

## RRFA 01: Robert Rauschenberg papers

Interviews: Seckler, Dorothy Gees / "The Artist Speaks: Robert Rauschenberg" / Art in America, May-June 1966

### THE ARTIST SPEAKS: ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG

*This interview of Robert Rauschenberg by Dorothy Gees Seckler initiates a series of taped talks with American artists co-sponsored by Art in America and the Archives of American Art and illustrated with photographs by Ugo Mulas*

I talked to Robert Rauschenberg during a week when he was never out of the limelight: the Museum of Modern Art had just opened its exhibition of his drawings illustrating all thirty-four cantos of Dante's "Inferno," winding up a tour which had won enthusiastic attention in more than a dozen European cities; Life magazine's issue containing their commissioned sequel to his Dante series had just arrived on the newsstands with its newsreel-like panorama of a modern hell, and Rauschenberg was in constant demand by journalists and photographers. All this followed a series of staged presentations of his live theater-dance program, "Map Room II," which had jammed overflow crowds into the Film-Makers' Cinemathèque on West 41st Street in New York.

Ten years ago, at age thirty, Rauschenberg was not bothered by poverty and today he is only slightly more irked by the pressures of fame that have mounted steadily since last summer when one hundred French intellectuals named him the most important artist to have emerged since the war. (This honor was all the more surprising because it followed by only a year the hostile reaction—almost as marked in some New York quarters as in Europe—to his first prize at the Venice Biennale in 1964).

Rauschenberg's attitude of acceptance of whatever circumstances develop is not only a matter of temperament but an existential emphasis that is implied in his work through all its phases. Without his willingness to entertain the contradictory elements present in every moment of the encounter with environment, the incongruous elements of his combines would be arbitrary and contrived.

In the past decade Rauschenberg's breathless progress from one style and material to another is typical of a new posture of restless mobility for the avant-garde artist. He takes for granted that

for the artist who manipulates the viewer's surprise and reshuffles the viewer's perception and associations, there is a diminishing impact in repeat performances. As he discovered how quickly the disreputable castoffs were aestheticized (the beauty of a rusting license plate, for example, became apparent to everyone), he abandoned his combines and began to compose with images daily disgorged by the press: the split-second action that takes place on a baseball diamond, in a parachute, in a traffic clover-leaf, at a Fourth of July parade or among the swinging clubs of riot police. Photograph sections were transferred to canvas by a silk-screen process. But last year as he went off on tour with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company (designing sets and costumes, occasionally directing and taking part in dance performances), he decided that the silk-screened images no longer held the requisite element of surprise for him. He then had one hundred and fifty of the prepared silk-screen panels removed from his studio so that he would be forced to turn to new materials on his return.

It would have been easier to continue with these familiar ways of working and turn out a product that is now in great demand despite its high prices. But since the challenge as Rauschenberg sees it is not to ingratiate the audience but to constantly renew and expand its perception of the present, this was not an alternative that could be considered.

I have reason to recall how early and how consistent was Rauschenberg's concern with the viewer and his involvement, because it was implied in a way that puzzled me on the occasion of my first meeting with him in the early Fifties, when I went to his studio to preview his forthcoming one-man show at the Stable Gallery. The contents of that show turned out to be a group of paintings whose vast, pristine expanses of white were interrupted only slightly and far off-center by, in one case, a newspaper clipping and in another, a fragment of mirror. Since these were the days when the appearance of such objects was automatically assumed to connote dadaist cynicism and despair, I was too much baffled to take them at their face value as emblematic reminders of my own (the viewer's) presence. I was astonished to meet, as the author of these

*Dorothy Gees Seckler, a contributing editor of Art in America, has been conducting taped interviews of American artists for the Archives of American Art for the past four years. Ugo Mulas, the noted photographer, is from Milan. His book of photographs, "New York: the New Art Scene," with a text by Alan Solomon, will be published by Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., in the spring of 1967.*

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works, a young man with a boyish, open face, a habit of moving as if his tennis shoes carried an extra charge of bounce and a pleasantly resonant voice which had a trace of southern accent. His conversation revealed no nihilistic spleen or dada ironies; far from seeming a rebel of any stripe, he conveyed a sense of continuous delight at the discoveries of every shining hour.

Rauschenberg had spent his youth as part of a large, modestly situated family in Port Arthur, Texas and had not discovered his vocation until he was serving in the Navy during World War II. Afterwards he studied briefly on the G.I. Bill at the Kansas City Art Institute and, with his own savings, in Paris. But his really productive study was with Josef Albers at Black Mountain College in North Carolina in 1948 and 1949, an experience which offered him ideas and disciplines with sufficient clarity and authority to produce his rebellion against them, a rebellion manifested during three years of scattered work and study in New York when he produced, first, all-white paintings and then a black series.

In 1953 the abstract expressionists, whose powerful example was to have a significant effect on Rauschenberg's work, were consolidating their monolithic triumph on the New York art scene, bringing with them into this period of success a crisis atmosphere and glorification of the artists' wilfulness in the face of the public. This stance of indifference or even contempt for the audience collided with Rauschenberg's emphatically opposite attitude because it reflected to some extent an experience that could not be expected to make sense to him: disillusion following years of involvement with left-wing causes and a harassing obligation to deal with a social content.

Rauschenberg apparently found it hard to understand that escape from the pressures of the Thirties should have been into the fascinating inner world of the unconscious. It may be that the older men had to establish their independence as artists, free from public pressures, before the next generation could fraternize with the audience.

It is my speculation that Rauschenberg, who certainly appreciated and was able to appropriate all the painterly freedoms offered by action painting, was prevented from joining the abstract-expressionist ranks by his training as well as his temperament and that he was fortified in this by attitudes he had absorbed from his work with Josef Albers at Black Mountain. While the action painters' concern with psychology was directed inward to the subjective unconscious, Albers had certainly implied, in his teaching, an awareness of the psychology of the spectator. No one could sit through countless demonstrations of how a viewer, when confronted with a warm color, can be fooled by chromatic surroundings into believing it cool, without becoming aware not only of the plasticity of color but also of the plasticity of perception.

