

RRFA 01: Robert Rauschenberg papers

Interviews: Black, L. D. / "Robert Rauschenberg" / Splash Magazine, 1985

SPLASH Magazine interview with Robert Rauschenberg

Feb./March, 1985

Q. First off, what would you like the general public to know about the impending Rauschenberg exhibition at the Ringling Museum of Art?

A. The Salvage Series is a direct byproduct of my collaboration with Trisha Brown and Laurie Anderson in "Set and Reset."

While I was in the process of silk screening the fabric for the costumes, (my photos of architectural details from streets of New York City) we had to put something under the sheer fabric to catch the excess ink. The chance compositions that were created from the process suggested to me that we should put canvas there. We did; I liked the results. It was rich raw material.

I let it develop into what is being recognized as the most recent change in my work. This is one example of why collaboration in all sorts of professions is so rewarding to me. (This is a formal thanks to Trisha, Laurie, and those wonderful dancers.)

Q. I know you've been doing a lot of traveling lately. Could you tell us something about that?

A. I've always done a lot of traveling. It's a way of collecting excuses for changing and fight the corrosion of style.

Presently my priority preoccupation is a 22-nations and all continent cultural odyssey named R.O.C.I. (Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange). Its goal is to promote peace through direct artistic contact and exchange. People are not the trouble, ignorance is.

Q. You seem to have always been easily distracted from the actual production of art. Is this because you simply need other outlets for your creative energy, or because you tend to see these other activities as being part of your art?

A. My wide range of activities in the arts, almost schizophrenic, is sponsored by my desire to broaden the concept of what art actually is. Curiosity is the main energy. If the world were sensitive and responsive enough, what we call art would only function as a memory.

Q. Do you agree with John Cage about indeterminate creation? For instance, do you consider his 4'33" to be analagous to your white paintings?

A. I didn't, but John did or someone writing about John. If the all white paintings (1951) were in any way responsible for such a beautiful work, I am very complimented. (4'33" is an instrumentally silent piece of sound.)

Q. Cage said that public opinion must not matter. You yourself have been particularly subjected to the vicissitudes of public opinion. How do you deal with rejection? Acceptance?

A. I deal with both of them about the same, with suspicion. The notion that there is such a thing as "the public" doesn't interest me. Vitality is in the individual. There may be groups of singular agreement or disagreement, but without information or communication or individual thoughtfulness. The concept of public is a cowardly fantasy.

Q. You had several intimate friendships with other painters. How did you resist the competitive urge?

A. Given the concept that creativity is alive in its uniqueness, how could there be room for competition? One direction leaves room for another and another, making experiences varied and life rich.

Q. Of all the artists in the New York School, you doubtless were influenced most by de Kooning. What do you feel you shared with him aesthetically? Perhaps a sense of affirmation?

A. This is not true. I had the lucky and rewarding opportunity in my aesthetic innocence to be in personal contact with the great artistic giants of our time, at a most critical point in their discovery and exposure. What I am talking about is the adolescence of American art as an international force. These enlightened, mature minds performed every night at the Cedar Bar in the village in New York. They were, as favorites, de Kooning, Kline, Newman, Pollack, Guston, Reinhardt, Tworlov and others. That included avant garde dancers, musicians and visiting foreign cultural celebrities. And, I almost forgot, some claim-jumping critics moving in on the first wave of notoriety.

Q. If someone dredged the Arno and recovered the pieces you discarded there, do you think they would still be your art, or his, or art at all?

A. I think by now it might be overwhelmingly the work of nature.

Q. What role do you think abstraction plays in your work?

A. I am never sure, even when I use it, what the word abstraction means. When an image from the real world is represented but the material, scale, color and form are pushed to the brink of non-recognition, is that abstract?

When a common, familiar object from the real world is displaced and considered in a totally foreign environment with a non-utilitarian function, is that abstract?

Q. Aside from canvases you have painted over, and other re-uses of media, have you ever used a completed work of your own as an element in a new work?

A. Yes, I've used my own photos in works since early 1950s, but only recently exclusively. My clothes, rags and artifacts and objects are and have been up for art grabs for works.

Q. Joseph Albers was your instructor at Black Mountain, but one could say that since he hardly taught any technique, and offered you little in the way of constructive criticism, indeed subjected you to such abuse that you considered yourself "Albers' dunce," that he taught you nothing at all. What is the role of an art teacher? If you were to teach art, what would you hope to instill in your pupils?

A. I have always considered Albers my greatest teacher. I learned from the exposure to his discipline that one could be certain and in control and remain right for the rest of his life, and it is a full time job. It is also a full time job to take chances, encourage curiosity, try things that you can't do and stop when you can. If you find the world exciting your work can communicate the hope for the future.

