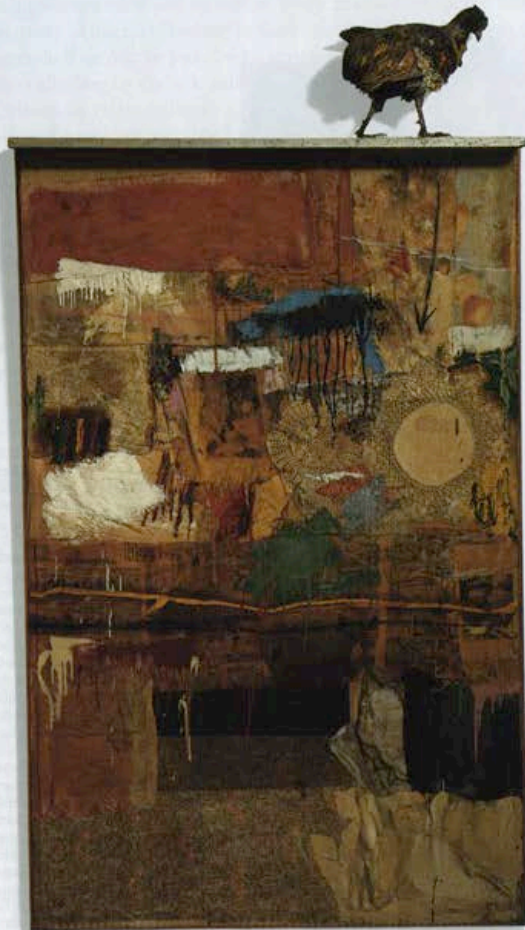


WITH THEIR INTRICATE PATCHWORK SURFACES AND AVIAN APPENDAGES, ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG'S COMBINES CONTINUE TO POSE BAFFLING INTERPRETIVE RIDDLES MORE THAN A HALF CENTURY AFTER THEIR INCEPTION. ON THE OCCASION OF THEIR MOST COMPREHENSIVE EXHIBITION EVER, ART HISTORIAN YVE-ALAIN BOIS AND PAINTER CARROLL DUNHAM REFLECT ON THE ELUSIVE STRUCTURES AND EVOLVING LEGACY OF THESE SEMINAL WORKS.



All or Nothing

CARROLL DUNHAM

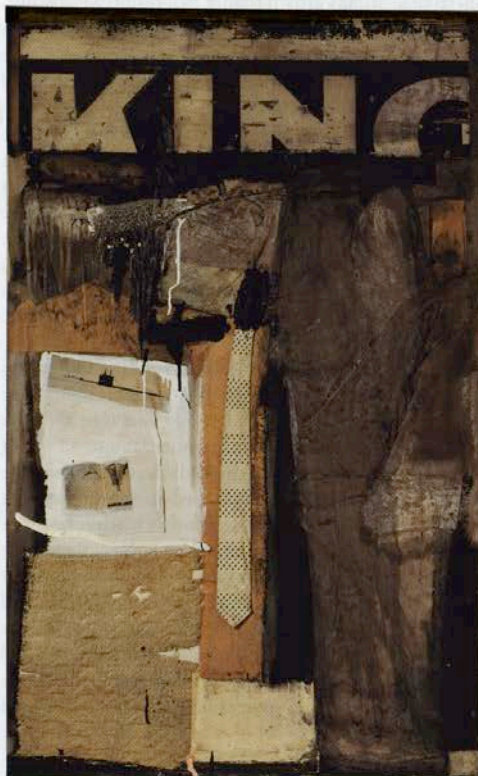


Robert Rauschenberg's career took off with a chapter of shock and awe followed by a forty-year-and-counting campaign for the hearts and minds of the largest possible audience. Perceptions of him evolved quickly, from the Oedipal assassin of his New York School elders to the Golden Lion of Venice and poster boy for a new kind of art-world success. After an extraordinarily productive decade, by 1965 he had begun to steer his work away from painting toward more technologically and socially engaged forms of art, and while the fruits of his increasingly collaborative labors may have left the jury of his peers uneasily out, any attempt to understand painting's recent past and cultural role inevitably traces back to Rauschenberg—a kind of “artist zero” in the margins of whose early activities the later projects of many others were implied.

