

Undrinking the River Lethe or Remembering to Subvert: Two Drawings by Robert Rauschenberg

HELEN HSU

A critical election year stimulated political engagement, rallied activism, and spurred protest. Endemic inequalities in American society provoked uprisings plagued by violence. The regime of law and order forced to the surface the problem of police brutality. A series of high-profile shootings ignited a national debate on gun control. The sports arena became a stage for decrying racial and social injustice. The year was 1968.¹

That year comedian and civil rights activist Dick Gregory (1932–2017) ran for president as an independent, largely write-in candidate.² His appearance in two drawings by Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008) from 1968 motivates a comparative study of these works and further consideration of the solvent transfer technique used to create them. At the far right edge of *Bagged* (1968), in a private collection (Fig. 1),³ Gregory's mirror image peers out, with a grave expression, between headline and caption inscriptions of his name. The double identification of Gregory in this drawing insists on the specificity of the figure, an infrequent device in Rauschenberg's process, which usually favored decontextualized obscurity. In *Untitled* (1968), in the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, New York (Fig. 2),⁴ an enlarged close-up of Gregory's face, unnamed in this instance, dominates the left side of the drawing and stands out as the most pigment-saturated element. The identification of the printed sources transferred in both *Bagged* and *Untitled* (e.g., Fig. 3) drives the discussion of the

time signatures of these drawings and how they register their historical milieu. From this perspective, the solvent transfer technique—which Rauschenberg first discovered in 1952, but did not fully exploit until 1958—engages the artist's materials (print mass media) in a critically discursive manner. The resulting drawings present webs of interpretive temptations and collections of images and facts that tease recognition, inviting viewers to participate in the creative process.

STREAMING MEDIA

To make solvent transfer drawings, Rauschenberg applied turpentine or lighter fluid (Ronseal was his solvent of choice by 1968) to magazine and newspaper extracts in order to dissolve the printed matter. He then placed the materials face down on the drawing surface and rubbed the backs with a stylus. A striated mirror image was transferred to the paper with varying density depending on the tightness or looseness of the artist's hatching. The result is inherently degraded, with residual ink left on the original substrate and negative threads where the stylus did not make contact, showing in the final drawing as visual static. Rauschenberg sequentially transferred individual images, often from different sources, to build accretions of manually scanned patches. His friend, composer John Cage (1912–1992), described the effect as “many television sets working simultaneously all tuned differently.”⁵ Superimpositions, low-resolution effects of the process, and tactical blocking



Figure 2 (above)

ROBERT
RAUSCHENBERG

Untitled, 1968

New York, Robert
Rauschenberg
Foundation (©
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Foundation)

Figure 3 (right)

“The Shift from
Moderates to
Militants: A
Separate Path to
Equality, Search for
a Black Past, Part
IV,” *Life*, 65, no.
24, 13 December
1968, pp. 86–87
(detail)



York.⁶ As in the *Inferno* of Dante (1265–1321), the title of the present essay poaches a feature from the Classical Greek underworld: the River Lethe, which causes the dead who drink its waters to forget their lives and pass peacefully into the thereafter. Solvent transfer enacts a similar function in which images and text are displaced from their original context and scrubbed of their appointed use. However, the wash into oblivion is incomplete. The past life of the printed fragment clings, if only in the recognition that the transfer was lifted from a mass-media source elsewhere. Figures, places, and objects approach and elude recognition, depending on the ever-changing drift of historical currency and contemporary literacy, which vary from one viewer to the next. Every element is multivalent and swings perpetually between the specific and the generic. Identification of the source materials augments interpretive possibilities by overcoming the cognitive stutter of incomplete transmission. It does not, however, provide solutions or even keys to the art works, merely additional information.

The drawings are assemblages of appropriated fragments, picked from the ubiquitous newspapers and coffee table glossies that mark the daily, weekly, and monthly passage of time. These mass-media organs assume the mirror and window metaphors of the illusionistic picture plane; they confirm the reader's experience of contemporaneity, while delivering information—both verbal and visual—on distant or other realities. Rauschenberg used as art media these manifold representations and mediations to access the world, an external social, cultural, and political sphere, as well as the one synthesized by the images and texts themselves; lived actualities, set in parallel with and in contradistinction to reported events. The drawings hypostatize the theories of Roland Barthes (1915–1980), who in 1967 declared the death of the author (artist) as the simultaneous birth of the reader (viewer), describing the text (art work) as “a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable

centres of culture.”⁷ Rauschenberg long favored the priority of the viewer and the creative labor of encountering and engaging with an art work.⁸ His ethos was consonant with Barthes' observation of the evolving relationship between art and its public. This direction absorbed and conveyed a pervasive post-war disposition: anti-authoritarianism focused on the development of emancipated subjectivity. Citation, as action and element, is a critical medium of Rauschenberg's drawings, by which he collected and remade pieces of the mediated world. The resulting images, dissimulated in the process, are finally interstitial, at once coming into view and disappearing from sight.

Outside of the *Dante* suite, Rauschenberg's solvent transfer drawings, unwedded to any program, wander the mediascape with visual, rhetorical, and allusive abandon. While the emergence of recurring motifs reveals the artist's preferences and preoccupations, motivations for image selection and how the transfers were deployed vary widely from one drawing to another. In *Bagged*, Gregory's small black-and-white headshot floats discretely in an open field and is clearly named to confirm his identity. By contrast, in *Untitled*, Gregory's enormous face, significantly outscaling the other figures in the drawing, appears anonymous, but may be described as “speaking.” The source image, from a *Life* magazine feature dated 13 December 1968 (see Fig. 3), confirms that the scraps of text transferred above the face quote Gregory himself. Discernible phrases, in mirror reverse, include “won't conform to society's old image,” “we will free ourselves from our hangups,” and “it's just a word to fascinate white folks who enjoy denouncing it,” broadcast from the counterculture and civil rights struggle of 1968. Did Rauschenberg count on the contemporary popularity of Gregory to prompt viewer recognition of the source? Or was the macrocephalic form the principle matter? It joins a horizontal lineup spanning the central width of the drawing that displays a demonstration of scale, from left: tiny, large, medium, and small. Photographic literacy understands all of these figures to be in the range of human size and their varying appearance the effect of focal length, lens

angle, and layout magnification. The manipulation of art makes Gregory a giant and the couple at left Lilliputian. Based on the dates of the source materials, it is likely but not certain that *Bagged* (early September 1968) was completed before *Untitled* (December 1968). Candidate Gregory returns post-November election as citizen Gregory.

