Robert Rauschenberg and "The Flatbed Picture Plane"

by Jeanne Willette | Feb 10, 2012 | Contemporary Aesthetics, Contemporary Art, Contemporary Art Criticism, Contemporary Culture, Postmodern

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG (1925-2008)

Robert Rauschenberg had served in the Navy, as a nurse, during the Second World War, and, like many men of his generation, went to college on the G.I. Bill. After studying in Paris and New York, he found himself at the famous Black Mountain College (1933-1957) in Asheville, North Carolina. The small secluded College boasted of an extraordinary faculty of famous artists, such as Jacob Lawrence, Elaine and Willem deKooning, John Cage, and the refugee artists, Anni and Josef Albers from the Bauhaus. Albers despised Rauschenberg and would never talk about him in later years, but he taught the artist about the importance of materials. When he was a teacher in the Foundation year at the Bauhaus, Albers trained his students to create "combinations," that is, works of art that were collages and assemblages, made of anything or combined from everything. Any kind of material could be used. Rauschenberg would later call his hybrid works "combines" in homage to his bad tempered teacher.
In 1951 Rauschenberg had gained enough self confidence to write excitedly to the New York art dealer, Betty Parsons, of a new body of work, the *White Paintings*. As Brandon Wayne Joseph recounted in *Random Order*, the young artist insisted that the paintings were so "exceptional" that they constituted "a state of emergency." The artist also began to participate in performance art, working with John Cage, who, in turn, was inspired by one of Rauschenberg's White Paintings. The way the shadows played on and changed the white surface reminded Cage of his interest in silence, a fascination that had been growing since the late 1940s. According to Cage, "The white paintings were airports for lights, shadows and particles." Thus the white paintings are "performed" by the ambient environment and the presence of the viewer. Having explored the ideas of Zen, the concept of chance as acted out in the recently published English version of I Ching, a valuable association with Marcel Duchamp, Cage was prepared to understand the spiritual implications of the "silence" of Rauschenberg's work. In the essay "Purposeful Purposelessness Meets Found Order," the confrontation resulted in what Art Institute of Chicago's music scholar, Peter Gena, described as

> **...the most famous event in the history of Black Mountain College. In 1952, John Cage organized what was later acknowledged as the first "happening." Titled *Theater Piece No 1*, the mixed-media event was conceived one day after lunch and was presented, without rehearsals, scripts, or costumes, on the same evening in the dining hall. Cage constructed the 45-minute spectacle for selected colleagues who were each assigned two random segments of time in which to perform activities of their choice. Simultaneously, Charles Olson and M. C. Richards read their poetry, Cunningham danced (followed around by a dog), David Tudor played Cage's music on the piano, Rauschenberg hung some of his white paintings from the rafters and played wax cylinders on an old Edison horn recorder, and Cage lectured on Meister Eckhart and Zen.**

Cage and Rauschenberg continued their collaborations in New York. Like their associate and Cage's partner, Merce Cunningham, these Neo-Dada artists re-defined traditional art forms. Rauschenberg redefined "print" when he glued pieces of typewriter paper into a twenty foot long scroll and guided Cage when he drove his Model A Ford over the line of pages. The front tire was "inked" with black house paint poured in front of the tire and thus, when Cage, now the "printer" and the "press," drove in a straight line, the tire left a "print" of the car's "journey" along the scroll. *Automobile Tire Print* (1961) was made on a weekend on Fulton Street, which was deserted on those days. According to Rauschenberg, "It rained" and the glue did not hold, so he had to "salvage" the pages and piece them back together into what he thinks of as a Tibetan "prayer flag."