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Q. Plato, in his Republic preferred the work of the craftsman to the work of the artist, because the craftsman makes a copy of a perfect form and the artist makes a copy of a copy. Succeeding generations of artists seem to have overcome this criticism, making it clear that art is not a copy of anything. In view of modern art, and your own work in particular, what is the difference between the artist and the craftsman?

A. I think it is a matter of focus and experimental dedication. If the making of each work is the confrontation of a self- or material-inflicted challenge then the results must be art. How successfully, profoundly or originally one has dealt with the challenge determines the quality of the work. (Acceptable familiarity might accuse a "fine artist" of being a poor craftsman.)

(Note change in wording of question:)

Q. ~~Rxx~~ Would your definition of art differ from that of Marcel Duchamp?

A. I don't think so--his articulation is more scandalous, but after all he remains one of the greatest generals in an aesthetic revolution that continues. I think his questioning art right back to the bone, by idea and deed, will insist that he will always be contemporary and a permanent vigil against art fat.

Q. You seem to have a certain disregard for the end product of your own art. Is this because the art object is somehow eclipsed by the "moment of creation"?

A. My thrill is the trip, not the destination. The act of making one thing is the beginning of another thing. It would be easy for me to agree that I have done but one work and it is not finished. The housing and retrospective attention is a separate duty. (By the way, I am a collector myself.)

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Q. You were raised by fundamentalist Christian parents. How much, if anything, of those fundamentalist attitudes do you still retain?

A. This is hard for me to say, I imagine that I am probably blind to the most obvious ones. Sometimes I think that my use of nearly everything I can get a hold of might have some connection with the thrift and austerity that I grew up with, but that is offset by an uncontrollable appetite for excesses and exaggeration.

Q. You named your first litho press on Captiva after Janis Joplin, who came from the same town in Texas as you did. What did Joplin, and particularly her death, mean to you?

A. Janis was a dear friend of such fragile vulnerability, to be a constant concern. Our rapport was initiated by the first night we met (Max's Kansas City in New York City) when she sent a member of the band to fetch "the only other person to get out of Port Arthur." I named the press after her. I guess just to keep thinking about her, sort of a recycling of spirit. I also have a Siberian pup named "Tanya" after the late Tatyana Grosman, and a truck called "Dodge-M" after a dear dog that the Meyerhoffs had. (A free enrichment.)

Q. You have always loved contributing to the fields of music, dance and theatre. Recently, you designed the Talking Heads album "Speaking in Tongues." How did that come about?

A. It was arranged through friends that I met David Byrne at Jim Rosenquist's place in New York City. We liked each other. The "Talking Heads" are the greatest. It was an honor to be associated with them.

Q. Johns said that you had "invented more than any artist since Picasso," and it seems safe to say that you have been a kind of trailblazer throughout your career. Into what new directions or new media do you see art moving during the next few decades?

A. Forseeing new directions could be a great mistake. All one could measure is a lack, and suppose a fill. Any logical intent would deny the surprize of art and life. (Enjoy the confusion and entertain the unknown.)

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SALVAGE SERIES - TRISHA BROWN SET + RESET

1. First off, what would you like the general public to know about the impending Rauschenberg exhibition at the Ringling Museum of Art?
2. I know you've been doing a lot of traveling lately. Could you tell us something about that?
3. You seem to have always been easily distracted from the actual production of art. Is this because you simply need other outlets for your creative energy, or because you tend to see these other activities as being part of your art?
4. Do you agree with John Cage about indeterminate creation? For instance, do you consider his 4'33" to be analogous to your white paintings? *I DIDN'T BUT JOHN DID. IF THE WHIT. PAINTINGS WERE*
5. Cage said that public opinion must not matter. You yourself have been particularly subjected to the vicissitudes of public opinion. How do you deal with rejection? Acceptance?
6. You had several intimate friendships with other painters. How did you resist the competitive urge?
- ~~7. Like Picasso and Braque, you and Jasper Johns were intimately and regularly involved with each other's work; yet unlike them, the two of you were going in different directions artistically. Was it difficult to retain your individuality?~~
8. Of all the artists in the New York School, you doubtless were influenced most by de Kooning. What do you feel you shared with him aesthetically? Perhaps a sense of affirmation?
- ~~9. Wasn't the erased de Kooning drawing an act of patricide, as Tomkins said?~~
10. If someone dredged the Arno and recovered the pieces you discarded there, do you think they would still be your art, or his, or art at all?
11. What role do you think abstraction plays in your work?
- ~~12. Your work could hardly be called representational, yet you consistently use familiar objects and images, sometimes from other media, in your work. What part do these familiar images play?~~
13. Aside from canvasses you have painted over, and other re-uses of media, have you ever used a completed work of your own as an element in a new work? Copyright restrictions apply.