Tracing source imagery is not merely an iconographical exercise, but a recovery of historical memory. In the process, one encounters the origins, at once secret and public, of the drawings and gains access to latent content and veiled immanences. Reluctant to discuss his methods and sources, details that divert the viewer from direct visual engagement with the art work, Rauschenberg eagerly granted permission to see and interpret beyond the constraints of the artist's consciousness. He characterized his working process as "always closer to a *collaboration* with materials than to any kind of conscious manipulation and control," even deprecating the artist's subjectivity, "I don't want a painting to be just an expression of my personality.... I feel it ought to be much better than that."⁹ He delighted in the independent, even anarchic, quality of his media, "It seems to me it's just a kind of friendly relationship with your material where you want them for what they are rather than for what you could make out of them."¹⁰ Emancipated from the artist's will, the art works become autonomous,

"intentions...frequently get lost and a painting takes on an interest and character of its own."¹¹ And if the artist's validation is still needed to authorize interpretation, Rauschenberg would later give full license, "Anything you see is what I intend."¹² *Bagged* and *Untitled* contain potent registrations of the tumult of 1968, an inherent effect of his chosen source materials. While the debate continues regarding how closely the images can be held to their original identities and contexts, as well as how those origins may or may not be brought to bear on their final instrumentalization and transmutation in the drawings, the tracing of source material opens a vital channel of inquiry.¹³ Rauschenberg's appropriated excisions of mass media content—their attendant histories, problematics, and tangents in tow—ceaselessly tempt revelation and identification.

FIT TO PRINT

Rauschenberg drew nearly all of the imagery and text in *Bagged* from the 4 September 1968 Gulf Coast edition of the *Miami Herald*. The next day's *Herald* provided the Dixie Crystals sugar ad (Fig. 4), transferred at the top edge, right of center, with the tagline "IN THE BAG," from which the drawing (Fig. 5) derives its title.¹⁴ The (red, white, and blue) crossed Dixie Crystals logo piggybacks on the Confederate saltire. If the brand name, featuring a quaint sobriquet for the American South, does not

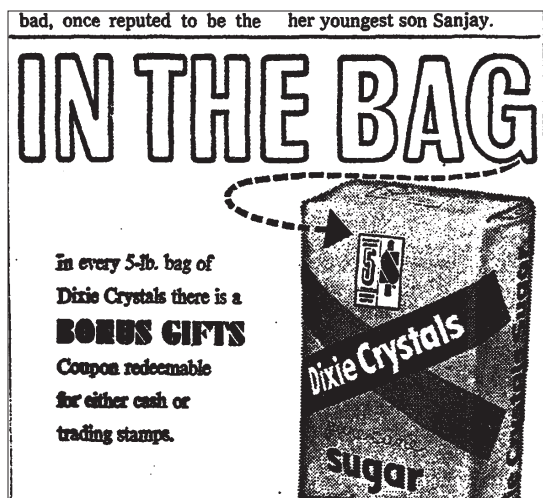


Figure 4 (left)

Dixie Crystals sugar ad, *Miami Herald*, 5 September 1968, Gulf Coast Edition

Figure 5 (right)

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG

Detail of Figure 1

Private Collection
(© 2019 Robert Rauschenberg Foundation)

insinuate the resemblance—manifestation rather—then the nearby headline about George Wallace (1919–1998) hammers home the point. Typeset in three lines, *Wallace Here / To Enjoy Sun / Says He'll Win* reads like a miscounted haiku, referring to the former Alabama governor's third party presidential bid. The phrase condenses the hubris of Icarus into the clipped newspeak of the information age. It also echoes the timbre of “*IN THE BAG*,” a vernacular boast for a presumed sure thing, the counting of unhatched chickens. Even though Wallace posed no real threat in the election, the strength of his campaign, logging over 13% of the popular vote, startled mainstream America and galvanized white supremacists. Behind the slogan “Stand up for America” resounded the words from his 1963 gubernatorial inauguration speech, “segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever.” A few months into his governorship, the police in Birmingham would unleash dogs and turn firehoses on peaceful protesters demonstrating against Jim Crow discrimination.¹⁵ Five years later, Wallace ran for the highest office in the United States, a fact embedded in *Bagged*.

Situated directly below the Wallace tercet, the Gregory passage (triply articulated by headline, headshot, and caption) appears as the opposition in a marquee battle. While Gregory's presidential run was even more improbable, might his emphatic appearance as the only figure who is both named and pictured in the drawing indicate the artist's political allegiance? Rauschenberg joined

a list of supporters of the progressive anti-war candidate Eugene McCarthy, published as a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times* of 12 August 1968. By the time Rauschenberg created *Bagged*, Vice President Hubert Humphrey (1911–1978) had won the Democratic nomination, pushing McCarthy out of the race. Regardless, Rauschenberg freed Gregory from the original headline, *Gregory Still in Jail, Only One of 583* (Fig. 6), referring to his detention during the recent Democratic National Convention protests in Chicago. The edit prioritized his candidacy over his controversial activism, perhaps heeding the front page news story in the same *Miami Herald* that reported civil disorder as the top issue concerning Florida voters.

While words were present in Rauschenberg's work from the time of his earliest drawings, there was a marked profusion of topical headlines in the 1968 solvent transfer works.¹⁶ What had previously appeared as scanning chatter became coherent messages. The embedding of loaded text capsules in Rauschenberg's 1968 drawings signaled a heightened consciousness of an epochal time of geopolitical upheaval; an atmosphere of revolutionary ecstasy fueled political, discursive, and cultural excesses. The decade that began with the Kennedy administration ended with that of Nixon. The hope in a compassionate and enlightened citizenry that would cooperate to achieve racial reconciliation, expressed in the 1962 warning from James Baldwin (1924–1987)

Figure 6


“Gregory Still in Jail, Only One of 583,” *Miami Herald*, 4 September 1968, Gulf Coast Edition

Wed., Sept. 4, 1968
THE MIAMI HERALD
3-A

Gregory Still in Jail, Only One of 583

CHICAGO — (AP) — Civil rights activist Dick Gregory is the only person left in jail of the 583 persons arrested in demonstrations last week during the Democratic National Convention, a spokesman for the Chicago Legal Defense Committee says.

“As far as



GREGORY

we know everyone is out,” the spokesman said. “Now, there may have been one or two lost in the shuffle, but we don't know of any.”