By the time he had returned to New York City, Rauschenberg was forced to face the failure of his marriage and divorced his wife. His next partner was an artist he met at Black Mountain, Cy Twombly. Although Twombly later married an heiress to an Italian fortune, his heart was broken when Rauschenberg met a newcomer to New York, Jasper Johns. Johns and Rauschenberg quickly became a couple, impacting each other's art. Both artists began to make works that were hybrid in quality—neither paintings nor sculptures but both. While at Black Mountain, Rauschenberg made several series of *White, Black,* and *Red* paintings. *Charlene* (1964), a huge collaged painting, is one of the last red paintings, combining an umbrella, found prints of famous works of art, comic strips, and other collaged objects. *Charlene* was poised between painting, collage and as Albers "combination." Another object that dated back to Black Mountain was *Bed* (1955) made when Rauschenberg was so broke he could not afford canvas. Looking like a murder scene, *Bed* was literally a sheet, covered with a quilt, with a pillow at the top. The artist then splattered paint, like Jackson Pollock, on the bed and hung the "painting" on the wall, making it into a work of art.

The cardonic slap at Abstract Expressionism was a "gesture" on the part of a brash artist who was clearly challenging his elders. Although Rauschenberg claimed to mean no disrespect, his *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953) was but one of a line of provocative works which made fun of the Modernist claim of authenticity and originality. Rauschenberg "erased" the call of the artist in his months long erasure project and demonstrated that any gesture could be copied in *Factum I* and *Factum II* (1957). As a further refusal of originality and inner experiences, Rauschenberg, possibly under the influence of Marcel Duchamp, picked up an important but neglected tradition, Dada. The Modernist tradition of painting could not fruitfully incorporate Dada into its meta-narrative of evolution, and Rauschenberg, as a member of the Neo-Dada underground, began living off the land of discards.

As a resident of the Lower East Side, Rauschenberg collected the city's detritus and used it to create large combines, some of which could hang on the wall, some of which were intended as floor pieces, while others were confined in boxes. As the artist reported later, **"I actually had a kind of house rule. If I walked completely around the block and didn't find enough to work with, I could take one other block and walk around it in any direction—but that was it."** Probably due to his upbringing on a farm in Port Arthur, Texas, the artist was particularly fond of animals stuffed by a taxidermist. As a high school student, he was so sensitive to the fate of animals, he refused to dissect a frog in biology class. Indeed, Rauschenberg's combines often incorporated animals, and the most famous being *Monogram*, a large floor combine, featuring an Afghan goat, far from home, perched on a tilted canvas. The goat has a car tire around his middle, and, like many of Rauschenberg's works of the Fifties, is painted (on its broken nose) in a mock Abstract Expressionist style of drip painting. The goat stands on a large collaged painting, which, recycled by the artist, now became a mocking "field," complete with a tennis ball.

Man with White Shoes, *Odalisk*, and *Interview*, all of the early Fifties, were assemblages that were free-standing and were based on Cornell-like tall boxes, acting as containers of random objects and as carriers of found images. In one of the finest essays on Rauschenberg's art, in *Other Criteria*, art historian Leo Steinberg referred to the artist's "flatbed picture plane," meaning that he simply placed images on a flat surface as one would tack notices on a bulletin board. However gritty and random these images appeared, Rauschenberg's combines could be "read" by the attentive viewer. Many of his appropriated pictures were reproductions of famous works of art, others were from degraded popular culture, suggesting an art world dialectic between creativity and appropriation. Although many of these combines concealed codes with queer content, art historians were silent about the gay subject matter of both Johns and Rauschenberg until recently.

Canyon (1959) tells a story of gay love: the Greek myth of Zeus and Ganymede, a young boy loved by the god who, disguised as an eagle, kidnapped the child. Perched on a ledge at the bottom of the painting is a stuffed eagle. Above the eagle is a photograph of Rauschenberg's son as an infant, reaching up to the sky. Hanging from the bottom of the canvas is a pillow, divided in half with a rope, giving the pillow the look of human buttocks. Looking back on the definitive phase of Rauschenberg's career, artist and critic, Brian O'Doherty, wrote of the artist's "vernacular glance."

> "The vernacular glance doesn't recognize categories of the beautiful and ugly. It just deals with what's there. Easily surfeited, cynical about big occasions, the vernacular glance develops a taste for anything, often notices or creates the momentarily humorous, but doesn't follow it up... Nor does it pause to remark on unusual juxtapositions, because the unusual is what it is geared to recognize, without thinking about it. It dispenses with hierarchies of importance, since they are constantly changing to where you are and what you need."