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MAGICIAN OF THOUGHT
LUCKY + REWARDING

ROCI

BROADEN
CONCEPT
OF ART
NOT TO PRODUCE
CURIOSITY IS
MAIN
INCENTIVE

ABOUT THE
SAME, THE POPULAR
NOTION THAT
THERE IS SUCH
A THING AS A
PUBLIC IS A
COURTLY
FANTASY

IN ANYWAY
RESPONSIBLE
FOR SUCH
A BEAUTIFUL
WORK, IN
COMPLIMENT

14. Josef Albers was your instructor at Black Mountain, but one could say that since he hardly taught any technique, and offered you little in the way of constructive criticism, indeed subjected you to such abuse that you considered yourself "Albers' dunce", that he taught you nothing at all. What is the role of an art teacher? If you were to teach art, what would you hope to instill in your pupils?

15. Plato, in his *Republic* preferred the work of the craftsman to the work of the artist, because the craftsman makes a copy of a perfect form and the artist makes a copy of a copy. Succeeding generations of artists seem to have overcome this criticism, making it clear that art is not a copy of anything. In view of modern art, and your own work in particular, what is the difference between the artist and the craftsman?

16. ~~How~~ would your definition of art differ from that of Marcel Duchamp?

17. You seem to have a certain disregard for the end product of your own art. Is this because the art object is somehow eclipsed by the "moment of creation"?

18. You were raised by fundamentalist Christian parents. How much, if anything, of those fundamentalist attitudes do you still retain?

~~19. Do you feel that you ever emulated the legendary lifestyle of Jackson Pollock? You certainly never emulated his art.~~

20. You named your first litho press on Captiva after Janis Joplin, who came from the same town in Texas as you did. What did Joplin, and particularly her death, mean to you?

21. You have always loved contributing to the fields of music, dance and theatre. Recently, you designed the Talking Heads album *Speaking in Tongues*. How did that come about?

~~22. Because your design for the Talking Heads album proved too costly for general distribution, the record company issued another version of the album, without your design, along with the more expensive version. In 1953, John Cage asked you to design a program for a series of performances of his works, which he decided not to use, for similar reasons. When you start a project, what importance do you give to the time, effort or expense it will involve?~~

23. Johns said that you had "invented more than any artist since Picasso," and it seems safe to say that you have been a kind of trailblazer throughout your career. Into what new directions or new media do you see art moving during the next few decades?

Thank you very much. Copyright restrictions apply.

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THE SALVAGE SERIES IS A DIRECT BY PRODUCT OF MY COLLABORATION WITH TRISHA BROWN AND LAURIE ANDERSON IN "SET AND RESET." WHILE I WAS IN THE PROCESS OF SILK SCREENING THE FABRIC FOR THE COSTUMES (MY PHOTOS OF ARCHITECTURAL DETAILS FROM STREETS OF N.Y.C.) WE HAD TO PUT SOMETHING UNDER THE SHEER FABRIC TO CATCH THE EXCESS INK. THE CHANCE COMPOSITIONS THAT WERE CREATED FROM THE PROCESS SUGGESTED TO ME THAT WE SHOULD PUT CANVAS THERE. WE DID I LIKED THE RESULTS. IT WAS RICH RAW MATERIAL. I LET IT DEVELOP INTO WHAT IS BEING RECOGNIZED AS THE MOST RECENT CHANGE IN MY WORK. THIS IS ONE EXAMPLE OF WHY COLLABORATION IN ALL SORTS OF PROFESSIONS IS SO REWARDING TO ME. (THIS IS A FORMAL THANKS TO TRISHA, LAURIE, AND THOSE WONDERFUL DANCERS)

② I'VE ALWAYS DONE A LOT OF TRAVELING,
IT'S A WAY OF COLLECTING EXCUSES
FOR CHANGING AND FIGHT THE
CORROSION OF STYLE.

PRESENTLY MY PRIORITY PREOCCUPATION
IS A 22 NATIONS + ALLCONTINENT
CULTURAL ODYSSEY NAMED R.O.C.I.
(RAUSCHENBERG OVERSEAS CULTURAL
INTERCHANGE). ITS GOAL IS TO
PROMOTE PEACE THROUGH DIRECT
ARTISTIC CONTACT AND EXCHANGE,
PEOPLE IS NOT THE TROUBLE
IGNORANCE IS.