Gregory, who submitted voluntarily to arrest Thursday night when he tried to pass through a police blockade at the end of a line of marchers, has refused bail.

Most of the 583 arrested were charged with disorderly conduct and some with resisting arrest. About 75 per

cent of the bail bonds set were for \$25, the spokesman said.

However, bonds ranged as high as \$25,000 in some cases.

The majority of the arrests were made Wednesday and Thursday nights after confrontations between demonstrators and police. Both nights the demonstrators massed in Grant Park across Michigan Avenue from the Conrad Hilton Hotel, conven-

tion headquarters.

Other arrests were made Sunday, Monday and Tuesday nights when demonstra-


tors on the North Side defied an 11 p.m. curfew in Lincoln Park and were routed by police.

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of the “fire next time,”¹⁷ was dissipated by the conflagrations of civil uprisings in 1967. If Bob Dylan (b. 1941) rhapsodized about “The Times They Are A-Changin’” in 1964, by 1968 the Beatles were singing wryly about “Revolution.” *Bagged* contains simultaneous reports of war in Vietnam, famine in Biafra, the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, and earthquakes in Puerto Rico, Turkey, and Iran, all from the same day’s news. This dissonant chorus condenses and distills from the dense grids that structure mass-mediated information into parcels of column inches, fractional pages, and full spreads. Rauschenberg’s deconstruction focused a state of unrest, even emergency, an accumulation of facts conveying the dire exigency that propelled demands for reform, if not revolution.

The entire spectrum of heterogeneous content was available to Rauschenberg’s voracious eye, attuned to a particular understanding of the social condition of the artist. As he asserted in a text celebrating his friend, painter Öyvind Fahlström (1928–1976):

*The logical or illogical relationship between one thing and another is no longer a gratifying subject to the artist as the awareness grows that even in his most devastating or heroic moment he is part of the density of an uncensored continuum that neither begins with nor ends with any decision or action of his.*¹⁸

Rauschenberg’s perspective, written in 1961 and published in 1964, characterized contemporary subjectivity, one that moved through the world with greater and lesser degrees of agency, constrained and channeled by the social fabric into which one is woven and one also weaves. Further remarks in his appreciation of Fahlström reflect his own process:

The use of the familiar is obscure, the use of the exotic is familiar. Neither sacrifices completely its origin, but the mind has to travel to follow just as the eye has to change to focus. In the end a viewed painting has been an invitation not a command.... There is no separation between the literal and literary. No competition exists

*between the physical character of the materials and the function of the signs. Both remain lively impure.*¹⁹

Rauschenberg assembled his own art works as optimized occasions for the flights of thought and modulations of sight he so highly valued. All the elements in a work cross-fertilize and cross-contaminate so that nothing is one thing. With utmost regard for the viewer, he released the work to elicit rather than direct their experience and welcomed the idea that its meaning would escape his control.

In a rare statement of purpose, Rauschenberg provided an explanatory note for his 1970 *Syn-Tex* series,²⁰ comprised predominantly of news-print collage:

*The image and the word cooperate to construct a flat re-reading of the facts plus familiar passing insignificancies that control our day. Information, originally engaged in a daily rhetorical screen to eliminate as much direct feeling and response as possible, re-exposed to encourage consideration.*²¹

A variation on these operations was already at work in the previous solvent transfer drawings. They were poetic rather than flat rereadings of the media, both significant and trivial, intended to re-expose heterogeneous content to further examination. If the intrusion of headlines in 1968 heralded an escalation of Rauschenberg’s engagement with print media, the move to literal collage two years later marked what might be called his *annus politicus*, in which he made *Studies for Currents* and *Signs*, as well as the inaugural Earth Day poster (all 1970).²² In 1968, the ambiguities, obscurities, and distortions of solvent transfer were still compatible with Rauschenberg’s rising consciousness. After all, re-presentations—the (bracketed or framed) repetitions that call for another look—are recreations that include strokes of interpretation. Various gestures of support or disdain, expressions of desire or animus, selections of form or content, these appropriations are approached by the viewer with his or her own calibrations for these sliding scales. Now at a remove of more than fifty years, when recent history is conceived of in decades, *Bagged* and *Untitled*



compellingly evoke the social, cultural, and political moment in which they were made.

Alternatively, one can look to passages that transcend the drawings' time signatures. In the lower right half of *Bagged* (Fig. 7), a triangulation of three female figures from progressive phases of life—a little girl, a young woman, and an elderly matron, sequenced in this order in the newspaper on pages 2A (Fig. 8), 4A (Fig. 9), and 10A (Fig. 10)—stages the classical allegory of the Three Ages of Man. The three watches at bottom right, emblems of time and mortality (Fig. 11), further suggest this trajectory. One might think of the oft-painted narrative of the *Three Ages and Death* (1541–44) by Hans Baldung Grien (1484–1545), in the Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid (Fig. 12),²³ which features a woman as protagonist.²⁴ Informed by the source context, the girl and the young woman are captured *in extremis*. The former has lost her family and her home in a major earth-

Figure 7 (above)

ROBERT
RAUSCHENBERG

Detail of Figure 1

Private Collection
(© 2019 Robert
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Figure 8 (right)

"Little Girl
Carries Water Jug
Amid Ruins,"
Miami Herald, 4
September 1968,
Gulf Coast Edition,
p. 2A

Little Girl Carries Water Jug Amid Ruins
... she lost her entire family



Girl Who Ignored the Curfew in Berkley Is Carried Away by Police
... city manager has prohibited 'loitering' on Telegraph Avenue between 8 p.m. and 6 a.m.