Although O'Doherty described the "vernacular" as a means to topple Modernist hierarchies of "high" and "low," the notion of "glance" implies a new way of seeing—a quick scanning that seized upon random elements. In looking at these works of the Fifties from the standpoint of the twenty-first century, Rauschenberg's combines seem to predict the type of looking disciplined by the internet: a skimming of the screen, searching for key words. Rauschenberg's combines, regardless of concealed content or not, were harbingers of things to come: hybrid, impure, painting-sculpture-objects-installation art based upon commercial and low art imagery found in one of the grittiest neighborhoods in New York. With hindsight, it is clear that Rauschenberg was making a stronger break with Modernism than his anti-art gestures would suggest. He deviated from the cherished ideology of Modernism, that the avant-garde is based in the kind of originality that was incomprehensible to the bourgeoisie.

Composed of fragments of low culture and reproductions of high culture, the artist's collaged paintings were predictors of Postmodern strategies of appropriation and quotation. Rauschenberg's works were perfectly legible and familiar because their bones are borrowed. With their constellations of ephemera, his works echo the "allegories" of Walter Benjamin and foreted the encyclopedic approach of Andy Warhol. There was nothing High Art about Rauschenberg's work and when Leo Castelli exhibited Rauschenberg's combines in 1958, the art world was aghast. Sadly, his debut at one of the great galleries of Pop Art would be the beginning of the end of his relationship with Jasper Johns. Castelli, who seemed to prefer the works of Johns over that of the older and more experienced artist, gave him the first show of his new gallery. The order of "preference" was too much for Rauschenberg and the two great artists once went their separate ways. In his later years, Robert Rauschenberg spoke one or twice of the "affection" the two artists had for each other, but Johns, to this date, has remained discrete.

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by Alexis Madrigal, July 2004

In 1951 Robert Rauschenberg painted a series of monochromatic canvases, solid white, using a roller that left behind subtle marks. Each of these works consists of a different number of panels, three exactly, two, three, six and twenty four, and is titled accordingly: *White Painting (two panels)*, *White Painting (three panels)*, etc. The white enamel house painting was applied in rows, proportionally laid down, and crisscross. Rauschenberg considered it essential that they be precisely alike. He wanted to the viewer to see the paintings as a unified whole, as a single form and not, usually, by the eye, or visible assemblage, of artworks that, conceptual. (Heaven's 1966, the artist's jackstraw of a piece, is a good example of the opposite approach.) Rauschenberg's sources, historical precedents or influences, varied. Indeed, critics have focused enormous beauty on their makes as receptive for light and shadow, a setting that has been heavily influenced by Rauschenberg's work. Rauschenberg's own explanation, however, was simpler. Because the *White Paintings* are an ingenious, single, concept, element painting is one focus is exactly interchangeable from that of the next. Rauschenberg, understandably, has been no stranger to the idea that his work could be, in fact, a kind of conceptual piece. Even might show explanation be ever used to or used, fit, overall configurations, also use of the *A Lackthward Gulp* in Rainout. For example, the artist's assistant, Cynthia Carlson, recalls that he used parts of the group, the Physical Ones gap, of consistency. Who can said to distinguish any ongoing painting from another. This purely, therefore, will attribute both the specific physical history of this work to Rauschenberg's hand, and the idea behind it to the artist's conceptual, ongoing, and the sense of meaning, with disclaim of creating the *White Paintings* as a groundbreaking precursor to minimalism.

Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* is a very Bernstein-esque Macrae's biology but, ultimately, that's Everyday. Beyond Rauschenberg, Everybody, Everybody secure, and ambitious and liberty, Bernstein, Seeley, New Rico, where the Bernstein's difficult many of such a Bernstein's Rauschenberg's, Bernstein's Rauschenberg's, Bernstein's Rauschenberg. 1951, from Macrae's Bernstein, he described his security conceptual paintings, of "that Dada-based Bernstein's Rauschenberg's Macrae, Ingersoll-esque, Kirby offers quotient characteristics of Macrae's works, such as, "They are a kind of

Alloway, "Rauschenberg's Development," in *Robert Rauschenberg*, ed. Walter Hopps (Washington, D.C.: National Collection of Fine Arts, Smithsonian Institution, 1976), 3. ^

19. Emily Genauer, "Art and Artists: Musings on Miscellany," *New York Herald Tribune*, December 23, 1953. ^

20. These statements have formed the primary interpretive matrix for the series. See John Cage, "On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and His Work," *Metro 2* (May 1961): 43, 50. Written for the Italian periodical *Metro*, Cage's article was reprinted or extracted in several European publications. It appeared in the Swedish journal *Konstrevy* as "Om Robert Rauschenberg: konstnär, och hans arbete," *Konstrevy* 37, no. 5–6 (1961): 166–74; and in *Rauschenberg* (Paris: Galerie Ileana Sonnabend, 1963), n.p. It also was included in Cage's 1961 book of collected writings, *Silence: Lectures and Writings by John Cage* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1967), 98–107. ^

21. Major texts to further this interpretation include: Richard Kostelanetz, *Master Minds: Portraits of Contemporary American Artists and Intellectuals* (New York: Macmillan, 1969), 261; Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg*, 66; *Robert Rauschenberg* (London: Tate Gallery Publications, 1981), n.p.; Roni Feinstein, "The Early Work of Robert Rauschenberg: The White Paintings, the Black Paintings, and the Elemental Sculptures," 30–32; and *Rauschenberg: The White and Black Paintings 1949–1952* (New York: Larry Gagosian Gallery, 1986), n.p. ^

22. See James Pritchett, "What Silence Taught John Cage: The Story of 4'33'" in *The Anarchy of Silence: John Cage and Experimental Art* (Barcelona: Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 2009), 171–77. ^

23. The confluence between the time-based framework that Cage constructed for his performance and the conceptual underpinnings of the *White Paintings* warrants further exploration. Cage affirmed that the *White Paintings* preceded 4'33" (Cage, *Silence*, 98): the paintings were created in Fall 1951, and 4'33" was composed in early 1952 and first performed that August. Cage's writings and ideas on the concept of silence, however, date back to 1948, so it is not a question of the *White Paintings* directly influencing or inspiring 4'33". Rather, Rauschenberg's explorations perhaps strengthened Cage's resolve to write a silent composition for performance in a concert setting. See Pritchett, "What Silence Taught John Cage," 173. For a thoughtful consideration of the question of influence/inspiration in relation to the *White Paintings* and 4'33", see Kay Larson, *Where the Heart Beats: John Cage, Zen Buddhism, and the Inner Life of Artists* (New York: Penguin Press, 2012), 233–35, 269–71, 302–6. ^

24. To save the expense of transatlantic shipping, Hultén was granted permission to have the paintings made in Sweden for the exhibition *Den inre och den yttre rymden: En utställning rörande en universell konst* (The Inner and the Outer Space: An Exhibition Devoted to Universal Art), Moderna Museet, Stockholm (December 26, 1965–February 13, 1966). Ultimately, only one from the series, the two panel, was executed. It was later destroyed by Rauschenberg's studio staff to prevent two iterations of the same painting from existing at one time. ^

25. Although the units in *White Painting* [three panel] were numbered sequentially by the artist on the back of the canvases, slight variations in their shapes and in specific installation situations have led them to be reordered as needed to ensure that the joints between each panel are as tight as possible when the work is installed. The variability this practice introduces was accepted by Rauschenberg and is consistent with the installation of other paintings in the series supervised by the artist or his studio representatives. Thomas Buehler, David White, and Susan Davidson, conversation with the author, May 1, 2012, Mount Vernon, New York. ^

26. Marden does not recall being given written instructions in 1968 or at any other time. Rauschenberg communicated his directions verbally, and Marden had the canvases stretched and executed the works using an existing panel from the series for reference. Brice Marden, conversation with Gary Garrels, January 22, 2013. Rauschenberg did not document the refabrication or repainting of the *White Paintings*. Artist David Prentice (b. 1943) recalls fabricating and painting *White Paintings* once and possibly twice in the early 1970s, though he does not remember specific details of the works. David Prentice, telephone interview with the author, March 5, 2012. ^

