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The Visual Culture of Robert Rauschenberg

Daniel A. Siedell

Curator at Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska- Lincoln

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SHELDON MEMORIAL ART GALLERY AND SCULPTURE GARDEN

THE VISUAL CULTURE OF ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG

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THE VISUAL CULTURE OF ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG



"Painting relates to both art and life. Neither can be made. I try to act in that gap between the two."

Robert Rauschenberg, 1959

I.

The importance of Robert Rauschenberg to the history and development of 20th-century American art has been firmly established for well over three decades. It is, however, the nature of his importance that remains, in large part, unresolved. The recent retrospective exhibition of the artist's work at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York in 1997-98 represents to date the most ambitious attempt to document comprehensively the multiple aesthetic activities of one of the most complex and diverse artists in the history of modern art. By focusing on his involvement in performances, sculpture, and unique and creative engagement with technology, in addition to an in-depth exploration of his early paintings, combines, and phototransfers, the Guggenheim retrospective painted a portrait of an artist that is quite different than the one portrayed by most formalist histories of art. These formalist narratives have defined Rauschenberg as a product of historical "influences," from Abstract Expressionism to Pop Art. Despite his work's superficial affinity with the "Action Painting" process of Abstract Expressionism and a shared interest with the Pop artists in popular imagery, the fact remains that Rauschenberg's artistic intentions and aesthetic *modus operandi* bore little resemblance to either movement. And, therefore, like his friend and fellow artist Jasper Johns, Rauschenberg sits firmly outside the reductionist Greenbergian narrative of the inevitable formalist "progress" of avant-garde art. And like Johns, Rauschenberg continues to produce artwork, long after the "influences" of Abstract Expressionism in the fifties and Pop Art in the sixties have faded.

It is thus probable that Rauschenberg's quite broad and eclectic artistic activities from the late forties until the present can be



Untitled (Statue of Liberty), 1983, UNL-F.M. Hall Collection

interpreted, analyzed, and more fully appreciated within a broader methodological context than is usually utilized by most art historical narratives, narratives which assume—either explicitly or implicitly—the necessity of a Manet-Monet-Cézanne-Cubism-Fauvism-Surrealism-Abstract Expressionist lineage in interpreting the meaning and significance of postwar American art.

The difficulty of understanding Rauschenberg's artistic development and diverse creative activities within the limits of this modernist aesthetic has led many critics and historians to conclude that Rauschenberg's art is "postmodern."¹ Whether or not his eclecticism is sufficient grounds for his art being considered "postmodern," Rauschenberg's aesthetic is, without question, profoundly anti-formalist. Like those other "neo-Dada" artists he was often associated with, such as Jasper Johns, John Cage, Morton Feldman, and Merce Cunningham, Rauschenberg's artistic activity requires a broader, more sophisticated conceptual model within which to interpret his work and one that is more faithful to the artist's own intentions.

A broader methodological perspective has been achieved, at least potentially, through a developing interest in the "history of images," which offers a more inclusive approach to the study of visual imagery than the more hierarchical history of fine art.² This approach has focused attention not simply on modernist avant-garde painting but on a more comprehensive concern for the visual imagery that we as cultural participants use and consume in order to affirm and critique social values. This methodological approach brings into view such visual imagery as photojournalism, film, television imagery, cartoon illustrations, and the multitude of other images—high art, popular, and "kitsch"—that constitutes our diverse aesthetic environment, an environment that includes both Richard Serra's minimalist sculpture and Warner Sallman's popular biblical illustrations.

This approach coincides quite comfortably with Rauschenberg's own interest in circumventing the clichés of traditional "high art" experiences. For instance, Rauschenberg's early "white," "black," and "red" paintings of the early fifties were an attempt to strip the visual arts of their reliance on Romantic and psychological language of "sustained contemplation" and "spiritual reflection" often used to articulate the profound experience of "high art." In a 1963 interview, Rauschenberg observed,

*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..*³

A "culture" is a constellation of social

habits and behaviors that affirms and reaffirms a community's identity as a community. And as the post-Enlightenment emphasis on the "visual" over the verbal and the aural in the communication and reception of knowledge reaches a climax in the late twentieth century, a "visual culture" has played—and continues to play—a decisive role in the affirmation and reaffirmation of the many diverse—and competing—cultures that make up modern society. In this way, Rauschenberg's own visual culture is derived from the various visual cultures that have shaped our own identities as cultural participants in modern society. Rauschenberg's visual culture, then, is also ours.

