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 (Ronsonol 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
or fragmentation of the images further challenge legibility. The drawings derive from, but do
not reproduce, their sources. In addition to the
transfers, Rauschenberg employed watercolor,
gouache, pencil, ink, crayon, and the occasional
adhesion of pasted paper elements. Bagged and
Untitled bear unevenly brushed underlayers of
white pigment, but essentially no other marks
beyond the solvent transfers.

Deliberately selected images pass through an
aleatory mesh via an aqueous mirror transposition
before assuming their wavering appearance
in the drawings. Other factors that heighten the
blindness of the process include fluctuating solvent
saturation and the printing quality of the original
reproduction. Rauschenberg honed his tech-
nique in Thirty-four Illustrations for Dante’s Inferno
(1958–60), in the Museum of Modern Art, New
Figure 2 (above)
ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG
Untitled, 1968
New York, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation (© 2019 Robert Rauschenberg Foundation)

Figure 3 (right)
York. 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 hereafter. 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.” Rauschenberg long favored the priority of the viewer and the creative labor of encountering and engaging with an art work. 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.” 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.” 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.” 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.” 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. 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. 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)
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. 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)
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 newsprint 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 annum 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 andUntitled
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), which features a woman as protagonist.

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-
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.”) 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.” 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), inviting consideration of representations of...
The shift from moderates to militians: A SEPARATE PATH TO EQUALITY

SEARCH FOR A BLACK PAST, PART IV

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.

The drawings are screens of contingency, surfaces that receive and project. Multivalences and diverse possibilites abound not only for the images, but also for the permutational relationships among them. 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 Bagdad 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 violent cult, and Valerie Solanas (1936–1988) had only three months earlier shot Andy Warhol (1928–1987). Look again at the polka-dot-sporting grandmother (see Fig. 10) becomes a surrogate for Dora Rauschenberg (1902–1999), the artist’s five years 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.”

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. 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 Bagdad 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 violent cult, and Valerie Solanas (1936–1988) had only three months earlier shot Andy Warhol (1928–1987). Look again at the polka-dot-sporting grandmother (see Fig. 10) becomes a surrogate for Dora Rauschenberg (1902–1999), the artist’s five years 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.”
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. 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). 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 Kréma’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. It contains a spectrum
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 simulates [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
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 principles—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. 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:
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. ... He functions like the paradise of myths or of delight. A senseless beginning causes the discourses of meaning to be produced.⁴⁸

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.”⁵⁹ 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.”⁶⁰ 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.⁶²

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, emblematized by the dead author, was oriented to recognize, subvert, and resist structures of authority. Rauschenberg’s art of deliquescence 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
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 Krēma 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.  

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.” 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.

Helen Hsu has worked as the assistant curator at the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, New York, since 2013.

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.


4. RRF 68.D011. Solvent transfer, gouache, and watercolor; 572 x 759 mm; see ibid., no. 16, repr. (in color).


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/36719](http://www.moma.org/collection/works/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 a Rauschenberg’s source materials, replete with erudite analysis based on impeccable research).


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 Dorsay, “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 Coast, p. 27).


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).


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 4) were transferred from the concluding feature in the series, “The Shift from Moderates to Militants: A Separate Path to Equality,” Life, 13 December 1968.


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.


19. See ibid.

20. On these works, see www.rauschenbergfoundation.org/art/series/syn-tex.


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.


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-casse), 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.


29. My thanks to Julia Blaut, Director of Curatorial Affairs, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, for suggesting this identification.

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 Kročma 2017, p. 118.


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.


40. See Seckler 1965.


44. See Kročma 2017, p. 158.