RRFA 01: Robert Rauschenberg papers

Interviews: Raedeke, Paul / “Interview with Rauschenberg” / Photo Metro, 1983

I was an innovator at that time. What brought you to use photography in your college work? You could have drawn things in, is there something specific about a photograph that motivated you to use them?

They come free magazines, newspapers, and all one can use were my images. I used my kid is there every now and then. [laughs]

Up until a week and a half ago I would have said “never preconceived.” Now I’m collaborating with Trisha Brown and Laura Alderson in a theater event. I’m doing the costumes and the set. I’m lighting the set with four new college movies that I have to do next week—it’s only twenty-two minutes. And trick! It’s not asked one more second to that dance. I say! I don’t know how I’m going to do it anymore. I’ve never even done it before, so that makes it a bit different. However, I want our specific staff to take photographs to be interviewed onto the fabric that I’m making. This comes out of that. That was one of the first times I went out deliberately to take a picture.

I see the word “network” watch some of my mixed media. How do you transfer the photographs onto your collage?

Some are silhouettes, a lot of the image is color and regular areas where the image is one to one. I have solvents, and it’s through a press. I can use regular photographic stuff in the booth. I can use the contrast with the element of the contrast. I can use some of the low light stuff. (laugh) It’s a bit frustrating, particularly our economy falls out from under us—magazines are getting smaller and smaller, so the material I can use is getting smaller. You see these enormous, grotesque posters. I don’t know what in hell they do to that kind but you just can’t wrench it loose with anything.

What motivated the move toward more purely photographic work? Was there a need to break out of the public’s expectations about your work?

No, my biggest weakness is that I feel I have to break everything. I never give anything up.

But the Renaissance is over (laughs)! Do you think that the fact that your work blurs the lines between established media?

I hope it does. I’ve been trying to do that all my life.

Does it make it any more difficult for the public or the critics to understand it?

I hope so too. It’s awfully hard to keep the public awake. Their main direction is to ensure that the main purpose of the critique is to understand what you’re doing. And understanding means that they can’t go back to sleep. To describe what you’re doing in one of the lowest priorities. Anything that you say that’s coherent as an explanation is already impossible. All you’re doing is having the laugh.

Your painting and drawing are experimental, iconoclastic, even revolutionary. Your photographs seem to operate more within the framework of traditional concerns, closer to the mainstream. Is that something that is occasioned by the medium itself?

It’s funny. You see, my forte is college, which means I can crop and all sorts of things. That’s where I can get, embarrassingly cheap. My role as being traditional in taking pictures is the gentle of fitting that precise moment without cropping, without college, without any tricks.

Are you pre- or half frame?

Yes, one thing, a bird landing on my picture, is enough to make it not be mine.

Do you have less control over the resultant image?

Yes, being traditional I have much less control.

Does that change your approach to image making? It’s certainly a very different act to make a collage than to make a photograph.

I got an amazing assignment. You have never got someone in on an image and everybody turns and looks at you something like that (laughs). There is a certain amount of luck involved.

Right, and that’s part of the gamble too.

But there are elements of luck anyway, at least, they just take different forms.

But there isn’t that time element, which is a risk. A photograph can get up and walk away from you, a cloud can change, anything. It’s not just purgatory that sits on your pictures. (laughs) It’s not just that I could come back the next day at the same time and get a picture I missed—well, forget it! It just doesn’t work that way. But I can affect
in a painting studio. It doesn't really matter because there's not the original record there anyway. It comes together in a much different sense of time.

PR: But the danger you feel in the studio is the loss of direct contact with reality?

RR: That's right. That's the affectation that has to be maintained. There is no affectation when you're on the spot taking photographs.

PR: Are the concerns you deal with in photographic art different than those in your college?

RR: I don't think so. It's just all you try to keep everybody aware of as many differences in our life as they can stand.

PR: Someons wrote that you are more of a journalist than an artist.

RR: I said that I'm more interested in being a reporter than in being an aesthetician.

PR: Didn't you once, early in your career, conceive of a project to walk across the country and photograph every inch of it?

RR: Yes, and I kind of renewed that idea with a little more general scheme in the In and Out City Limits work. A lot of this work comes from that. I have portraits of different cities. I have nearly the whole East Coast now. I have hundreds of photographs of each city, and along the road—that's why it's called in and out City Limits. I just haven't had shows of all those things. I wanted to do the work and then come back to the town and show them what the town looked like. I've only done Los Angeles, New York, Boston, Fort Myers. I'm halfway through Chicago and Miami . . .