Jasper Johns, Cy Twombly, and Andy Warhol have been much more frequently invoked in the mantras contextualizing subsequent generations of artists, which is understandable given how manic and promiscuous Rauschenberg has been with his gifts. The reciprocal influences and dialectics connecting him with Johns and Twombly are well known, but the latter pair have been far more withholding of their favors, and the collective heart has grown fonder as a result. Meanwhile, Rauschenberg's high profile, if not his practice, certainly made a big impression on Warhol. The two of them are the most compulsively prolific artists of recent times who haven't lived in transient hotels or mental hospitals. Yet Warhol stayed more on message, and while there seems to be an exhibition of his work on view at any time somewhere on the planet with no apparent damage to his aura, the volume of Rauschenberg's output appears to have diluted its intensity. The Guggenheim's disappointing 1997 retrospective reinforced this notion with its inclusionary sprawl. Rauschenberg's work benefits from consideration of specific series, and the Metropolitan Museum's exhibition of the Combines provides the first such treatment since the Whitney's revelatory, if weirdly underappreciated, “Silkscreen Paintings, 1962–64” of 1990. Now we can revisit the period of his greatest influence and deepest trailblazing, while also glimpsing within his artistic DNA the hyperactivity that would later have such confusing repercussions.

One often hears the art of an earlier period praised for looking like it was “made yesterday,” but on entering the show at the Met another thought came unbidden: These things look like they were made a long time ago. To walk through the exhibition is to travel down a collective memory lane to a time of enormous change in both art and the culture at large. Rauschenberg made the first Combines not long after the beginning of television, when the imagination of the art world was still very much in the thrall of the New York School, whose members he clearly venerated and also strove to surpass. The Combines' extreme messiness and improvisatory construction probably gave them an aged quality even then, but the artist's emphatically nonarchival approach to materials assured a literal aging and fading that impart an autumnal glow reverberating strangely with the anarchic aggressiveness of the individual works. Desire, memory, and loss are implied and embraced in the Combines. The provisional associations and physical decay form a lattice supporting a central content of ceaseless and regret-free transition.

Rauschenberg's general approach in the Combines—the composting of fabric, pictures, and objects of private and common interest into a fertile mulch of dense pictorialism—was neither unprecedented nor wholly unique. Precursors can be found in several collage episodes of earlier modernism as well as in nineteenth-century American trompe l'oeil painting, just as there were affinities with con-



Clockwise from top left: Robert Rauschenberg, *Interior*, 1956, oil, pencil, paper, wood, hat, nails, and pressed tin on canvas, 48 1/4 x 46 1/4 x 7 1/2". Robert Rauschenberg, *Untitled*, ca. 1955, oil, house paint, paper, fabric, and printed reproductions with sock and parachute on canvas, 68 x 55". Robert Rauschenberg, *Inlet*, 1959, oil, newspaper, postcard, paper, wood, metal, fabric, pant leg, zipper, wire hanger, paper clip, can lids, stuffed bird, toy pistol, light socket, conduit, compass, furniture wheel, and corkscrew on canvas, 84 1/2 x 48 x 5". Robert Rauschenberg, *Kickback*, 1959, oil, enamel, wood, fabric, pant leg, necktie, mattress pad fragment, envelope, newspaper, cardboard, postcard, magazine photographs, matchbook cover, and found wooden sign on canvas, 76 1/2 x 33 1/4 x 2 1/4".

temporary developments in Italy and France. What was unprecedented in his work was the fusion of an intimist sensibility (not unrelated to Joseph Cornell's) with the mythological ambition of postwar abstraction and an almost circuslike sense of spectacle. The earliest Combines retain the palette of his preceding "Red Paintings" and can resemble disused, blood-drenched bulletin boards, but Rauschenberg quickly shifted to a more public scale and atmospheric. With *Collection*, 1954, and *Satellite*, 1955, a methodology and format were established that claimed parity with the most advanced abstract painting while absorbing and reflecting elements of the culture that were completely unaccounted for within the program of the New York School. Rauschenberg was like an exposed nerve picking up still-latent signals from the culture and unleashing his high-affect, attention-deficit-disordered consciousness against the painting patrimony of the time. For the next eight years there followed a more or less continuously self-generating avalanche of work with the requisite highs and lows of such a brinksmanly practice. The term *masterpiece* is so problematic as to be nearly useless, but if any artworks of our recent past merit that designation then *Rebus*, 1955, *Interior*, 1956, and *Monogram*, 1955-59, are certainly among them.