Figure 9 (above)

"Girl Who Ignored the
Curfew in Berkley [sic]
Is Carried Away by
Police," *Miami Herald*,
4 September 1968,
Gulf Coast Edition,
p. 4A



... She Remembers Log Cabins, Log Church
... Mrs. Louise Prescott of Chaloute

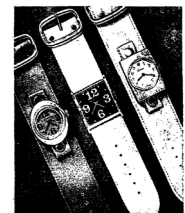


Figure 10 (upper
right)

"She Remembers
Log Cabins, Log
Church," *Miami
Herald*, 4 September
1968, Gulf Coast
Edition, p. 10A

Figure 11 (above)

Ad for watches,
Miami Herald, 4
September 1968,
Gulf Coast Edition



Figure 12 (left)

HANS BALDUNG
GRIEN

Three Ages and
Death, 1541–44

Madrid, Museo
Nacional del Prado



Figure 13 (right)

THOMAS
GAINSBOROUGH

Cottage Girl, 1785

Dublin, National
Gallery of Ireland

quake in Iran; the latter is being arrested for an act of civil disobedience in Berkeley, having violated a curfew intended to deter protesters. The octogenarian (see Fig. 10) is the subject of a human interest story featuring the anachronistic charms of an off-the-beaten-path Florida town. The arc of life extracted from a single day's news elegantly retraces the riddle of the Sphinx from the Classical Greek legend, source of the Three Ages allegory: What is the creature that walks on four legs in the morning, two legs at noon, and three in the evening? Confluences like this reveal a facility in Rauschenberg's handling of materials that he was reluctant to admit. ("I always have a good reason for taking something out but I never have one for putting something in.")²⁵ Cage provided an illuminating appreciation, "I must say he never forces a situation. He is like that butcher whose knife never became dull simply because he cut with it in such a way that it never encountered an obstacle."²⁶ Returning to the work to discern this fine process, one finds other allusions and alternative juxtapositions.

Look again and the perversely picturesque (photograph of the) earthquake victim (see Fig. 8) bears a family resemblance to the *Cottage Girl* (1785) by Thomas Gainsborough (1727–1788), in the National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin (Fig. 13),²⁷ inviting consideration of representations of

misfortune, whose conventions lead to the concept of poverty and disaster porn. Rauschenberg later expressed his unease with these types of images, “*Life* magazine would have at least four pages of beautiful color photographs of bombings and burnings and you look at it and it is incredible yellows and reds. That sort of thing stops the horror.”²⁸ Look again at the young woman in the clutches of two policemen (see Fig. 9): they become a coerced *ménage à trois* that evokes the title *Bagged* as slang for sexual conquest. This endangered, but resisting figure resonates with the anti-establishment clashes of the day. Without the mooring of the original context, this image could also read as its antithesis—the police capturing a radical domestic terrorist. After all, Charles Manson (1934–2017) was at this moment recruiting young women into his “family,” as he would refer to his violent cult, and Valerie Solanas (1936–1988) had only three months earlier shot Andy Warhol (1928–1987). Look again and the polka-dot-sporting grandmother (see Fig. 10) becomes a surrogate for Dora Rauschenberg (1902–1999), the artist’s

mother, further suggested by the precise perching of the image above Rauschenberg’s signature.²⁹ According to art historian Lewis Kachur:

*The most consistent feature in Rauschenberg’s oeuvre is that meaning is not unitary, but multiple. There is often no dominant theme, but rather three or four thematic clusters ricocheting off one another. ...Rauschenberg is at the beginning of a new mode: polysemous, fragmentary, conditional, relative.*³⁰

The drawings are screens of contingency, surfaces that receive and project. Multivalences and diverse possibilities abound not only for the images, but also for the permutational relationships among them.

Look again. In *Untitled* (see Fig. 2), Dick Gregory is joined by Malcolm X (1925–1965), Merce Cunningham (1919–2009), and Hieronymus Bosch (c. 1450–1516), the latter via a detail from his *Garden of Earthly Delights* (1490–1500), in the Prado, Madrid,³¹ arguably making him, from the perspective of half a century later, the most obscure figure

Figure 14

“The shift from moderates to militants: A SEPARATE PATH TO EQUALITY,” from “Search for a Black Past, Part IV,” *Life*, 65, no. 24, 13 December 1968, pp. 82–83



Figure 15

ROBERT
RAUSCHENBERG

Detail of Figure 2

New York, Robert
Rauschenberg
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of the group. The picture of Malcolm X, occupying the center of the drawing, is still recognizable in 2019. His image is pulled from a *Life* magazine feature that profiled him as a forerunner of Black Power and champion of African-American psychological emancipation (Fig. 14). In 1968, three years after Malcolm's death, his image in *Untitled* (Fig. 15) is both icon and cipher. Malcolm's "X" transmits via dual frequencies, as defiant repudiation of what he called a slave name and as triumphant declaration of the self. His is an affirmative negation in the way that non-violent protest projects a resounding refusal. Contemplated as a rebus, Malcolm's figure resolves, in one instance, to "X," as the image might be abstracted if it escaped recognition, linking the central passage of *Untitled* to a recurring graphic device in Rauschenberg's oeuvre.³² It recalls the prominent "X" in one of his first transfer drawings, *Untitled (Mirror)* (1952), in the Museum of Modern Art, New York (Fig. 16).³³ The word "mirror" carries the art-historical baggage of one model for the illusionistic picture plane and underscores the inversion principle of solvent transfer. Ripped from the tabloid *New York Daily Mirror* masthead, it is doubly reflexive. Concurring with art historian Ed Krěma's characterization of *Untitled (Mirror)* as a visual manifesto of the solvent transfer technique, one can also extend his discussion of the "X" beyond notions of error and cancellation.³⁴ It contains a spectrum



Figure 16

ROBERT
RAUSCHENBERG

Untitled (Mirror),
1952

New York, Museum
of Modern Art
(© 2019 Robert
Rauschenberg
Foundation)

of signification that can symbolize the unknown, mark a goal, and denote an ineffable but perceived quality. In mathematics, it stands for multiplication. Lodged in the heart of *Untitled* is a commemorative image of an assassinated icon, whose self-proclaimed “X” issues myriad associations and possibilities, activating the field of the drawing.

One of the principal effects of solvent transfer is mirror transposition. Tipped across a reflecting plane, the original image becomes other, potentiating multiple valences of inversion: reversal, negation, estrangement, and complementarity. As (self-)reflections of the sources, the transfers exist in a condition of split custody between Rauschenberg’s use and their original context. According to critic Dore Ashton (1928–2017):

The very technique of the transfer is significant. By penciling the back of a reproduction, R transfers his image. All transactions change one thing into another. He creates the equivalent of a mirror image; it is seen in reverse and dimmed; it is not exactly what it was, and yet carries the thought of the reality inexorably. The black-leaded mirror of the Renaissance, smoking the features, wavering. It is reality, but in reverse. So it is with the collage technique which R simultates [sic] in this series. ...Double, triple, quadruple illusions.³⁵

Rauschenberg transformed the images with his process: a re-mediation of mediated representations through an anonymized form of manual mark-making that prioritizes the artist’s choice of image and juxtaposition of chosen images as the act of creative labor, extending the iconoclasm of the readymade. Solvent transfer sabotages the mechanically reproduced image by interposing a series of delinquent maneuvers. This performative delinquency begins with a heist on the mass media delivered via a deauthorized hand, hastily sweeping to and fro. Images arrive in the drawings faded, frayed, and disoriented. The mirror effect is a signature of subversion, characterizing a method in which every step operates against the grain.