PR: So you're doing something like the original idea but with more spaces in between.

RR: Right. And I've expanded it to Sri Lanka, China and Bangkok which were not in the original plan. I may be the last American photographer that ever does Sri Lanka.

PR: Do you process and print your images yourself?

RR: Yes. I have an assistant who follows through—we work very closely together.

PR: I take it you are not hanging up on technique, that it's secondary. You once stated that you didn't necessarily desire a perfect photograph, if by perfect photography one means maximum contrast, light and darks and extreme focus.

RR: I like a good, honest photograph, as rich as you can make it. But if it doesn't come out that way and the image is there, then it doesn't matter. In focus, out of focus, that's not what makes the moment.

PR: You work mostly in 35mm and some 2 1/4. Do you work with normal length lenses or do you use wide and telephoto also for effect?

RR: That's my favorite one [pointing] and I don't even know what it's number is. It's a zoom, isn't it?

PR: Yes, I started using the zoom in the South. If I hadn't I wouldn't have had an ass full of bucketshot. You can be photographing somebody's clothesline and they'll come out and scream at you and curse you and call the police. People are so paranoid nowadays; they either think you're robbing a robbery or reporting them to the IRS. It's nothing so romantic as invading their privacy or stealing their spirits. [laughter]

PR: Have you had any formal photo education or did you teach yourself?

RR: I studied at a Black Mountain College.

PR: Wasn't Aaron Siskind there?

RR: Yes, and Callahan and duPonting too. Siskind was a friend of mine already from New York. He loves being a painter with his photographs, doesn't he?

PR: Have any of these people influenced your photography?

RR: Oh, I hope so! Actually all of them. The integrity and seriousness necessary to be an artist is something I learned from photographers before other painters. Painters seem to be a lot vaguer about values—intrinsic waves and ethics.

PR: Does this exhibition herald a new direction in your career? Are you moving more toward photography? The fact that you came here personally might suggest some particular importance in this work.

RR: No. I always hang my shows now if at all possible, and meet the people who look at it. That's my input. I give what I can. But don't think I don't take from what they say it's not superficial, it's very difficult. It's harder as a successful artist to maintain some one-to-one relationship with your work and its purpose. I could stay in New York or Cap- tive and just do work and ship it around and that would be perfectly acceptable. But I would be starving. If you're trying to communicate you have to have some kind of feedback.

PR: Speaking of success, does it ever concern you that a lot of the people who come tonight [to the reception] will be coming to see Rauschenberg rather than the photographs?

RR: I don't think they're coming here to do that. You never know when there might be a breakthrough and somebody might actually look at something. Early in the showed there was no bad reason to buy a painting. A lot of painter's get very paranoid about that, and very prissy.

PR: Not even if it's just to match the color of a sofa? [laughter]

RR: Even if it's not. It's never the most concept collector. Once that painting is out being seen, you never know what its influence is going to be. If somebody's maid goes home and talks to her children about it, something has happened.

PR: Do you feel the expectations that go with being a legend have helped you or hindered you? There are people who will ask why you're exhibiting photographs. You're a painter, after all. Why shouldn't Ansel Adams exhibit his paintings then?

RR: Let him try! [laughter] I'm not a professional record album man either [a reference to the recently released limited edition Rauschenberg covers for the new talking Heads album]. And I don't like it. I've never printed fabrics. I think it's marvelous, all these things you can use. If you just get a rich enough palate of activities you can knock down all of those hierarchies.

PR: Do you think your photographs, given your reputation, will be difficult to judge objectively?

RR: I hope so. I know for a fact that I could have set back somewhere in the late 60's or early 70's and just held my ground and raised the prices. But that's what isn't like to me. This show should make it clearer that I'm working for them and not for me. I'm just a website here, just the carrier. The only reason I'm in this business is to change people's minds about something or open their eyes.

PR: One article I read recently began with a quote to the effect that "although known presently as an artist, Rauschen- berg has recently begun to work as a photographer." Do you find that disconcerting?

RR: I don't know what that means. I think photographers are artists. I think musicians are artists. . .

PR: I'd say "insatiable." [laughter]

RR: I thought we'd gotten over those debates about a century ago.

PR: But obviously we didn't. We missed a few.

RR: Was there any particular reason you chose San Francisco for this exhibition?

RR: I came here just as I could get into PHOTO METRO! [much laughter]

The exhibition runs through October 28.