Yet while much was made at the time and since of the Combines' hostility to painting and their implications for practices external to it, seeing a quorum of them at the Met makes it clear that they were much more significant as a way for painting to have expanded and survived. They roamed freely but did not really leave a territory of flat rectilinearity in their construction, which was often manifest as a stretched canvas or panel with prosthetic extensions, or in jerry-built contraptions alluding to shelves, cabinets, windows, or fragments of wall. Rauschenberg's baseline relationship to planarity is paradoxically most evident in the freestanding Combines, notably *Odalisk*, 1955/58, *Untitled*, ca. 1955, or *Monogram*, any of which could be seen either as paintings trying to be sculptures or as sculptures trying to be paintings. While they require a shifting and rotating point of view to be wholly perceived, they unfold in space largely as sequential pictorial episodes.

It is frustrating and perhaps not desirable to deal with these objects as ready sites for iconographic decoding, the usefulness of which has been extensively debated in the literature on the artist. The Combines are the most nonverbal form of communication imaginable while being replete with nameable things. The works come fully loaded with topical, historical, and no doubt personal references that can seem to invite narrative connections, but as in dreams, no single reading can hold final authority. It is much more rewarding to bask in their multi-bandwidth emanations. The trivial and philosophical, the refined and the insensitive, the intimate and the banally public all coexist in the clutter of their surfaces.

As attempts to transcend normal notions of selfhood, the Combines explore deeply the defining conditions of personality. They are the products of a solitary and somewhat isolated consciousness working improvisationally with the matter and emotions directly at hand, a projection of Rauschenberg's mind and body onto the intimate and alienated world of the studio. In a sense they are all one thing, the aftermath left by the sensitive and acquisitive tidal wave of the artist's awareness as it crashed into reality and then receded. This force of nature had certain tics and dispositions that define the "style" of the Combines and determine some thematic threads. The approach to composition is grid-based, like the physical structures, and relates more to late Hans Hoffman than to the frequently mentioned de Kooning. But Rauschenberg's "push-pull," unlike Hoffman's, was an attempt to include all levels of the inner and outer life within the "gestures" of the works, expanding that term to an almost universal category.

Rauschenberg clearly loved including taxidermied animals and fragments of clothing in these constructions, both of which possess a history with literal

RAUSCHENBERG WAS LIKE AN EXPOSED NERVE PICKING UP STILL-LATENT SIGNALS FROM THE CULTURE AND UNLEASHING HIS HIGH-AFFECT, ATTENTION-DEFICIT-DISORDERED CONSCIOUSNESS AGAINST THE PAINTING PATRIMONY OF THE TIME.

connections to biological processes and the rhythms of daily reality. The paint-spattered hat at the corner of the bleak no-place of *Interior*, the necktie crushed into the surface of the crudely authoritative *Wager*, 1957-59, or the sock drifting in the emotional crash zone of *Untitled* all impart to these paintings the afterglow of lived life. One doesn't necessarily know where the oft-mentioned "gap between art and life" is located but it can't be far from the dead bald eagle preparing to hightail it out of the painterly abyss of *Canyon*, 1959. The feathered denizens of works as diverse as *Satellite* and *Inlet*, 1959, inflect the Combines with strange backstories as well as reverberations of literal death. To see a dead animal inhabiting a painting triggers unprecedentedly complex angles of exegetical contemplation, touching on animal husbandry, individual and group extinction, and the question of the boundary between culture and nature.

There is a powerful halo of scatology around the Combines that is most apparent early on, becoming progressively repressed and redirected with time. The early examples are very "dirty" and the later ones relatively "clean." During the time he made *Collection* and related paintings, the impecunious artist was acquiring remaindered cans of commercial paint with illegible labels. The resultant randomness of the colors merges with the undirected, almost simian quality of the painted passages to create an effect of truly shitty aggression at the service of no descriptive or gestural agenda. The frequently applied label of "Abstract Expressionist" to describe these ersatz fecal smears misses the point rather widely. The anal libido is channeled in strange tragicomic directions. Although much has been made of the painted and scribbled violation of *Bed*, 1955, Rauschenberg rarely encountered a dead bird (or goat) whose face he didn't want to decorate with dribbles and dabs of viscous paint, in gestures that feel simultaneously tender and insulting toward their recipients. *Monogram* includes passages of this sort as well as a nasty tennis ball that sits behind the goat as if it had emerged quite recently from the animal's ass. Although this work has often been read as a parable of sex, the forlorn, tire-encircled goat stranded in the middle of a messy brown panel also suggests embarrassment not unlike that of a dog whose house-training has lapsed. Sexual content in the Combines is a matter of interpretation, present obliquely or as metaphor, but the scatological is often explicit subject matter. The palette of certain works is a dirty mix of black and brown, and two in particular bring this chromatic shit storm across the threshold of sublimation into direct awareness with their physical elements. *Talisman*, 1958, has a small aperture within which hangs a mason jar containing what looks for all the world like a bowel movement. *Kickback*, 1959, has embedded in its field of smeared paint part of a pair of filthy trousers that might be evidence of a total loss of sphincter control, a collapse of the most basic boundaries of the individual.