II.

Born in Port Arthur, Texas in 1925, Rauschenberg enrolled at the University of Texas in 1943. After spending two years in the U.S. military, Rauschenberg travelled to Paris on the GI Bill and studied art at the renowned Académie Julian. Later in the fall, Rauschenberg enrolled at Black Mountain College, an experimental arts school near Asheville, North Carolina, where he was influenced by the German modernist Josef Albers. The next year Rauschenberg enrolled in classes at the Art Students League in New York, again under the GI Bill.

Unlike the Abstract Expressionists, such as Willem de Kooning, who had spent nearly twenty years in New York making art before he was given a solo exhibition in 1948, Rauschenberg had his first solo show at the Betty Parsons Gallery in 1951 at twenty-six years of age and only after a few years in New York. Later that year Rauschenberg was included in the famous Ninth Street exhibition featuring the New York School artists, many of whom were nearly twice his age. In the early fifties, Rauschenberg's work consisted of the so-called white, black, and red paintings through which he sought to communicate a "silence of the visual" that could resist metaphoric allusions. Despite their heavily painted and worked over—even collage—surface, these paintings suggest a "heavy" or "muted" silence; or as Rosalind Krauss referred to it, a "silence of the visual."⁴

Rauschenberg's white paintings in fact were a major influence on John Cage's (in)famous musical composition 4'33" of *Silence*. In 1953 Rauschenberg asked de Kooning, whom he greatly admired and respected, to give him a drawing for him to erase. After de Kooning obliged—and even rose to the challenge—by giving him an extremely complex graphite and ink composition, Rauschenberg spent over a month erasing the drawing, titling it *Erased de Kooning Drawing* and displaying it in a gold leaf frame bearing the title. In 1954, Rauschenberg began to make his "combines," which he continued to make until 1964. Influenced heavily by Joseph Cornell, Rauschenberg's combines consisted of wood

panels, collaged photographic images, fabric, found objects, and pieces of furniture unified by a gestural "action painting" brushwork. Operating "in the space between art and life" as he called it, Rauschenberg's combines move from the wall and interact with the environment. As John Cage said,

Perhaps after all there is no message. In that case one is saved the trouble of having to reply. As the lady said, 'Well, if it isn't art, then I like it.' Some (a) were made to hang on a wall, others (b) to be in a room, still others (a + b).⁵

In 1953 Rauschenberg constructed a set design for the dancer/choreographer Merce Cunningham's *Minutiae*. From 1954 to 1964 Rauschenberg participated in twenty performances, including lighting, set, and costume design. In addition, both he and Cage were members of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company (MCDC). Rauschenberg's interest in the physical environment was with him from his early work, as even his densely painted white canvases invited "audience engagement."

In 1962 Rauschenberg began a black-and-white silkscreen series called "Random Order," which was "part manifesto, part diary, part poem," as Rosalind Krauss has called it.⁶ It consists of five pages in the first issue of the magazine *Location*, published in the spring of 1963. It marks not only Rauschenberg's shift to photography "not only as the image bank on which his pictorial practice would then rely...but as a new conception of the pictorial itself."⁷ This new pictorial vocabulary, which emphasized the ephemeral and fragmented nature of imagery, replaced the object-oriented assemblage character of his combines. Between 1962-64, he incorporated images from discarded photoengraved plates he salvaged from *The New York Times* and *New York Herald Tribune*. Rauschenberg also began using his own photographs as well in an attempt to circumvent any copyright problems that his compositions might cause.

III.

The Sheldon Gallery is pleased to present *The Visual Culture of Robert Rauschenberg*, an exhibition of ten works from the Gallery's permanent collection that surveys the artist's work after his move from the combines-collages to the photographic images in 1962, but which reveals influences that have remained from his early formative years of the late forties and early fifties. The only work of sculpture in the exhibition, *Tampa Clay Piece 3 (R.F.D.)*, 1972, manifests Rauschenberg's lifelong preoccupation with the three-dimensional potential of both painting and sculpture. These "facsimiles of cardboard" originated from his use of cardboard boxes, which he bent, flattened, cut and stapled to create wall sculptures. And despite its Duchampian attitude, this crushed box remains laden with the life-world associations of use and disuse and art's ability to facilitate

these associations in an ironic, yet passionate manner; as art—or visual imagery—itsself is “used” and then abandoned. *Tampa Clay Piece 3 (R.F.D.)* also alludes to the influence of Jasper Johns’s flag paintings and Claes Oldenburg’s *papier-mâché* “merchandise” of the early sixties, both of which attempted to increase the tension between “art” and “life,” between art and non-art, the serious and the humorous, the profound and the banal.