In *Untitled*, Merce Cunningham’s leonine face hovers directly above Malcolm’s (Fig. 17). They sport a similar tilt of the head, a detail that may

Figure 17

ROBERT
RAUSCHENBERG

Detail of Figure 2

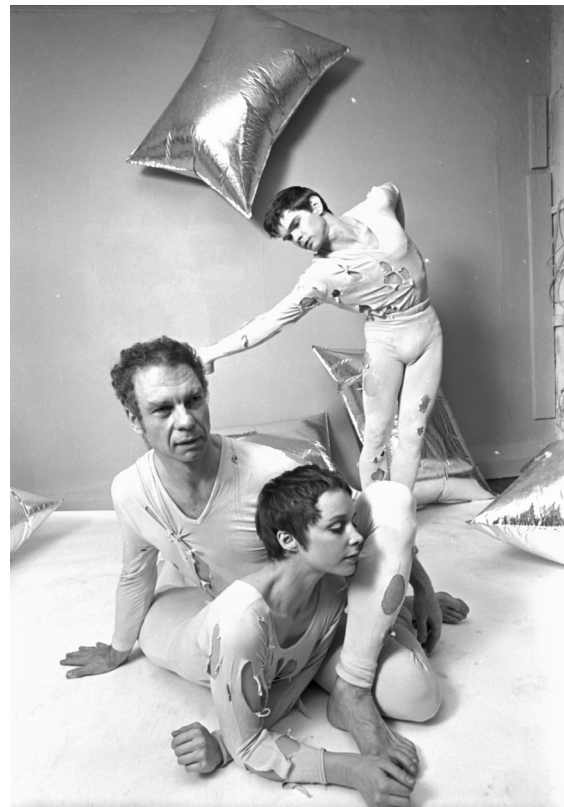
New York, Robert
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Figure 18 (below)

JACK MITCHELL

Merce
Cunningham
and company
performing
RainForest, 1968

Getty Images





have gone unnoticed if the two images were not vertically stacked. Along with Gregory—pioneers, leaders, and iconoclasts all—the three figures appear to be looking past the lower left edge of the paper. Is this a ploy to distract and divert the viewer’s gaze away from the faintest image in the drawing? Rauschenberg juxtaposed a press photo of Merce Cunningham and dancers for Cunningham’s *RainForest* (1968; Fig. 18) with lithe bodies transferred from a black-and-white reproduction (Fig. 19) of the lower right corner of the central panel in Bosch’s *Garden of Earthly Delights* (Fig. 20). While the two groups share a morphological similarity, there is also the suggestion of creative kinship. Rauschenberg spent nearly a decade of his early career designing costumes, sets, and lighting for Cunningham, whose visionary choreography he deeply admired. Bosch, celebrated in his lifetime as an inventor of monsters, straddler of medieval and Renaissance sensibilities, lands in Rauschenberg’s *Untitled* with one of the



most enigmatic and elusive paintings of Western culture. The continuing debate over what exactly is presented there—prelapsarian paradise, negative exempla, heretical cult ritual, alchemical paraphernalia and principles³⁶—ever rejuvenates Bosch’s painting, eliciting contemporary fascination and inspiring art-historical fever dreams stretching back over half a millennium. Its cameo appearance may well be a talismanic inscription of *ars longa*.³⁷ There is likewise a wishful induction of Gregory, Malcolm, and Cunningham into the tradition.

The hushed Bosch citation delays the moment of recognition and the flood of discourse it releases. The *Garden* as interpretation machine, the apparatus that Rauschenberg’s own works activate, precipitated the following evaluation by cultural theorist Michel de Certeau:

Figure 19 (upper left)

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG

Detail of Figure 2

New York, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation (© 2019 Robert Rauschenberg Foundation)

Figure 20 (above)

HIERONYMUS BOSCH

Garden of Earthly Delights (detail), 1490–1500

Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado

*The production comes from the spectator, captivated by the painting's ruse. Bosch has been called a raving lunatic: quite to the contrary, he **makes others rave**. He turns on our meaning-producing mechanisms. ... [H]e functions like the paradise of myths or of delight. A **senseless beginning** causes the discourses of meaning to be produced.*³⁸

Incoherence is the origin of interpretation because it is intolerable, especially in a society that sustains and demands mass media, a network of information delivery systems. The apparently incomprehensible, by obstructing understanding, most acutely stimulates its assembly. Bosch's *Garden* is a prime figure for expository frenzy, all the more active because no single interpretation sticks. To reference Barthes once more, "In the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be *disentangled*, nothing deciphered; ...writing ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it, carrying out a systematic exemption of meaning."³⁹ The exemption is generative, clearing the field for new hypotheses and speculations. Rauschenberg positively asserted, "I'm sure we don't read old paintings the way they were intended."⁴⁰ Their value and vitality lies in their subsequent reading, their continuing to be read; he strove to endow his own works with this capacity.

NEVER A DULL KNIFE

Rauschenberg's concept of random order is germane to the newspapers and magazines he prized as art materials:

*WITH SOUND SCALE AND INSISTENCY TRUCKS MOBILIZE WORDS, AND BROADSIDE OUR CULTURE BY A COMBINATION OF LAW AND LOCAL MOTIVATION WHICH PRODUCES AN EXTREMELY COMPLEX RANDOM ORDER THAT CAN NOT [sic] BE DESCRIBED AS ACCIDENTAL.*⁴¹

One perceives the same un-accidental random order in the hubs of journalism, editorial, and advertisement—a dynamic network of information, opinion, and consumerism, where the terms collide and hybridize on a constantly shifting basis. Print media knit the social fabric and evince the

cultural matrix—where crafted designs disintegrate, unintentional patterns emerge, and perverse juxtapositions squat—from which no one is entirely exempt, a condition Rauschenberg understood profoundly:

*...one has to deal with the limitations of society as you find it. And it's not like they made it and you're just put into it, because one continues making it and even if you have this idea, you're every bit as much a part of it as anybody else and just as responsible for all of its flaws.*⁴²

Conscious of his own social embedment, the artist drafted the solvent transfer technique to unfix and repurpose cultural fragments, if only symbolically. As purveyors and organizers of public sentiment and opinion, mass-media publications are also instruments of power. The critical turn of the 1960s, emblemized by the dead author, was oriented to recognize, subvert, and resist structures of authority. Rauschenberg's art of delinquency and reconstitution enacts this oppositional stance by appropriating mainstream forms. He scoured the photographic editorials, documentary news, and four-color advertisements that narrated and synthesized the hopes, fears, and aspirations of American culture; this material engagement establishes his identity as a social animal and historical subject. His manipulations of these illusory realities supplied an array of disruptions, short-circuits, and hacks suspended in the half-light of dissolution.