Although he does not recall having paid much attention to abstract expressionism's philosophical premises in existentialism and Zen, he apparently took seriously that part of its moral position which emphasized risk and openness and keeping the artist's activity—with all its precarious balancing—clearly in view. What he wanted to eliminate from this active engagement with materials was the assertion of will; he wanted to work from a motivation other than self-expression and a process other than stream-of-consciousness.

Part of the reward of working with street discards and other found objects in his combines was, he felt, in the possibility this offered him to act simply "as a collaborator with objects." Actually this fantasy that the objects are active while he is passive, which he knows is not literally true, is acted out in his role in "Map Room II," where he makes his body a conductor of electricity. Objects such as battered umbrellas were also useful because they brought to the canvas a sense of experience undergone—the wear and tear

of weather and of human usage—while permitting the artist to remain dead-pan and out of sight emotionally. Rauschenberg said that such castoffs served strong, basic shapes, also that they served to throw up a barrier against his "esthetic" taste.

Since anything that an artist produces must be, in the final analysis, an expression of himself, Rauschenberg's repugnance for self-expression in art begs for some clarification. He dislikes anything that he regards as an excessive exhibition or confession of emotional attitudes—and this can include a facial expression in an El Greco.

Because of his aversion to colors that could be read as emotionally loaded, he developed his "all colors, no color," approach, in which no single color stands out. After he did a series of paintings in which colors came in random order from bargain cans that had lost their labels, not even the most obtuse critic could detect dark, subjective mysteries or symbolism in his palette, as they had in his 1951 black paintings—irrationally, he said, because in that series, "there was a lot to look at but not much showing." He seems to feel that in his own work he is most successful when he has discovered and then revealed qualities in things that are objectively real and never preconceived or imposed in a reflection of his own prejudices. Thus his *Combines* offered not only objects and fragments that are really present in New York but also a succession of surprising contrasts that are everywhere evident to him in the city.

He has consistently favored images of public reference over those of private association. In his combines he used umbrellas, tires, Coca-Cola bottles, electric fans and street signs. A notable exception, *Bed*, with its paint-spattered bed covers, was the product of necessity; on a day when neither canvas nor funds was available, he pressed into service his previously functional quilt. In his subsequent, silk-screened images, public references are even more pointed; *Barge* is a notable example.

In modern art the most provocative body of emphatically public imagery had appeared in dadaist work, which Rauschenberg believes he encountered too late—around 1950—for it to have significantly affected his style. Yet it must have provided him, at least, with a leverage against the overwhelming influence of action painting. It was to be expected that the dadaist who most fascinated him—along with the witty Duchamp—was Kurt Schwitters, who was the least political and the most personal of the movement. Rauschenberg said that when he first saw a show of Schwitters (the German's work often included the same kind of street castoffs that attract Rauschenberg), he felt as if the whole exhibition had been made just for him. With dada, as with abstract expressionism, Rauschenberg's response has been, apparently, to accept the means and reject the ends. Dada used street objects to deride Culture; in Rauschenberg's work the inventory of public images is without the dadaists' mocking ironies.

He has said that he wanted to say both "yes" and "no" in order to say "yes." I recalled this while watching his dance-theater performance, "Map Room II," which seemed to derive much of its mystery from a presentation of continuing antitheses. Beginning with the absurdities of random word relationships, the piece shifted the audience from fun to enigma and then to a period of sustained tension; time seemed to be endlessly stretched out as a dancer, crouched inside a tire, inched her way painfully across the stage; the disquieting experience was amplified by another sense as two youths with their legs attached to tires lumbered across a battered bed spring, thereby producing a horrid jangle of sounds. But simultaneously, at intervals, came the other side of this action dialogue: a dancer, encased from head to foot in tires, who rolled comically in pneumatic liberation. The explosion of laughter from the audience seemed a gauge of the inner tension released. A more haunting sequence involved a dancer who adjusted exquisitely, with the most finely articulated, but necessarily mining, movements, to the cage

rull of live fluttering birds that she wore as a costume; it seemed like an allegory of accommodation to arduous circumstances.

Where dada ridiculed the Establishment, Rauschenberg sidesteps broad issues; what he deals with is actually a moment in the life of society more than the values of the society itself. There is a sense of passage through the environment that was reflected in fan mail he received after his recent show at London's Whitechapel Gallery. People seemed to recognize that their consciousness had been strangely modified, that they were aware in a new way as they traveled through the city's thoroughfares—an echoing in life of what had been experienced in art.

This happens more eloquently when the moment is average than when it is exceptional or dramatic. In his first Dante series the swimming blur of momentary actions and expressions—each, in itself, of a kind familiar in the sports pages—became mysterious in association; appearing as the isolated, silent observer in the midst of these active apparitions, the figure, wearing only a towel around his middle, allowed the viewer an equivocal identification. This ambiguous modern hell seems to exert a greater hold on the imagination than the far more specific imagery of the Dante pages Rauschenberg composed for *Life*. In the magazine's "Inferno" our immediate recognition of the Bomb, concentration camp atrocities and episodes of the civil rights struggle triggers a response in the light of everything we know and feel—we do not need to give our attention visually to what is on the page because the references are very familiar. This use of a more specific social reference represents an exceptional departure for Rauschenberg, who, until now, has assumed the political neutrality typical of his generation, sandwiched as it was between those aligned pro or con the old left and the younger generation which, even when it is not attached to the "new left," can have as a hero the protest folk singer, Bob Dylan.