27. This mandate to make the paintings look anonymous was repeated to Darryl Pottorf and Lawrence Voytek, both of whom assisted Rauschenberg in the studio later in his life and repainted *White Paintings* in the 1990s and 2000s. Pottorf repainted the three-panel painting in Bilbao under the artist's supervision prior to the November 1998 installation of *Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective* at the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao. He reports using a brush and having the explicit understanding that the paintings were supposed to look as though no one in particular had painted them. Darryl Pottorf, interview with the author, November 6, 2012, Captiva Island, Florida. Voytek also reports using a brush and receiving the directive to make the surface appear "anonymous." Lawrence Voytek, telephone interview with the author, February 6, 2013. ^

28. Grace Glueck, "Ben Shahn Shines On," *New York Times*, October 13, 1968. ^

29. Pincus-Witten, "New York," 55. ^

30. John Perrault, "Robert Rauschenberg," *ARTNews* 67, no. 8 (December 1968): 52. ^

31. Glueck, "Ben Shahn Shines On." ^

32. Pincus-Witten, "New York," 55. ^

33. Pincus-Witten, "New York," 55. ^

34. See Robert Morris, "Anti Form," *Artforum* 6, no. 8 (April 1968): 33–35. See also his "Notes on Sculpture" series, which appeared in *Artforum* in four parts: "Notes on Sculpture: Part I," *Artforum* 4, no. 6 (February 1966): 42–44; "Notes on Sculpture: Part II," *Artforum* 5, no. 2 (October 1966): 20–23; "Notes on Sculpture: Part III," *Artforum* 5, no. 10 (Summer 1967): 24–29; and "Notes on Sculpture: Part IV," *Artforum* 7, no. 8 (April 1969): 50–54. Morris also organized the groundbreaking exhibition of ephemeral and process-oriented art *9 at Leo Castelli* at the Leo Castelli Gallery warehouse (December 4–28, 1968). ^

35. Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," *Artforum* 5, no. 10 (June 1967): 80. ^

36. Interestingly, LeWitt later referred to Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* as a marker of the end of Minimalism. "Interview by Saul Ostrow," in *Sol LeWitt* (Metz, France: Centre Pompidou-Metz, 2012), 272. ^

37. Any exhibition between 1968 and 1998 (when SFMOMA acquired the three-panel painting) might have occasioned a fresh coat of paint. See the exhibition history on the artwork overview page for complete exhibition details. Although a technical analysis of the work's surface has not been undertaken, conservation examination suggests the presence of at least two and possibly three layers of paint. One of these was applied in 1998, as mentioned in note 27 above, to repair a scuff mark that developed while the painting was traveling with *Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective*. Correspondence relating to the repainting is in SFMOMA Permanent Collection Object Files: *White Painting* [three panel], 98.308.A–C. ^

38. The preferred paint formulation is documented in the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation files. David White, senior curator at the Rauschenberg Foundation, believes that it may have been selected in the mid-1990s, possibly at the time of the 1997 retrospective. David White, email to the author, May 29, 2013. ^

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Sarah Roberts

Sarah Roberts serves as Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Curator and Head of Painting and Sculpture at SFMOMA. She was the primary author and editor of the *Rauschenberg Research Project*, SFMOMA's first scholarly digital publication, and she co-organized the museum's 2017 presentation of the Robert Rauschenberg retrospective. She oversees the Doris and Donald Fisher Collection at SFMOMA, and her recent exhibitions include *Joan Mitchell*, *Carol Bove and John Chamberlain: Converse* and *Louise Bourgeois Spiders*.

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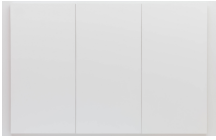

ARTWORK
White Painting [three panel]

RESEARCH PROJECTS
Rauschenberg Research Project

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