Cage's analogy of Rauschenberg with "that butcher whose knife never became dull simply because he cut with it in such a way that it never encountered an obstacle," deserves a closer reading. It would be a mistake to understand this deftness as a routinized skill or an evasion of obstacles. Rather, it is an adaptive intuition that carves through the situation at hand. Dancer and choreographer Steve Paxton (b. 1939) recalls from his early days together with Rauschenberg at the experimental Judson Dance Theater in the early 1960s, "We began with this idea of Bob's that you work with what's available, and that way the restrictions aren't limitations, they're just what you happen to be working

with.”⁴³ Like the horde of heterodox elements Rauschenberg embraced as art materials, obstacles too were a viable medium. Cage’s appraisal seems to admire the often invisible techniques or those taken for granted, the intricate paths through bodies of collected materials, that make the works that conceal the effort. There are accounts of the physical technique of solvent transfer, understood as Rauschenberg’s knife, but how he cut—what he saw in the newspapers and magazines, how he chose the images, and then how he decided to place them—remains a mystery. The art works appear suggestively not accidental.

Bagged and *Untitled* are launchpads for heuristic adventures. (This notion extends to Rauschenberg’s entire oeuvre.) Untethered to the artist’s authority, viewers are free to explore the works on their own terms, bring their experiences to bear, discover and synthesize new and other meanings, and through interpretation, make the drawings their own. The identification of Rauschenberg’s sources enriches the pursuit. Extended contemplation—induced by the destabilization of media fragments, thwarting the ability of the thinking eye to see/recognize, thus prolonging the experience—enables the viewer to replicate the solvent transfer technique virtually. As Krčma posits:

*Rauschenberg transfigures and organizes his materials to compel attention and tempt interpretive effort without seeking to circumscribe the boundaries of that activity. Deriving from an everyday reality broadly accessible and available, the viewer shares a stake in the task of working through the significance of those materials. Rauschenberg’s work both enlivens that task and delivers responsibility for meaning-making back to his audience, supplying intimations of coherence while both pointing to and resisting (as deadening) the desire for stabilization and closure.*⁴⁴

Meaning is not delivered but made. This synthesis occurs in the eye, hence mind, of the viewer. Rauschenberg generously redistributed the creative prerogative in works that challenge and encourage the viewer’s response. They initiate a

critical form of aesthetic encounter that Michel de Certeau identified in the reader who “invents in texts something different from what [the authors] ‘intended.’ He detaches them from their (lost or accessory) origin. He combines their fragments and creates something un-known in the space organized by their capacity for allowing an indefinite plurality of meanings.”⁴⁵ The solvent transfer technique models this tactic for mass deployment at the same time that Rauschenberg’s drawings are object lessons, equipping viewers with a deconstruct-to-reassemble toolkit for processing the wider world of spectacle.

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NOTES

1. The 1968 presidential election featured anti-war candidate Eugene McCarthy (1916–2005) galvanizing the nation’s youth, incumbent Lyndon B. Johnson (1908–1973) bowing out of the race, Robert F. Kennedy (1925–1968) hitting the campaign trail, and Republican Richard Nixon (1913–1994) ultimately winning. Three African-American students were killed by police and dozens of other people were shot at South Carolina State University in Orangeburg on 8 February while protesting unlawful segregation. Widespread unrest erupted after the murder of civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929–1968) on 4 April. Two days later, Black Panther Party member Bobby Hutton (1950–1968) was killed by police in Oakland, CA, weeks before his eighteenth birthday. Two months after that, the fatal shooting of Robert Kennedy on 6 June jolted the gun control debate. By the end of the month, it would be the cover story for *Time* and *Newsweek*. Later in the summer, demonstrations met the Republican convention in Miami, and protesters and police clashed violently outside the Democratic convention in Chicago. An iconic image from the Mexico City Olympics that October shows track and field gold medalist Tommie Smith (b. 1944) and bronze medalist John Carlos (b. 1945) on the podium, shoeless, with gloved fists raised in a sign of Black Power; their gesture expressed solidarity with universal human rights. Fifty years on, the USA is marked by an uncannily similar sense of social unease. This was strongly reflected in the outcome of the 2018 US midterm elections, which saw a “blue wave” shift in the political landscape, with record voter turnouts and a number of electoral firsts for women, racial minorities, and LGBTQ candidates. Young survivors of the mass shooting

at a high school in Parkland, FL, in February 2018 continue to make indelible contributions to the national conversation about gun violence. Stephon Clark (1995–2018) in Sacramento, CA, Antwon Rose II (2001–2018) in East Pittsburgh, PA, and Danny Ray Thomas (1984–2018) in Houston, TX, were among the unarmed black men killed by police last year. Quarterback Colin Kaepernick (b. 1987), who started taking a knee during the national anthem in 2016 to protest racial injustice, remains unsigned in the National Football League; several of his colleagues carry on the demonstration.