For an artist whose moderate-sized paintings sell at the Leo Castelli Gallery in New York for from ten to thirty thousand dollars (with outsized works ranging up to sixty thousand), Rauschenberg has lived very simply—unless the vastness of his former Broadway studio, with its tiered skylights, could be counted a luxury. There the only addition to the bare necessities afforded by an iron bed and functional kitchen unit was a casually installed collection of small works by such well-known contemporaries as Frank Stella and de Kooning (the famous erased drawing). The rest of the enormous space was a canine playground for a black Samoyed puppy named Leica and a Siberian husky named Moon.

Last winter Rauschenberg became the owner of a five-story brick building at the corner of Lafayette and Great Jones Streets; built in the nineteenth century, it was used until recently as a Christian mission house. He will have his living quarters on one of its several unobstructed floors—through, use a second floor as a studio for painting and sculpture and a third for dance-theater projects. The building purchase represented a compromise arrived at after months of frustrated search for a structure capable of accommodating audiences for the theater projects that have occupied him intensively in the past two years and that involve him constantly with other innovators in this field—most notably with Deborah and Alex Hay, Steve Paxton, Trisha Brown, Lucinda Childs, Yvonne Rainer and also the sculptor, Bob Morris. His new building will provide space for working out but not for staging these programs.

But a project which has a very high priority and which always generates high excitement in his discussion of activities to be launched in the new building is one which returns him to the area of technology which he had started to explore with his *Broadcast* and *Oracle* assemblages, both of which incorporated working radios. In these ventures (and surely also in the new ones) he has had and will have the important collaboration of Billy Kluver, a gifted re-

search engineer who develops unusual and original projects for Bell Laboratories. Still in a germinating stage are Rauschenberg's ideas for a number of three-dimensional units (coordinated into a single whole) which will be hypersensitive to ever-changing elements in the surroundings. Some sophisticated admirers may raise an eyebrow at his pressing into the field of art-cum-technology in which a number of his most knowledgeable contemporaries have already staked out impressive claims: Calder to Len Lye and George Rickey in wind-driven forms; Norbert Kricke in water-conducting structures; Tinguely in radio and mechanics, others in light.

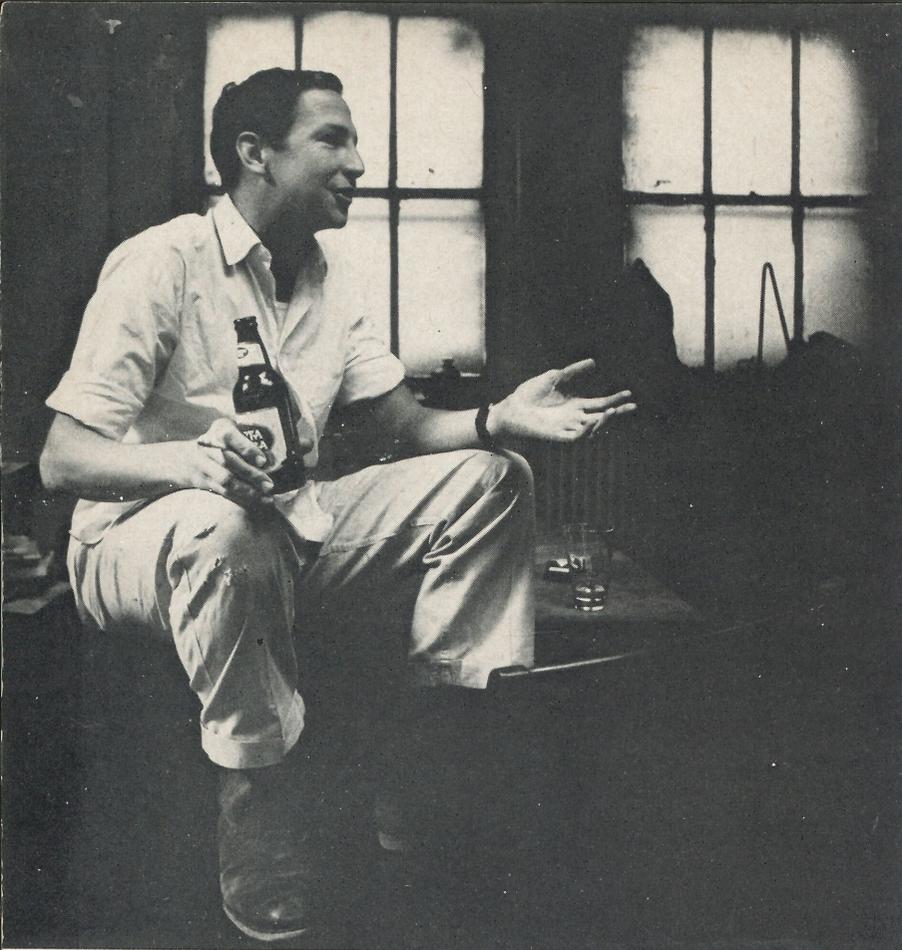
Here the only criteria available is the difference in his own uses of these forces and materials as they have already been indicated. There is some evidence supplied by Rauschenberg in recounting (in a different connection) his experience at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 1962. Willem Sandberg, then the Stedelijk's director, assuming a strong community of interest among five artists whose international reputations depended partly on the use of machines and like devices, invited the collaboration on a single sculptural unit of Tinguely, Niki de Saint-Phalle, Pierre Ulteit, Martial Raysse and Rauschenberg. Significantly, the artists discovered when they assembled and tried to pool their ideas that it was impossible to reconcile their diverse concepts. In the separate units that each consequently produced (for the exhibition, called, "Dylaby,") in a three-week crash program in the museum, Rauschenberg's four sculptures—ranging from eight to ten feet high—were probably the least sophisticated technically since they were held together by bolts, nails and wire, but they seem to have reflected his usual concerns. A reminder of his obsession with time was a piece that incorporated nine large clocks, as he said: "some just zipping around, others hardly moving."