In our present situation, as we bury ourselves in garbage and slide toward irreversible climate change, any residual glibness one sees in

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Consider *Levee*, 1955, for example. The caption in the catalogue says that it is made of “oil, paper, printed paper, printed reproductions, fabric, and necktie on canvas.” Simple enough, but which is the canvas “on” which everything is grammatically affixed? Between a reproduction of a Cranach portrait and an image of a lake behind tree trunks, there is a dirty blank rectangle that seems to be carved into the work, as if something had been peeled away to reveal at its periphery a whole mattress of superimposed fabrics. It is hard enough trying to figure out what lies on what when looking at the crest of this stack of fabric, but this gap within the overall tissue prompts one to ask: Where does it stop? Is it, as Dr. Seuss would say, turtles all the way down?

Or look at *Untitled*, ca. 1955, with its flattened toy parachute and pendulous catenary strings. There seems at first to be a homogenous support on which very few objects or images are glued (the parachute, a dirty sock, a photo of a pair of birds, several small rectangles of monochrome fabric, and, at the top, a postcard of grazing cows): Peace at last! But repose is evasive. Several embroidered gaps within the fabric of the “support” (a long horizontal line along the top and a smaller vertical one at left), as well as thin margins on the left border, an empty rectangle at the bottom left corner, and a small square “hole” just above it, reveal the “real” ground to be a black canvas almost entirely covered by the collage elements. This foray into the recesses of the material support is also matched in the reverse direction: We soon realize that another portion of the fabric with the embroidered gaps (identified as a tablecloth by the accompanying wall label) is pasted next to the dirty sock, and, furthermore, the staccato pattern of the gaps has been mimicked in a line of light blue paint traversing the picture from edge to edge. The piling up stops there, but it could go on. For a good while, all of Rauschenberg’s “supports” were patchworks—or rather palimpsests—of excruciating complexity and varying assembly (sawing being almost as common as pasting), a practice that extended to his habit of partially obscuring his collaged photographs behind veils of translucent fabric or wash. Again and again, the peekaboo trap is laid, leaving us always to wonder what lies beneath.

Rauschenberg’s layering of the material “support” is ubiquitous until 1959. (There are a few exceptions, of course, notably *Factum I* and *Factum II*, both of 1957, but there the doubling of the canvases and the elements within them displaces the problem of the ground.) I say “ubiquitous,” but I might also have said *essential*, for, above all, the physical superimpositions are the key to the Combines’ success—they are what lend the works their dynamism and mystery. Why? Because in performing materially for us the children’s game of topping hands, which fascinated Barthes, this layering forces our reading to participate in the play. Speaking about the act of reading a text, Barthes envisioned two systems. The first “goes straight to the articulations of the anecdote, it considers the extent of the text, ignores the play of language” (this type of reading, for him, is prompted by Jules Verne). Barthes continued:

The other reading skips nothing; it weighs, it sticks to the text, it reads, so to speak, with application and transport, grasps at every point in the text the asyndeton which cuts the various languages—and not the anecdote: it is not (logical) extension that captivates it, the winnowing out of truths, but the layering of significance; as in the children’s game of topping hands, the excitement comes not from a

progressive haste but from a kind of vertical din (the verticality of language and of its destruction); it is at the moment when each (different) hand skips over the next (and not after the other) that the hole, the gap, is created and carries off the subject of the game—the subject of the text.

This mode of reading, concludes Barthes, “is the one suited to the modern text, the limit-text,” that is, the non-narrative text. The myopic grazing that Rauschenberg’s Combines invite is of the same order.