2. Setting aside a successful and lucrative career as an entertainer, Gregory devoted himself to human rights activism. In 1968, against the backdrop of his presidential campaign—eventually heading the Freedom and Peace Party ticket, but for the most part as a write-in candidate—Gregory endured hunger strikes in protest of the Vietnam War and racial inequality, as well as in support of Native American rights; went to jail for his activism; and lectured on the liberal college circuit. See Dick Gregory, *Write Me In!*, ed. by James R. McGraw, New York, 1968; and Eliot Asinof, “Dick Gregory Is Not So Funny Now,” *New York Times Magazine*, 17 March 1968, pp. 36–53.
3. Rauschenberg Foundation registry no. RRF 68.D041. Solvent transfer, gouache, and pencil; 559 x 759 mm; see *Robert Rauschenberg: Transfer Drawings from the 1960s*, exh. cat., New York, Jonathan O’Hara Gallery, 2007, no. 31, repr. (in color).
4. RRF 68.D011. Solvent transfer, gouache, and watercolor; 572 x 759 mm; see *ibid.*, no. 16, repr. (in color).
5. See John Cage, “On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and His Work,” *Metro* (Milan), no. 2, 1961, p. 46.
6. Inv. nos. 346.1963.1–34. All solvent transfer drawing, pencil, gouache, and colored pencil; each c. 368 x 292 mm; see www.moma.org/collection/works/series/36719; and Ed Krčma, *Rauschenberg/Dante: Drawing a Modern Inferno*, New Haven, 2017 (which provides an inspired account of the *Dante* drawings through the lens of Rauschenberg’s source materials, replete with erudite analysis based on impeccable research).
7. See Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *Image Music Text*, Eng. trans. by Stephen Heath, New York, 1977, p. 146.
8. In 1961 Rauschenberg stated, “a picture remains absolutely unchanged and is set up for the next person who comes along, who has a completely different series of experiences to fall back on....” (see “The Art of Assemblage: A Symposium [1961],” transcript ed. by Joseph Ruzicka, in *Essays on Assemblage*, ed. by John Elderfield, *Studies in Modern Art*, 2, New York, 1992, p. 138). In 1980 he noted “the puzzle is to be discovered as each viewer discovers it for himself. It is a different puzzle for each person. The only thing I can hope to do is give it a diverse enough multiplicity that it will lengthen the life of the work—if there is an invitation to read and re-read” (see John Dorsy, “Rauschenberg’s ‘Bank Job’: ‘A Different Puzzle for Each Person,’” *Baltimore Sun*, 24 February 1980, sec. D, p. 8). While this statement refers to a specific art work, the sentiment applies to the whole oeuvre. In 2005 Rauschenberg reiterated his notion of viewer participation by saying, “I always like involving the audience.... I like to give the audience respect and responsibility. Usually that means engaging them in some activity” (see Drew Sterwald, “Rauschenberg Shakes up Art Community,” *Fort Myers News-Press*, 7 January 2005, Gulf Coasting, p. 27).
9. See Calvin Tomkins, “Profiles: Moving Out,” *New Yorker*, 40, no. 2, 29 February 1964, p. 59.
10. See Dorothy Gees Seckler, Oral history interview with Robert Rauschenberg, 21 December 1965, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; available online at <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-robert-rauschenberg-12870> (accessed 30 September 2018).
11. See G. R. Swenson, “Rauschenberg Paints a Picture,” *Artnews*, 62, no. 2, April 1963, p. 46. Rauschenberg consistently maintained this position, “I’m not so interested in control, in controlling a painting. If it doesn’t tell me what to do, then it’s not a good painting. The work takes over. I become a thoughtful observer. And the only time it doesn’t work well is when I’m self-conscious” (see Ellen Edwards, “Rauschenberg: He’s No. 1 in the Art World—And a Wild, Worried Man,” *Miami Herald*, 25 February 1979, sec. L, p. 10).
12. See Franz Schulze, “Rauschenberg’s Cheerful Cheek,” *Chicago Daily News*, 3–4 December 1977, Panorama, p. 15.
13. See Krčma 2017, pp. 69 and 71. Krčma extends the discussion of opposing camps of iconophiles and iconophobes to the transfer drawings, that was previously addressed in consideration of Rauschenberg’s *Combines*, a series of works combining painting and sculpture (1954–64), by Thomas Crow (“Rise and Fall: Theme and Idea in the Combines of Robert Rauschenberg,” in *Robert Rauschenberg: Combines*, ed. by Paul Schimmel, exh. cat., Los Angeles, Museum of Contemporary Art, 2005, p. 245).
14. An additional image is transferred in the vicinity of the weather map, partly superimposed on it, and has yet to be identified. In September 1968 Rauschenberg had recently purchased his first property on Captiva, an island off the Gulf Coast of Florida, and was spending more time there. In 1970 he would move there full time.
15. In 1968 Rauschenberg recalled this episode from Wallace’s recent history when he incorporated an iconic image of young black protesters pressed against the side of a building by the high-pressure torrent from a firehose, as

photographed by Charles Moore (1931–2010) and originally published in *Life* magazine in 1963, in the solvent transfer drawing *Untitled* (1968), in a private collection (RRF 68.D013; see *Robert Rauschenberg*, exh. cat., Washington, DC, Smithsonian Institution, National Collection of Fine Arts, 1976, no. 114 [misidentified as *Pass*], repr.). It was republished in the 6 December 1968 issue of *Life* in the third installment of a four-part series entitled “Search for a Black Past.” Images in the *Untitled* (1968) drawing discussed in this essay (see Figs. 3 and 14) were transferred from the concluding feature in the series, “The Shift from Moderates to Militants: A Separate Path to Equality,” *Life*, 13 December 1968.