③ MY WIDE RANGE OF ACTIVITIES IN
THE ARTS, ALMOST SCITZOPHRENIC,
IS SPONSERED BY MY DESIRE TO
BROADEN THE CONCEPT OF WHAT ART
ACTUALLY IS, CURIOSITY IS THE
MAIN ENERGY. IF THE WORLD WERE
SENSITIVE + RESPONSIVE ENOUGH,
WHAT WE CALL ART WOULD ONLY
FUNCTION AS A MEMORU.

④ I DIDN'T, BUT JOHN DID OR SOMEONE
WRITING ABOUT JOHN. IF THE ALL
WHITE PAINTINGS (1951) WERE IN
ANY WAY RESPONSIBLE FOR SUCH
A BEAUTIFULL WORK, I AM VERY
COMPLIMENTED. (4'33") IS A
INSTRUMENTALLY SILENT PIECE OF
SOUND)

5

I DEAL WITH BOTH OF THEM ABOUT THE SAME, WITH SUSPICION. THE NOTION THAT THERE IS SUCH A THING AS "THE PUBLIC" DOESN'T INTEREST ME. VITALITY IS IN THE INDIVIDUAL. THERE MAY BE GROUPS OF SINGULAR AGREEMENT OR DISAGREEMENT BUT WITHOUT INFORMATION OR COMMUNICATION OR INDIVIDUAL THOUGHTFULNESS. THE CONCEPT OF PUBLIC IS A COWARDLY FANTASY.

6

GIVEN THE CONCEPT THAT CREATIVITY IS ALIVE IN ITS UNIQUENESS HOW COULD THERE BE ROOM FOR COMPETITION. ONE DIRECTION LEAVES ROOM FOR ANOTHER AND ANOTHER, MAKING EXPERIENCES VARIED AND LIFE RICH.

8

THIS IS NOT TRUE. I HAD THE LUCKY + REWARDING OPPORTUNITY IN MY AESTHETIC INNOCENCE TO BE IN PERSONAL CONTACT WITH THE GREAT ARTISTIC GIANTS OF OUR TIME AT A MOST CRITICAL POINT IN THEIR DISCOVERY AND EXPOSURE. WHAT I AM TALKING ABOUT IS THE ADOLESCENCE OF AMERICAN ART AS AN INTERNATIONAL FORCE. THESE ENLIGHTENED MATURE MINDS PERFORMED EVERY NIGHT AT THE CEDAR BAR IN THE VILLAGE IN NEW YORK. THEY WERE, AS FAVORITES) DE KOONING, KLINE, NEWMAN, POLACK, GUSTIN, RHINHART, TWORKOV, AND OTHERS THAT INCLUDED AVANT GUARD DANCERS

MUSICIANS, AND VISITING FOREIGN CULTURAL CELEBRITIES, AND I ALMOST FORGOT, SOME CLAIM JUMPING CRITICS MOVING IN ON THE FIRST WAVE OF NOTORIETY.

⑩ I THINK BY NOW IT MIGHT BE OVER WHELMINGLY THE WORK OF NATURE.

⑪ I AM NEVER SURE, EVEN WHEN I USE IT, WHAT THE WORD 'ABSTRACTION' MEANS. WHEN AN IMAGE FROM THE REAL WORLD IS REPRESENTED BUT THE MATERIAL, SCALE, COLOR AND FORM ARE PUSHED TO THE BRINK OF NONRECOGNITION, IS THAT ABSTRACT? WHEN A COMMON, FAMILIAR OBJECT FROM THE REAL WORLD IS DISPLACED AND CONSIDERED IN A TOTALLY FOREIGN ENVIRONMENT WITH A NON UTILITARIAN FUNCTION IS THAT ABSTRACT?

⑬ YES, I'VE USED MY OWN PHOTOS IN WORKS SINCE EARLY 50'S BUT ONLY RECENTLY EXCLUSIVELY. MY CLOTHES, RAGS AND ARTIFACTS AND OBJECTS ARE AND HAVE BEEN UP FOR ART GRABS FOR WORKS.

14

I HAVE ALWAYS CONSIDERED ALBERS MY GREATIST TEACHER. I LEARNED FROM THE EXPOSURE TO HIS DISCIPLINE THAT ONE COULD BE CERTAIN AND IN CONTROL AND REMAIN RIGHT FOR THE REST OF THEIR LIFE, AND IT IS A FULL TIME JOB. IT IS ALSO A FULL TIME JOB TO TAKE CHANCES, ENCOURAGE CURIOSITY, TRY THINGS THAT YOU CAN'T DO, AND STOP WHEN YOU CAN. IF YOU FIND THE WORLD EXCITING YOUR WORK CAN COMMUNICATE THE HOPE FOR THE FUTURE.