Rauschenberg's plan to set up one floor of his new building for painting should scotch inaccurate press reports that he has given up painting. Periodically he gives up painting, spends strenuous weeks or months on other activities; but after such exertions there is the appeal of what he has called, "the genteel look of a well-stretched canvas." In his canvases, as in his new technological forms, there has been all along the same attack on what he calls hierarchies of values, preconceived notions of what is important enough to deserve notice and what is not; these hierarchies are main obstacles to an honest rapport with the world we live in. He wonders if it is because of Protestant or puritan elements in our background that we are habituated to being conscious of only certain areas in our surroundings, only selected moments of what we experience but he believes that Europeans are even more inhibited by centuries of this programming.

In his paintings one is struck by the fact that every formal decision has been made to attack pre-judgment of what is seen—and this will almost certainly apply also to the new technological forms. Each element assumes significance not in itself, but in relation to directions, tensions, convergences that are open-ended—and at the terminal of this actively charged circuit is the spectator. (Whatever ideas he may have taken from de Kooning, Rauschenberg could never have imitated his centered and deliberately hieratic compositions of the *Woman* series.)

This is the year that avant-garde writers are immersed in case histories, reporting without interpretation the truths that are increasingly making fiction seem trivial. Musicians, too, are bent on utilizing real life sounds—and even tuning in on the "music of the spheres" in outer space. Rauschenberg is certainly not alone in the art field in his drive to document, to submit himself to reality naked of illusion, to convey to an audience the sense of what it is that is seen, heard, experienced—even if it adds up only to the sense of being lost.

—D. G. S.



In 1953 Rauschenberg had returned broke to New York after a year spent in North Africa, Spain and Italy. Although he had been given a one-man show at the Betty Parsons gallery two years earlier, his work was taken seriously by only a few. His main encouragement came not from painters but from a group of musicians, Morton Feldman, John Cage and Earle Brown, and the dancers associated with them. He was spending fifteen cents a day for food and fifteen dollars a month for rent on a loft near the Fulton Fish Market in Lower Manhattan. To save carfare he walked uptown to Greenwich Village to sit in on the heated discussions about action painting then taking place at the Eighth Street Club and at the Cedar Bar.

"Affluence was very foreign to me in the period we are talking about but if you don't have trouble paying the rent, you have trouble doing something else. One needs a certain amount of trouble to operate, some need more, some less. The creative process somehow has to include adjusting realistically to the situation. I felt very rich being able to pick up Con Edison lumber from the street for combines and stretchers, taking advantage of whatever the day would lay out for me to use in my work—so much so that I am sometimes embarrassed that I seem to live on New York as if she were an unpaid maidservant.

"I felt new in New York. I thought the painting that was going on was unbelievable. Bill de Kooning is a great painter. I liked Jack Tworkov himself and his work, and also Franz Kline but I found a lot of the artists at the Cedar Bar were hard to talk to. There was something about the self-confession and self-confusion of abstract expressionism—as though the man and the work were the same—that personally always put me off because at that time my focus was in the opposite direction. I was busy trying to find ways where the imagery, the material and the meaning of the painting would be, not in an illustration of my will, but more like an unbiased documentation of what I observed, letting the area of feeling and meaning take care of itself [Rauschenberg is speaking here of his *Combines*]. I mean that literally: I felt an excitement at being in a city where you have on one lot a forty-story building and right next to it, you have a little shack. There is this constant irrational juxtaposition

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of things that one doesn't find in the countryside. I had traveled quite a lot in Europe just previously and had not found it there either: instead there's a kind of architectural harmony; everything is so much more cohesive than I have found in New York."

*While some abstract expressionists were nailing boards over their windows to shut out the distractions of the city, Rauschenberg was drawing stimulation from the dramatic contrasts of the waterfront neighborhood: the animals in the largest pet store in New York, the wholesale plant stores on the same block as the Washington Market, and in the next block, hardware stores galore.*

"During the day the streets would be so full of people that it looked like an ant hill that had been kicked over; then, bang—at six o'clock you could hear footsteps three blocks away. The buildings were the tallest there and I always like being near the water if I have the choice. So I think that this is a very rich part of town, but I don't find the rest of the city lacking in this quality. Every time I've moved, my work has changed radically and I think that if it didn't change naturally, that I'd do something about it to make it change. In this place [his studio at 809 Broadway] the light is so white that it's not to be believed. In other places where the ceilings may not be so high, the windows may be bigger; there you'd get the light bouncing off the floor—it would be warmed up. It is the job of the artist to move with these things, using them as additional qualities. Some artists move into a new place and force on it a working attitude they remember as one they like. That attitude makes a kind of painting different from mine. My work was never a protest against what was going on, it was an expression of my own involvement."