I cannot date precisely when Rauschenberg’s Combines abandoned the game of topping hands, but my guess is that the act of painting onstage in October 1959, during the performance of Allan Kaprow’s *18 Happenings in 6 Parts*, constituted a major turn away from the slow process of accumulation that had presided over his art during the preceding years. And in *First Time Painting*, also executed onstage in 1961, I find a confirmation that speed was of the essence in the new mode. Two major features characterize this approach: The support is now unified, a perfectly smooth blank canvas (even if, as in the “Summer Rental” series of 1960, a horizontal black line alludes, *trompe l’oeil* style, to a seam), and the paint, applied in broad brushstrokes of often garish colors—à la third-generation AbEx—is no longer in quotation marks. The two features are not only coeval but intricately linked. Once the support is nothing more than a neutral surface of projection and the moving brush nothing more than the prolongation of one’s arm, no heterogeneous, imported element can have enough weight to materially destabilize the unity of the picture plane. This is why I find all the objects grafted on the late Combines, no matter how protruding, strangely inactive, and perhaps all the more so if they themselves are destined to move like the electric fans of *Pantomime*, 1961, or the clocks of the “Time Paintings” from that year. By returning to its traditional role of neutral receptacle, by redeeming the homogeneity that had been so effectively undermined, the ground sutures all gaps and, to my mind at least, depletes the late Combines of any energy, despite the fact that their painterly gestures are done with ever more bravado. Once again, there are exceptions among the post-1959 Combines: I’ve already mentioned *Black Market*, and I should point to *First Landing Jump*, also of 1961, in which the black cloth that occupies the upper portion of the work is sewed to the dirty tan fabric below. (It is perhaps not by chance that in these two examples the brushstrokes are far less conspicuous and in subdued colors.) But in general, the embeddedness of the ground is lost from 1959, a direction that the exhibition underlines by ending with *Gold Standard*, 1964, a freestanding folding screen whose mechanically articulated surface is as impenetrable a citadel as the Federal Reserve to which its smooth and shiny gold leaf (and title) seems to allude.

This was a dead end and Rauschenberg knew it. In fact, two years before, he had already made his next move in the first of the “Silkscreen Paintings,” a series that was coincident with the late, AbEx-like Combines and the origins of which can be found in the series of transfer drawings after Dante, dating from 1959 to 1960. For although the ground in the silk-screen works of the early ’60s would never relinquish the coherent identity it had regained after years of sabotage, neither would it function conspicuously as a mere receptacle. Rather, the transparency of the images and their superimposition would make the canvas into something more like photographic paper—the white of the support seeping into the highlights in the imagery—or, better,

something like the two plates of transparent glass between which Duchamp sandwiched his rebuses. Back to square one, in a sense. But that is another story. □

A CONTRIBUTING EDITOR OF *ARTFORUM*, YVE-ALAIN BOIS IS PROFESSOR OF ART HISTORY AT THE INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDY, PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY. (SEE CONTRIBUTORS.)

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the Combines is replaced by a creepy sense of prescience and a feeling that they might be analogous to both journalism and poetry. Almost all of them were made during the Eisenhower administration, when the consensus view of the United States as a heroic and positive force in the world went largely unchallenged. Although the vector of their evolution took Rauschenberg toward a deeper mining of the exploding mediasphere and a dematerialization of the physical syntax of his art, the Combines embody a then-not-obvious truth about the self-consuming economic and social system that was their support. As Fairfield Porter already observed in 1960, Rauschenberg “calls attention to the success of industrialism opposite the way the Bauhaus did, which saw industrialism as it wished to be seen.”

Porter went on to say that “Rauschenberg’s work has more personality than anything like it. Its weakness is that it tends to approach the chic.” This is a sharp observation to have been made years before elegance and good taste in art came to be defined by the likes of Twombly or Warhol, especially so coming from another artist who was basically sympathetic to what Rauschenberg was up to. (More reactionary observers also accused Rauschenberg of being lightweight and merely fashionable but these impressions can be dismissed in hindsight as the obligatory sour grapes built into the basic plotline of *avant-gardism*.) One feels that Porter was identifying a big problem in its incipient form. What’s clear is that whatever problem Rauschenberg’s superficial side may have become for the rest of us, it wasn’t too much of a problem for him. Once he figured out the general approach of the Combines, he made a lot of them, and a complicated by-product of this exhibition’s exhaustiveness is the confrontation with his reliance on pure style to achieve coherence in many of these works. The jarring specificity and sense of adventure of the great Combines is not mitigated by but must be understood in contrast with the insouciant artiness of many of the smaller works and the discomfiting sense that the entire enterprise could coalesce into one big dandified haze. Yet it was necessary for Rauschenberg to do all of this in order to do any of it, and ultimately one person’s masterpiece might well be another person’s provocative mess. The slightly embarrassing feeling of scattered attention, of someone working too hard, all too evident in the Guggenheim retrospective, is really the flip side of the unwillingness to self-censor and the defiance of any normative sense of the appropriate that allowed Rauschenberg to self-actualize. However vexing the problem of understanding his entire contribution may remain, the Combines merged the energies of their maker and their moment into mirrors reflecting the collective and windows onto exotic inner precincts, and their reverberations will be with us for a long time. □

CARROLL DUNHAM IS A NEW YORK-BASED ARTIST. (SEE CONTRIBUTORS.)