15

I THINK IT IS A MATTER OF FOCUS AND EXPERIMENTAL DEDICATION. IF THE MAKING OF EACH WORK IS THE CONFRONTATION OF A SELF OR MATERIAL INFLECTED CHALLENGE THEN THE RESULTS MUST BE ART. HOW SUCCESSFULLY, PROFOUNDLY OR ORIGINALLY ONE HAS DEALT WITH THE CHALLENGE DETERMINES THE QUALITY OF THE WORK. (ACCEPTABLE FAMILIARITY MIGHT ACCUSE A "FINE ARTIST" OF BEING A POOR CRAFTSMAN.)

16

I DON'T THINK SO - HIS ARTICULATION IN MORE SCANDALOUS, BUT AFTER ALL HE REMAINS ONE OF THE GREATEST GENERALS IN AN AESTHETIC REVOLUTION THAT CONTINUES.

I THINK HIS QUESTIONING ART
RIGHT BACK TO THE BONE, BY IDEA
AND DEED, WILL INSIST THAT HE
WILL ALWAYS BE CONTEMPORARY
AND A PERMANANT VIGIL ABANST
ART FAT.

17

MY THRILL IS THE TRIP NOT THE
DESTINATION. THE ACT OF MAKING
ONE THING IS THE BEGINNING OF
ANOTHER THING. IT WOULD BE
EASY FOR ME TO AGREE THAT I HAVE
DONE BUT ONE WORK AND IT IS
NOT FINNISHED. THE HOUSEING
AND RETROSECTIVE ATTENTION IS A
SEPARATE DUTY. (BY THE WAY I AM
A COLLECTOR MY SELF)

18

THIS IS HARD FOR ME TO SAY, I
IMAGINE THAT I AM PROBABLY BLIND
TO THE MOST OBULOUS ONES.
SOMETIMES I THINK THAT MY USE OF
NEARLY EVERYTHING I CAN GET A
HOLD OF MIGHT HAVE SOME CONNECTION
WITH THE THRIFT AND AUSTERITY THAT
I GREW UP WITH, BUT THAT IS OFFSET
BY AN UNCONTROLLABLE APPETITE
FOR EXCESSES AND EXAGGERATION.

20

JANIS WAS A DEAR FRIEND OF SUCH
FRAGILE VULNERBILITY, TO BE A
CONSTANT CONCERN. OUR RAPORTE
WAS INITIATED BY THE FIRST NIGHT
WE MET (MAX'S KANSAS CITY, NYC) WHEN

SHE SENT A MEMBER OF THE BAND TO
FETCH THE ONLY OTHER PERSON TO GET
OUT OF PORT ARTHUR. I NAMED THE
PRESS AFTER HER. I GUESS JUST
TO KEEP THINKING ABOUT HER, SORT
OF A RECYCLING OF SPIRIT. I ALSO HAVE
A SIBERIAN PUP NAMED "TANYA" AFTER
THE LATE TATIYANA GROSSMAN AND A TRUCK
CALLED "DODGE-M" AFTER A DEAR DOG THAT
THE MURHOFES HAD. (A FREE ENRICHMENT)

(21)

IT WAS ARRANGED THROUGH FRIENDS
THAT I MET DAVID BYRNE AT
JIM ROSENQUISTS PLACE IN N.Y.C.
WE LIKED EACH OTHER. THE "TALKING
HEADS" ARE THE GREATEST. IT WAS
AN HONOR TO BE ASSOCIATED WITH
THEM.

(23)

FORSEEING NEW DIRECTIONS COULD
BE A GREAT MISTAKE, ALL ONE
COULD MEASURE IS A LACK, AND
SUPPOSE A FILL, ANY LOGICAL
INTENT WOULD DENY THE
SURPRIZE OF ART AND LIFE.
(ENJOY THE CONFUSION AND
ENTERTAIN THE UNKNOWN)

- ① Salvage Series
- ⑪ ? is "Abstraction"
- ⑭ What Allées taught PR
- ⑮ Marcel Duchamp
Art Definition
- * ⑰ Making Art vs. sub product
- ⑳ Jarvis Joptim (+press)
+ Tanga + Dodge-M.

↑
GOOD STUFF

bj. separate
subjects

INTERVIEW TOPICS

> SALVAGE SERIES

- > philosophies
- > competition
- > EARLY influences
- > ART in ARNO RIVER
- > 'abstraction'
- > Albers' influence
- > ARTIST VS. CRAFTSMAN
- > Duchamp
- > parental influence
- > JANIS JOPLIN
- > FUTURE OF ART