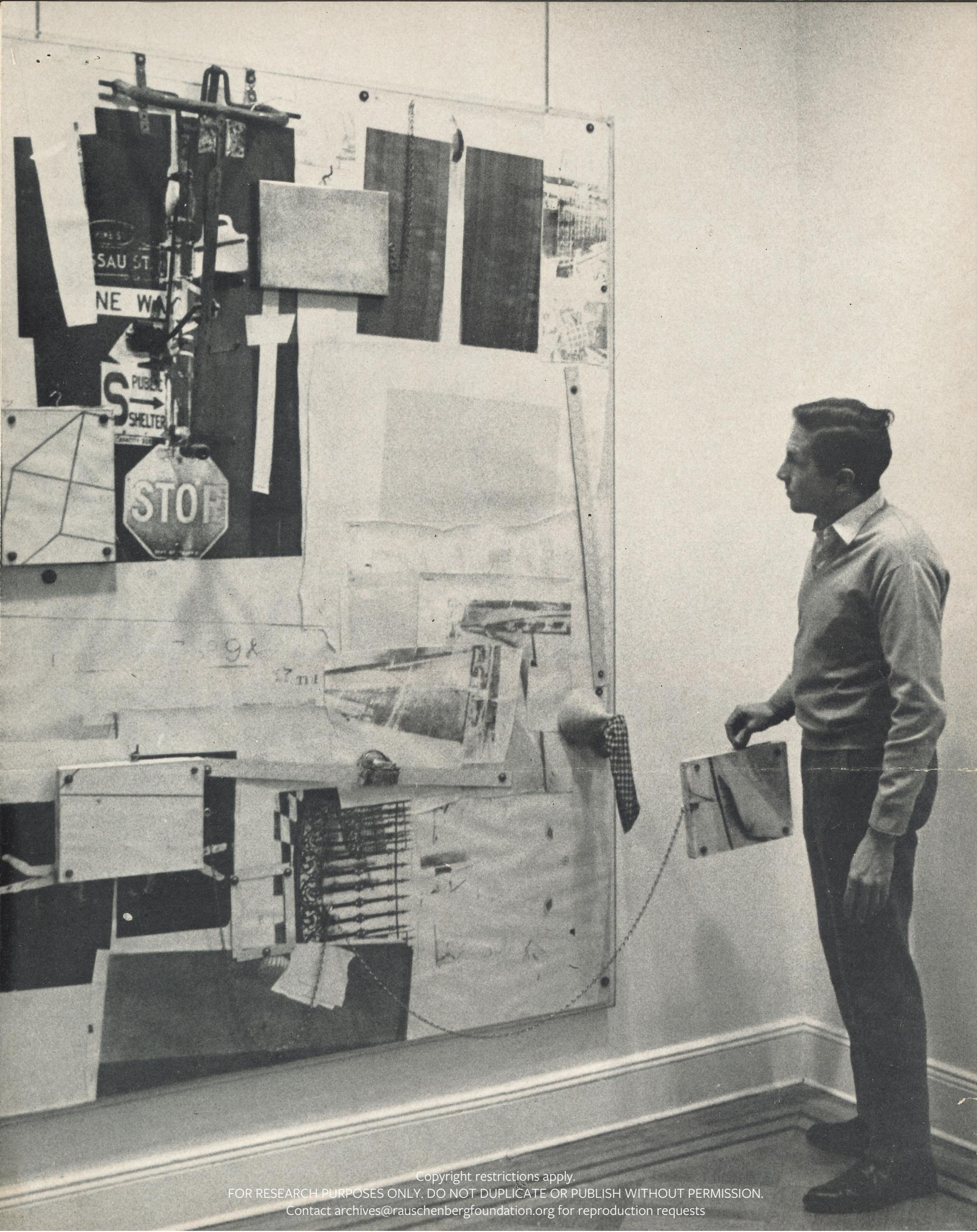
*A principal difference between the outlook of Rauschenberg and the abstract expressionists is seen in their very opposite estimates of the significance of the unconscious in art. Rauschenberg told me that, as far as he was aware of it, the unconscious was not an important source of imagery or content in his work. Pollock had said: "I think the unconscious is a very important side of modern art." Rauschenberg, in his wish to exclude unconscious fantasy, also rejects much of the associational aura read into some of his paintings. This came out in a discussion of his black paintings (with collage) of 1951.*

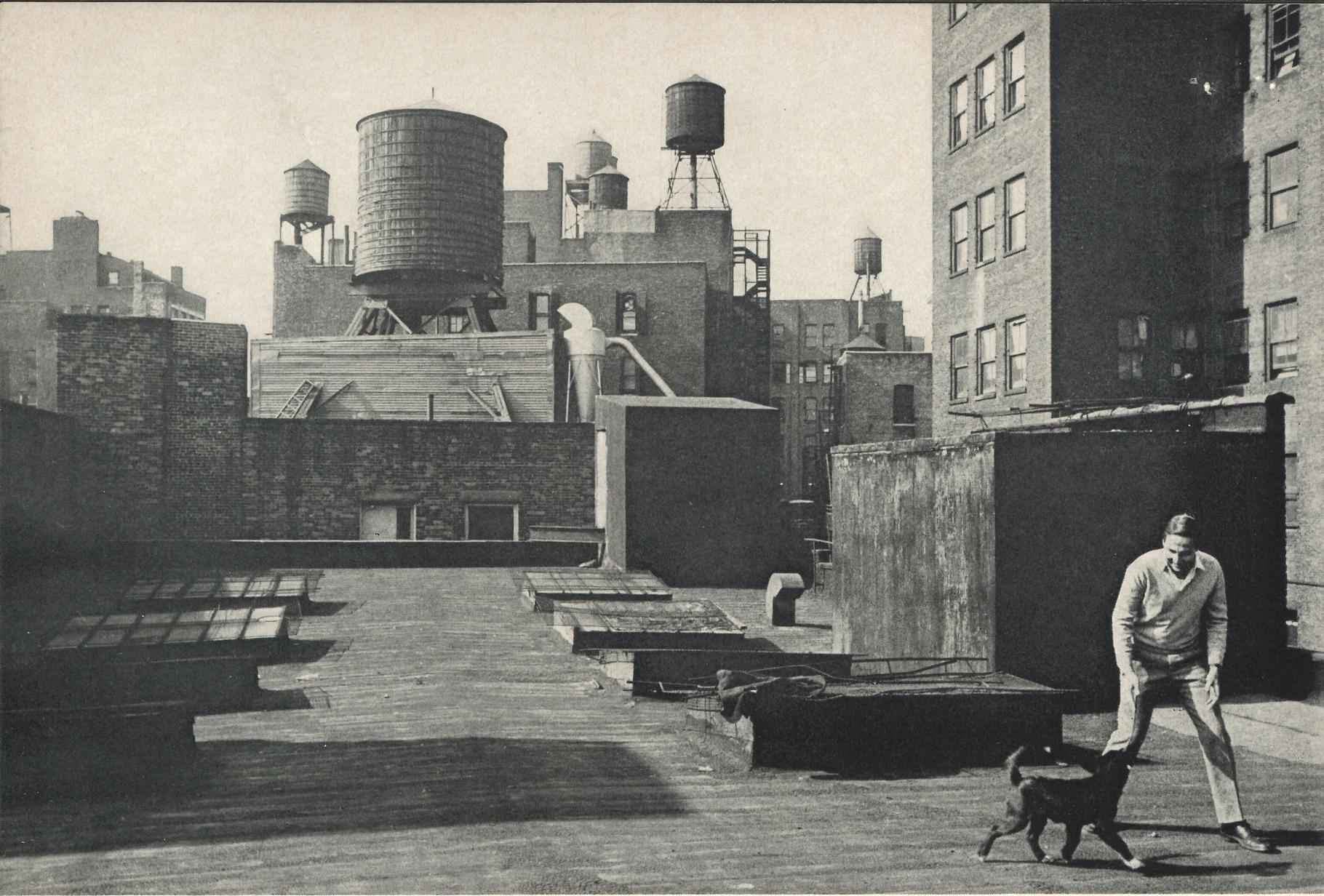
"Lots of critics shared with the public a certain reaction: they couldn't see black as pigment. They moved immediately into association with 'burned-out,' 'tearing,' 'nihilism' and 'destruction.' That began to bother me. I'm never sure what the impulse is psychologically; I don't mess around with my subconscious. I try to keep wide-awake. If I see any superficial subconscious relationships that I'm familiar with—clichés of association—I change the picture. I always have a good reason for taking something out but never have one for putting something in. I don't want to—because that means that the picture is being painted predigested.