16. Art historian Lewis Kachur also identified 1968 as a critical year for Rauschenberg’s solvent transfer drawings (see “Paraphrase: On Robert Rauschenberg’s Transfer Drawings of the 1960s,” in *New York* 2007, pp. 8–15). His survey of a significant selection of drawings from the 1960s includes *Bagged* and *Untitled*. He braids insightful descriptions based on close examinations of the art works with their historical context.
17. See James Baldwin, “Letter from a Region in My Mind,” *New Yorker*, 17 November 1962, which concludes with the scriptural warning that would become the title of the 1963 book *The Fire next Time*, in which the essay was republished along with another text.
18. See Robert Rauschenberg, “Öyvind Fahlström (Oct. 1961),” *Art and Literature*, no. 3, 1964, p. 219.
19. See *ibid.*
20. On these works, see www.rauschenbergfoundation.org/art/series/syn-text.
21. See *Robert Rauschenberg: New Works*, exh. brochure, New York, Visual Arts Gallery, School of Visual Arts, 1970.
22. On these works, see www.rauschenbergfoundation.org/art/series/currents, www.rauschenbergfoundation.org/art/artwork/signs, and www.rauschenbergfoundation.org/art/art-in-context/earth-day. Rauschenberg likewise prepared texts for *Currents*, a print made with the *Studies for Currents* collages: “...AN ACTIVE PROTEST ATTEMPTING TO SHARE + COMMUNICATE MY RESPONSE TO + CONCERN WITH OUR GRAVE TIMES + PLACE. ART CAN ENCOURAGE INDIVIDUAL CONSCIENCE...” and *Signs*: “CONCEIVED TO REMIND US OF LOVE, TERROR, VIOLENCE OF THE LAST 10 YEARS. DANGER LIES IN FORGETTING.” These statements were printed on separate announcement cards for concurrent exhibitions at Automation House and Castelli Graphics in New York, June 1970.
23. Inv. no. P002220 (oil on panel; 151 x 61 cm); see www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection.
24. Rauschenberg was no stranger to art-historical drag, having participated in the 1967 recreation by his friend, artist Elaine Sturtevant (1924–2014) of a tableau vivant photographed by Man Ray (1890–1976), based on the paintings of *Adam and Eve* (c. 1510–20) by Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553) in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (inv. nos. GG861a–b; see www.khm.at/de/object), which was enacted in 1924 by Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968) and Brogna Perlmutter (1906–2004) respectively, for the *Relâche* of Francis Picabia (1879–1953). This convivial torrent of characters evokes the atmosphere of communal creative exchange that Rauschenberg craved and sought by keeping his studio door open. Networks of transmission, collaboration, sharing, and trading are echoed in the complex webs of information, images, texts, and marks that are the solvent transfer drawings.
25. See Seckler 1965. The following sentence reads, “And I don’t want to, because that means that the picture is being painted predigested.” Rauschenberg embraced a deliberate unintentionality in order to keep his process free and open. Nonetheless the works display his incisive selections of materials, which he then orchestrated and choreographed as alternately and simultaneously poignant, humorous, ironic, inscrutable, and endlessly provocative juxtapositions.
26. See Cage 1961, p. 41.
27. Inv. no. NGL4529 (presented by Sir Alfred and Lady Beit, 1987; oil on canvas; 174 x 124.5 cm); see <http://onlinecollection.nationalgallery.ie/objects/8701>. Gainsborough—remembered here by one of his late paintings in the peasant genre, ironically dubbed his “fancy pictures”—was of special importance to Rauschenberg, who cited Gainsborough’s *Blue Boy* (1770), in the Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens, San Marino, CA (inv. no. 21.1; oil on canvas; 177.8 x 112.1 cm; see www.huntington.org/project-blue-boy), as one of his first inspirations to pursue art. Or one might think of *La Cruche cassée* (1771) by Jean-Baptiste Greuze (1725–1805) in the Louvre, Paris (inv. no. 5036; oil on canvas; 109 x 87 cm; see www.louvre.fr/oeuvre-notices/la-cruche-cassee), in which a broken pitcher allegorizes innocence lost. Pictures are not just taken, they are also made. Ever since early photographer Mathew Brady (1822–1896) moved his first corpse to stage-manage his celebrated documentary photographs of the American Civil War, the reality of photojournalism has been haunted by a veil of suspicion. It is the task of another essay to explore how Rauschenberg’s solvent transfer technique engages this problematic quality.
28. Unpublished transcript of interview with Rauschenberg on 29 May 1974, during the exhibition *Robert Rauschenberg in Israel*, at the Israel Museum, Jerusalem, p. [7]. New York, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, Robert Rauschenberg papers (Interviews series, RRFA 01, Temp Box INT1).
29. My thanks to Julia Blaut, Director of Curatorial Affairs, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, for suggesting this identification.

30. See New York 2007, p. 9.
31. Inv. no. P002823 (oil on panel; 205.5 x 384.9 cm); see www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work.
32. My thanks to David White, Senior Curator, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, for observing the rebus quality of this figure and comparing it with the central “X” in Rauschenberg’s silkscreen painting *Crocus* in a private collection (1962; RRF 62.022; oil and silkscreen ink on canvas; 152.4 x 91.4 cm); see Roni Feinstein, *Robert Rauschenberg: The Silkscreen Paintings, 1962–64*, exh. cat., New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, 1990, no. 15, repr. (in color).
33. Inv. no. 162.2004 (Gift of Sarah-Ann and Werner H. Kramarsky). Solvent transfer, oil, watercolor, crayon, pencil, and cut-and-pasted paper; 267 x 216 mm; see www.moma.org/collection/works/90718.
34. See Krčma 2017, p. 118.
35. See Dore Ashton, “Thirty-four Illustrations for Dante’s *Inferno*,” *Metro* (Milan), no. 2, 1961, p. 59. Ashton worked closely with Rauschenberg to compose the accompanying text for the 1964 facsimile edition of the Dante drawings. They engaged in extended discussions, looking at the drawings and also rereading Dante together.
36. Discussions of Bosch’s *Garden* frequently start with a fire-works survey of prior speculations, hypotheses, and theories, from the stringent to the outlandish, what Michel de Certeau (1925–1986) called “the thousand and one nights of erudition” (see “The Garden: Delirium and Delights of Hieronymous Bosch,” *The Mystic Fable, Volume One: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, Eng. trans. by Michael B. Smith, Chicago, 1992, pp. 49–72). See also Laurinda Dixon, “Science and Salvation: *The Garden of Earthly Delights Triptych*,” in *Bosch, Art and Ideas*, London, 2003, pp. 227–78; Joseph Leo Koerner, “The Unspeakable Subject,” in *Bosch and Bruegel: From Enemy Painting to Everyday Life*, Bollingen Series, XXXV 57, Princeton, 2016, pp. 179–222.
37. The potency of the Bosch quotation also relates to Rauschenberg’s previous engagement with Dante. Dore Ashton (see “The Collaboration Wheel: A Comment on Robert Rauschenberg’s Comment on Dante,” *Arts and Architecture*, 80, no. 12, 1963, p. 37), with whom the artist had intensive conversations about the *Inferno* drawings and reread the text, expressed their shared appreciation of the medieval poet’s “artistic inconsistencies” and “flexible imagination, capable of assuming different guises at different times, and like the modern artists, of playing ambiguously around the great themes.” Rauschenberg strove for this aesthetic agility, which endows art works with ever-replenishing relevance and attraction for future generations of viewers and readers alike.
38. See De Certeau 1992, p. 52.
39. See Barthes 1977, p. 147.
40. See Seckler 1965.
41. See Robert Rauschenberg, “Random Order,” *Location*, 1, no. 1, 1963, p. 28. The text is handwritten in all capitals.
42. Rauschenberg, in an interview with John Jones, 13 January 1966, pp. 10–11. London, Tate Archive, John Jones Collection (TGA 201520).
43. See Calvin Tomkins, *Off the Wall: A Portrait of Robert Rauschenberg*, New York, 2005, p. 206.
44. See Krčma 2017, p. 158.
45. See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Eng. trans. by Steven Rendall, Berkeley, 1984, p. 169.