Rauschenberg’s post 1962 photographic turn is well represented in this exhibition with *Urban, 1962*, *Core Poster, 1965*, and *Untitled (Statue of Liberty), 1983*. Such “icons of public memory” as the Statue of Liberty, John F. Kennedy, automobiles and spaceflights, baseball, and other images of modern society are spliced, superimposed, and otherwise juxtaposed in jarring but nuanced transitions, which accommodates the late 20th-century viewer’s distracted or “absent-minded” attention as the German literary critic Walter Benjamin put it.⁸ These works manifest not only an interest in the imagery of popular culture but in the process by which these images are communicated, namely, the layer upon layer of fragmented imagery that continues to build on each other without offering a unified and coherent “narrative.” But these images, viewed not in isolation but in the context of Rauschenberg’s sustained interest in visual culture, become autobiographical as well. These images, which find their way into his compositions throughout the sixties and seventies, present Rauschenberg’s own perspective on modern society, on the images and visual “icons” that have most shaped his own “visual culture,” his way of making sense out of modern visuality and textuality.

Rauschenberg’s sophisticated visual culture is on further display in *Scrape, 1974*, in which pictorial images, including an airplane and a fragment of a classical Greco-Roman column, appear to float or hover effortlessly above each other. From his well-known Hoarfrost Series (1974-75), *Scrape* shows his interest in fabrics, using it as an unstretched support for his increasingly refined visual imagery in which he investigated the visual effects of “veiling” and “translucency.” “I read the word in Dante,” recounted Rauschenberg, “Hoarfrost is like a mock frost, but it’s a warning about the change of seasons.” The Hoarfrost series began, according to Mary Lynn Kotz, when Rauschenberg noticed that the cheesecloth used to clean the printmaking stones retained some of the newsprint images from the transfer-printing process. “I was actually trying to dematerialize the surface as much as I could so that you had a sense of the fabrics being there so the light would have something to fall on.”⁹

But perhaps one of Rauschenberg’s most ambitious photomontage compositions is his *Currents, 1970*, a silkscreen print fifty-four feet

long featuring headlines and photographs and ads from the January and February 1970 editions of *The New York Times*, *New York Daily News*, and *Los Angeles Times*, assembling thirty-six collage compositions for what Mary Lynn Kotz referred to as “a silkscreen project with a grim message.”¹⁰ The title of the project alluded to both “current events” and the “currents,” which were sweeping through modern society that greatly troubled and concerned Rauschenberg.

From these thirty-six collage studies, Rauschenberg produced two portfolios of prints, *Surface Series from Currents and Features from Currents* in order to reach a larger audience. As Mary Lynn Kotz described it:

*To emphasize the gravity of these world events, he then joined all the imagery together to form the world’s largest silkscreen drawing, six feet high and fifty-four feet wide. Currents became an enormous black-and-white scrapbook, which Rauschenberg described as the “most serious journalism I had ever attempted.”*¹¹

Rauschenberg continued,

*The fact that you paid a quarter for your newspaper almost satisfies your conscience: Because you have read your newspaper, you have done your bit. And so you wrap your conscience in your newspaper just like you wrap your garbage....I made that series [Currents] as realistically as I could, as austere as possible, in the most direct way I knew how, because, knowing that it was art, people had to take a second look, at least, at the facts they were wrapping their garbage in.*¹²

With *Currents* Rauschenberg’s interest in and concern for politics, which was implicit in much of his work until 1970, became more explicit. Rauschenberg’s growing political concerns and the artist’s responsibility in the public arena was manifest in the ROCI (Rauschenberg Oversees Culture Interchange), which was inaugurated on December 14, 1984, in which he invited a group of ambassadors and artworld professionals to attend the formal announcement of the project at the United Nations in New York. ROCI was operative from 1984-91 and was born, according to Rauschenberg, because he “had given up on the politicians...now it’s up to the artists to wage peace.” The artist, Rauschenberg argued, “must be engaged in determining the fate of the earth, that the artist cannot stand aloof, as an observer.”¹³

IV.