"There was a whole language (used in discussions of the abstract expressionists) that I could never make function for myself: it revolved around words like, 'tortured,' 'struggle,' 'pain.' I don't know whether it was my Albers training or my personal 'hang-up' but I could never see those qualities in paint—I could see them in life and in art that illustrates life. But I could not see such conflict in the materials and I knew that it had to be in the attitude of the painter, his interpretation of an attitude that existed separately. In the future, if one were to lose contact with this idea it would be possible to have a completely different attitude about the painting.

"In the black paintings I might have—with my subconscious having me—used black with newspapers because of the burned-out look but I certainly did not like the idea of 'tortured,' 'tarred' and 'torn.' A newspaper that you are not reading can be used for anything. These same people didn't think there was anything immoral in wrapping their garbage in newspaper—a very positive use."

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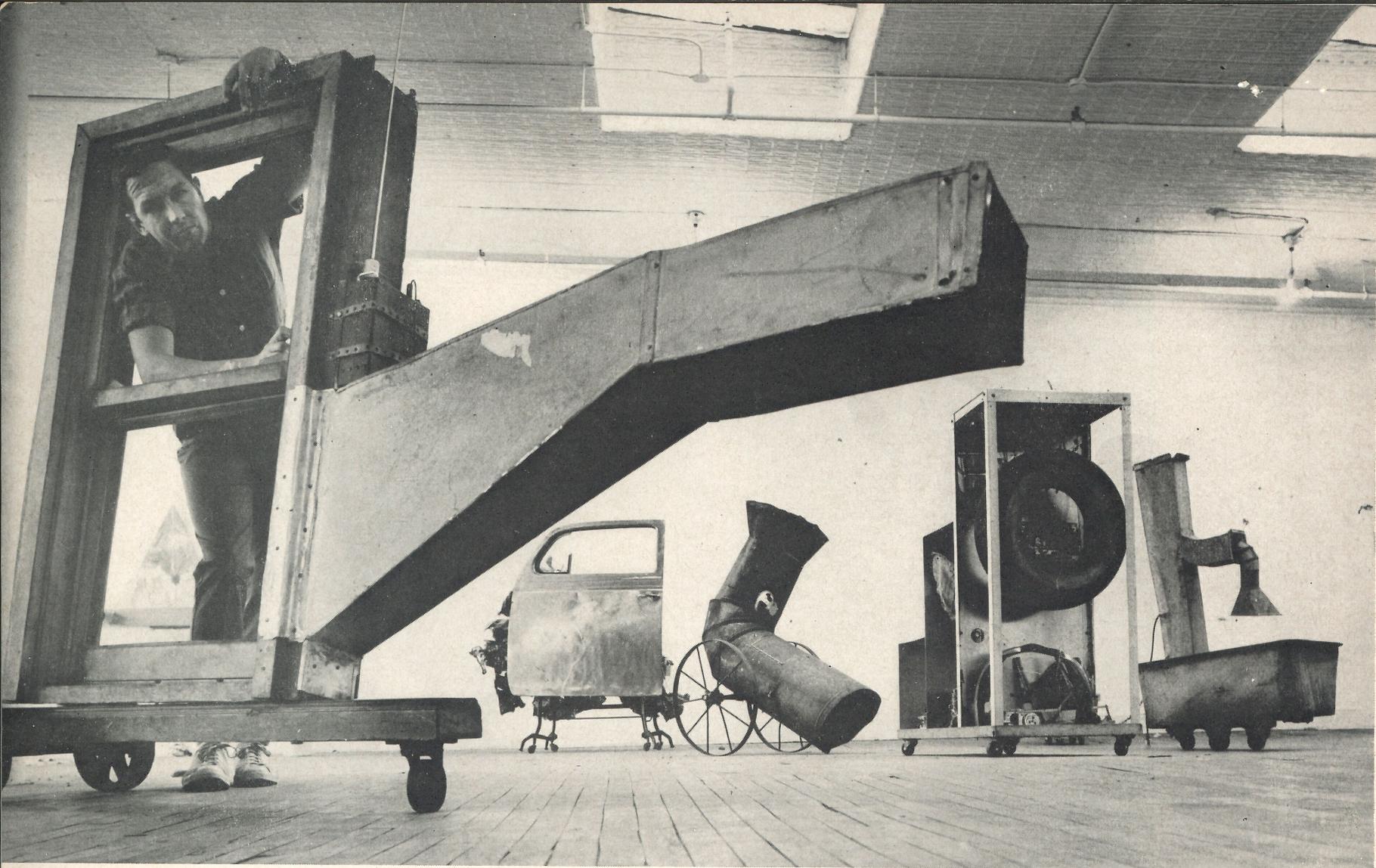




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*He investigated these possible associative qualities of materials in several experiments.*

"I did a painting in toilet-paper, then duplicated it in gold-leaf. I studied both very carefully and found no advantage in either: whatever one was saying, the other seemed to be just as articulate. I knew then that it was somebody else's problem—not mine."

