images were printed on various fabrics loosely hung upon the wall; to *Catastrophe* (1996) from the *Arcadian Retreats* series, modern-day frescoes in which environmentally friendly vegetable dyes were used to print photographic images on plaster surfaces.

The story of Rauschenberg's development, then, is one that begins with formally and conceptually oriented work executed in reaction against prevailing expressionist trends and then moves to an art wholly expressive of himself—of his wit and high energy, his richly associational mind, and his profound engagement with the stuff of life, either in actuality or as represented by photographic images. That this art was also relevant to the needs and conditions of the time in

which it was created is demonstrated by the immediate widespread influence it had on both his contemporaries and the generations of artists who followed. Rauschenberg's endless experimentation and innovation in a wide range of media, some of which he brilliantly fused into hybrid art forms, and his penchant from the very inception of his career to go against the grain in defining what a work of art could be, set an example for artists to the present day and established him as a towering figure in late-twentieth-century art.

NOTES

- 1 It is interesting to consider that Barnett Newman, who was Jewish, focused on Old Testament subjects, while Rauschenberg, who was raised within a Christian fundamentalist sect in Port Arthur, Texas, looked to the New Testament. In 1948 the young Texan met and soon thereafter married Susan Weil, a fellow artist and a New York Jew. In 1951, after the birth of their son, Christopher, Rauschenberg left the marriage to live as a homosexual. He was a young man engaged in defining himself as both an artist and a person (with regard to his religious upbringing, faith, sexuality, and other aspects of identity); *Mother of God*, like other "allegorical cartoons" in the Betty Parsons show, seems to reflect this moment in his life and art.
- 2 John Cage, *Silence* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 102. Inspired by Rauschenberg's *White Paintings*, Cage composed his revolutionary environmental sound piece 4'33" in 1952.
- 3 Concurrent with the black paintings, Rauschenberg was preoccupied with producing an extended series of what he called *Elemental Sculptures*, three-dimensional works in which he exploited the inherent properties of found, mostly natural materials. Related to this series is SFMOMA's *Untitled (Elemental Sculpture)* [steel flange and stone], a small sculpture of 1953 assembled from both natural and industrial materials.
- 4 Transcript of interview with the artist conducted by Walter Hopps and David A. Ross in 1999, Interactive Educational Technologies files, SFMOMA, 44.
- 5 Quoted in G. R. Swenson, "Rauschenberg Paints a Picture," *Art News* 62, no. 2 (April 1963): 45.
- 6 A tripartite division of a work via a focus on the primary colors was virtually never seen again in Rauschenberg's oeuvre, although it was a recurring feature in the work of Jasper Johns. Rauschenberg and Johns shared an intense personal and artistic relationship from 1954 to mid-1961, during which time they lived in close proximity to one another, saw each other's work daily, and traded artistic ideas. The exuberance of the late *Red Paintings* and Rauschenberg's breakthrough into the Combines—an extroverted art expressive of his personality and free of the constraints on form and content that were then prevalent on the New York scene—were, at least in part, due to the new friendship. For his part, Johns, who was five years Rauschenberg's junior, new to New York, and untrained as an artist, absorbed Rauschenberg's aesthetic before moving on to develop his own. Although Johns destroyed most of the work he produced before *Flag* (1954–55; Museum of Modern Art, New York), the layered newspaper collage underlying the image of the American flag clearly owed to his friend's example. Much writing has been devoted to examining the links between these artists. Among them are Roni Feinstein, "Random Order: The First Fifteen Years of Robert Rauschenberg's Art, 1949–1964" (PhD diss., Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, 1990), 234–69; and Jonathan Katz, "The Art of Code: Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg," in *Significant Others: Creativity and Intimate Partnership*, eds. Whitney Chadwick and Isabelle de Courtivron (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 189–206.
- 7 See Jonathan Katz, "Lovers and Divers: Interpictorial Dialog in the Work of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg" (part 3), <http://queerculturalcenter.org/Pages/KatzPages/KatzLoversPt3.html> (accessed June 22, 2009), for a discussion of some of the comics and other collage materials found in *Collection*, which Katz interprets as reflecting Rauschenberg's "complex relationship with his new lover," Jasper Johns.
- 8 I extend thanks to Sarah Roberts, Chad Coerver, and Amanda Glesmann of SFMOMA for the identification of some of these and other images.
- 9 Robert Rauschenberg, interview conducted by Dorothy Gees Seckler in 1965, Oral History Program, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 5. Portions of this interview were reprinted in Dorothy Gees Seckler, "The Artist Speaks: Robert Rauschenberg," *Art in America* 54 (May 1966): 81.
- 10 SFMOMA's 1961 work *Trophy IV (for John Cage)* is among the latter. It was part of a series of works Rauschenberg created during this time in tribute to artists he admired (including Johns, Merce Cunningham, Jean Tinguely, and Marcel Duchamp).

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Front and back cover
LESLIE SHOWS, *Two Ways to Organize*, 2006
(detail of pl. 304). Acrylic, charcoal, metal,
mud, rust, and collage on panel, 82 x 82 in.
(208.3 x 208.3 cm). James and Eileen Ludwig
Fund purchase, 2006.123

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