From his early collaged paintings of the late forties and early fifties to his highly refined vegetable-dye Iris print transfers of the mid-nineties, the extraordinary aesthetic achievement of Robert Rauschenberg is found not in his desire to transcend or reject the visual cacophony that is modern society—to reject “kitsch” for the sake of a utopian, transcendent, and ascetic “avant-garde”—but is located firmly in his complete and

unapologetic embrace of the fragmented visuality and textuality of modern life. For it is through the very diverse visual means by which modern culture communicates its values that Rauschenberg uses as his visual language. It is a testimony to his sustained creativity that his aesthetic voice—his own “visual culture” is at the same time his own and his culture’s—arrests, sustains, and demands the kind of extended engagement that has been a prerequisite for the most important art in the Western tradition.

Daniel A. Siedell, Ph.D
Curator

1. See Leo Steinberg, “Other Criteria,” in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth Century Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 55-91. Steinberg argues that the horizontal orientation of Rauschenberg’s “flat-bed” combine constructions of the late fifties were the first “postmodern” artworks.

2. For a collection of essays within this more inclusive context, see *Visual Culture: Images and Interpretations*, eds. N. Bryson, M.A. Holly, and K. Moxey (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1994). See also, David Morgan, *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). For an excellent example of the results that such an approach can yield for the study of Rauschenberg, see Christin J. Mamiya, “We the People: The Art of Robert Rauschenberg and the Construction of American National Identity,” *American Art* (Summer 1993): 41-63.

3. Quoted in G.R. Swenson, “Rauschenberg Paints a Picture,” *Art News* 62/2 (April 1963): 45.

4. “Perpetual Inventory,” Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective, 212.

5. “On Rauschenberg, Artist, and His Work,” 1961.

6. “Perpetual Inventory,” 209.

7. *Ibid.*

8. “Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, ed. and intro. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 241.

9. Quoted in Kotz, 162.

10. Mary Lynn Kotz, *Robert Rauschenberg: Art and Life* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990), 180.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*, 182.

13. *Ibid.*, 20

CHECKLIST

URBAN

1962, lithograph, edition 5/38
29 3/4 x 22 7/8 in.
UNL-Gift of Olga N. Sheldon
1973.U-3300

UNTITLED (from the 1¢ Life, book written by Walasse Ting)

1964, lithograph (book edition 1500/2000)
14 1/2 x 11 in.
UNL-Olga N. Sheldon Acquisition Trust
1987.U-4091.42

UNTITLED (from the 1¢ Life, book written by Walasse Ting)

1964, lithograph (book edition 1500/2000)
15 1/2 x 10 1/2 in.
UNL-Olga N. Sheldon Acquisition Trust
1987.U-4091.41

CORE POSTER

1965, silkscreen poster, edition 199/200
35 7/8 x 23 7/8 in.
NAA-Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Lionel R. Bauman
1970.N-230

QUARRY

1968, offset photo lithograph poster
34 9/16 x 26 in.
UNL-F.M. Hall Collection
1973.H-2802

FEATURES FROM CURRENTS

1970, silkscreen, edition 28/50
40 x 40 in.
UNL-James E.M. and Helen Thomson Acquisition Trust
1997.U-4897

TAMPA CLAY PIECE 3 (R.F.D.)

1972, ceramic, luster glaze, tape, soil patina
20 5/8 x 24 1/4 x 4 15/16 in.
UNL-Gift of Carl H. and Jane Rohman through
the University of Nebraska Foundation
1994.U-4427

WATERMARK

1973, four-color serigraph, edition 14/250
30 x 22 1/2 in.
UNL-Gift of Save Venice Inc.
1974.U-1209

SCRAPE (from the Hoarfrost Series)

1974, transfer of offset lithographed and newspaper images,
collage of paper bags on silk (edition 4/32)
UNL-Gift of the National Bank of Commerce, the F.M. Hall
Collection and the Olga N. Sheldon Acquisition Trust
1994.H-3023

UNTITLED (Statue of Liberty)

1983, lithograph, edition 107/250
35 3/8 x 24 1/4 in.
UNL-F.M. Hall Collection
1990.H-2945

On the cover. *Features From Currents*,

1970, UNL-James E.M. and Helen Thomson Acquisition Trust

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Tampa Clay Piece 3, (R.F.D.), 1972,
UNL-Gift of Carl H. and Jane Rohman
through the University of Nebraska Foundation



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