*An artist who uses black because of established associations with death, and gold for its implications of elegance, is trading on known qualities in a way that Rauschenberg regards as dangerous for the life of the picture.*

"When someone close to you has been away it's only in about the first fifteen minutes that you're back together that you notice how he has changed from the idea you have of the way he looks. The same thing happens to a painting: when it becomes so familiar that one recognizes it without looking at it, the work has turned into a facsimile of itself. If you do work with known quantities—making puns or dealing symbolically with your material—you are shortening the life of the work. It is already leading someone else's life instead of its own."

*In recent years he has designed sets and costumes for the Merce Cunningham and Paul Taylor Dance Companies and while on tour has taken part in dance performances. He has also choreographed, directed and acted in a series of performances with dancers. Although these involve objects, the main motivation comes from dance.*

"I don't call these performances 'happenings'—happenings have to do with the animation of objects. Since they come out of my really quite traditional appreciation for dance, I would rather call them 'dance-theater.' I begin by just having an idea and if that idea isn't enough, have another idea and then a third and a fourth; composition could be described as an attempt to mass all these things in such a way that they don't interfere with each other. I never set up cause and effect sequences or action contrasts that are extreme: calmly or less calmly, episodes just happen to exist at the same time. One of my main problems is how to get a piece started and how to get it stopped without breaking into the sense of the continuation of the whole unit. I work very much the same way—composing in non-sequential relationships—that I do in painting.

"I like the necessity of working with people to put on a piece, and one of the reasons I have been preoccupied with theater is because of the extreme discipline necessarily demanded in working with other people."

*In December 1965 he staged several performances at the Film-Maker's Cinemathèque in New York (on a program with presentations by Claes Oldenberg and Robert Whitman) of "Map Room II," a development of a sketch he had initially designed and carried out at Goddard College as "Map Room I." In a final sequence he got into a pair of shoes embedded in glass-like blocks that reflected light from the floor.*

"I used my body as a conductor of electricity by holding a live coil in one hand; with the contact with neon tubes, they lit up (with different colors). I consider this more successful than some of my other pieces—maybe I've done enough to build a collective vocabulary. If one's body can be a conductor of electricity, there are all kinds of materials one could activate by hand. It's like moving the controls out onto the stage. I like the technicians to be visible and, if something has to be moved onto the stage, one does it in the most direct, simple fashion: you just walk over and put it there. I would rather not have the proscenium hiding everything. I nearly never choreograph expressions for people that I work with; they should not look as though they were doing something easily if it is necessarily difficult."

*In his work he exploits certain effects that appear accidental but this does not imply that he is motivated by an esthetic based on chance (as is his friend, composer John Cage).*

"I have certainly made use of the fact that paint will run. This is just a friendly relationship with materials—you want them for what they are rather than for what you can make out of them. One of my preoccupations was rather an intellectual idea. I tried to imply by the different ways that paint went on that even though I might know only seventeen ways, that there were actually thousands.

"I was interested in many of John Cage's chance operations and I liked the sense of experimentation he is involved in, but painting is just a different ground for activities. I could never figure out an interesting way to use any kind of programmed activity—and even though chance deals with the unexpected and unplanned, it still has to be organized.

"Working with chance, I would end up with something that was quite geometric; I felt as though I were carrying out an idea rather than witnessing an unknown idea taking shape.

"I did a twenty-foot print, and John Cage was involved because he was the only person with a car who would be willing to do this. I glued together fifty sheets of paper—the largest I had—and stretched it out on the street. He drove his A-Model Ford through the paint and onto the paper. The only directions he had were to try to stay on the paper. He did a beautiful job but I consider it my print."

*Persisting through a number of changes in color and materials are certain ways of composing that are the opposite of conventional design.*

"For years I've been concerned with the idea of a relaxed symmetry. I think of symmetry as a neutral shape as opposed to a form of design. If you are dealing with multiplicity, variation and inclusion as your content, then any feeling of complete consistency or sameness is a violation of that attitude. I had to try consciously to do a work that would imply the kind of richness and complexity I saw around me.

"One of my painter friends once said that I'm awfully good at the edges. This was intended as a joke but I think that it may be true: there's been a conscious attempt to avoid giving a dramatic preference to any area whether dead center or at a point where I have only half an inch before I hit the wall. I have ignored simple-minded ideas of formal composition by just putting something of no consequence at dead center."

*While critics have habitually credited Rauschenberg (along with Jasper Johns) with having launched many of the ideas and techniques that have become staples of pop art, some have failed to distinguish between his own attitudes and those of the artistic offspring. He was asked to clarify his own position vis-a-vis pop art.*

"The word 'pop' is more Hollywoodian than historian. Pop art decontaminated our art of stream-of-consciousness. We have a frontier country—the means have to be direct. Today in New York we have masters and matters of all sorts. Their voluntary cooperation indicates a certain amount of communication, tolerance and pleasure in each others' ideas. At the same time, I think that one of the aspects of my work that I criticize myself for the most is that so many people recognized it as a way of working, as an end in itself, so that the influence that the work has had on other artists who work in what they would call the same direction, is really a weakness of my concept. The reason: even the socially interesting misleads directly to the embalming of the work.

"I think that in the last twenty years there has been a new kind of honesty in painting where painters have been very proud of

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paint, let it behave openly though used for different reasons—just as many reasons as there are artists. For a long time one could see a brushload of paint almost as though the artist had just put it on the canvas and walked away (but now there's a new kind of paint that hides it because some artists were looking for, and then finding, a new medium—plastics).

"This was opposed to the older way of using paint only to build an illusion about something else or wanting only the color aspect. All of these things—elements of painting, such as line and color—are now being separated out, taken out of traditional relationships so that they function independently. Each one becomes a whole rather than a detail. And these elements will never fit back together to make anything we have seen. I think that it's a great time.

"In this new give and take, when an artist sees something exciting that another artist has done he is likely to say, as Larry Poons has: 'Well, now I don't have to do that.'"

*In contrast to the abstract expressionists who have generally preferred to stay within variations on major themes established in their maturity, Rauschenberg has moved restlessly from one style and material to another.*

"As far as style is concerned, I've run through a good many and it is always a pleasure to give them up . . . Yet I am not so facile that I can accomplish what I want to explore in one or two paintings. Sometimes a period, such as the all-red paintings or the ones I call 'pedestrian colors,' encompassed about fifteen paintings or it may go up to thirty. When I reach a stage where working in a certain way is more apt to be successful than unsuccessful—and it's not just a lucky streak—when I definitely see that this is the case, I start something else. Usually while I'm working one way there's another attitude that's growing up, a reaction to what I'm doing that almost may be the reverse of it.

"The problem when I started the Dante illustrations [thirty-four illustrations for "The Inferno," 1959] was to see if I was working abstractly because I couldn't work any other way or whether I was doing it by choice. So I insisted on the challenge of being restricted by a particular subject where it meant that I'd have to be involved in symbolism. An illustration has to be read; it has to relate to something already in existence and, well, I spent two-and-a-half years deciding that, yes, I could do that. All these statements can sound rather school-roomish—insisting that you force yourself to do something—but it's against my nature to be disciplined anyway; I have to strain a little to keep sanely free."

*When Life magazine commissioned him to do a new series of illustrations for Dante's "Inferno" (December 17, 1965) Rauschenberg had hoped to use lithography as the means of transferring images culled from the press but was prevented from doing so by legal and technical difficulties and had to return to the silk-screen technique he had used earlier. He found that working with twenty-five photographs (reduced to magazine scale on one screen) was "like having many palettes—instead of having colors laid out, there were all these images. Life readers saw in Rauschenberg's new "Inferno" illustrations, a series of juxtaposed images with recognizably specific references to concentration camps, the Bomb and episodes connected with the civil rights movement. Since these more readily identifiable elements represented a definite departure from the more ambiguous imagery of the earlier Dante series, I asked him if his point of view had changed.*

"Someone asked me yesterday: 'Do you really see modern life as all made up of hell?' Of course not. But if one is illustrating hell one usually uses the properties of hell. I've never thought that problems were so simple politically that they could be tackled directly in art works, not by me anyway, although in my personal life I do take

stands on atrocities of all kinds. But everyday, by doing consistently what you do with the attitude you have, if you have strong feelings, these things are expressed over a period of time as opposed to, say, one *Guernica*. That's just a different attitude. When I was doing Dante, the first series, it was election year and a historian would be able to read that this was when it was done. When you just illustrate your feeling about something self-consciously—that is for me almost a commercial attitude. If you feel strongly, it's going to show. That's the only way the political scene can come into my work—and I believe it's there. Consistently there has been an attempt to use the very last minute in my life and the particular location as a source of energy and inspiration rather than retiring into some other time or dream or idealism. I think that cultivated protest is just as dream-like as idealism."

*The free-standing metal forms wired for radio transmission that made up his 1965 exhibition at Leo Castelli called "Oracle" seemed a startling departure from his paintings. These sculptures followed (after a needed interlude of painting) a strenuous sculptural project he had carried out under great pressure in Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum. His interest in radio-equipped forms had begun with Broadcast, a painting with two knobs on the surface that enabled people to tune in different channels of its concealed radios.*

"I objected [in *Broadcast*] to the fact that one had to be standing so close to the picture that the sound didn't seem to be using the space the way the images were reacting to each other; I wanted to do one with remote control but I saw that the problem would be the one of weight and the depth that was needed to house the equipment.

"Painting was the wrong form. I became interested in sculpture after I returned from a dance tour with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company and made two additional pieces beside the one I had begun before [incorporating radios]. In these pieces the sound was literally important in shifting the focus of the audience; from the sound you had a sense of distance that, as often as not, was distorted. It had the feeling of knowing where you were but where you were was lost! Friends pointed out that I could have obtained similar sound effects in a far simpler way by recording and playing back radio sounds from a tape and I do not doubt that technically this could be done, but to me it was important to have the live sounds actually being broadcast at that moment in time. To have used a tape would have been like commercial art in the sense that it would be a rendering of the idea. I'd like for the sound to be as fresh as the daily fall of dust and rust that accumulates—that doesn't mean that from time to time one doesn't clean it off. This insistence on the piece operating in the time situation it was observed in, is another one of the ways of trying to put off the death of the work."

*Since Rauschenberg "likes very much this mixture of technology and esthetics," he thinks he is likely to pursue this direction after he moves to his new building on Lafayette Street.*

"I'd like to work with wind and water and plants. I have been thinking about a group of independent sculptural units that will form a single unit when combined. They will be sensitive to the proximity of the spectator—responding even to his body temperature—and they will be so delicately controlled by circumstance that two people viewing these forms will see something different from what is seen by either a crowd or one person. They will be responsive also to forces outside the jurisdiction of the viewer—to weather and passing traffic. Viewing of the work will not be completely dependent on seeing and the attention and desires of the viewer will be modified by circumstance. Constructed and viewed in the ground of darkness, (this work) will explore the nuances of not seeing and nearly not seeing. In darkness images can, literally, come and go."

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*"Pardonnez-moi, but isn't that a Rauschenberg?"*