SPLASH Magazine interview with Robert Rauschenberg
Feb./March, 1985

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

A. The Salvage Series is a direct byproduct of my collaboration with Trisha Brown and Laurie Anderson in "Set and Reset."
While I was in the process of silk screening the fabric for the costumes, (my photos of architectural details from streets of New York City) we had to put something under the sheer fabric to catch the excess ink. The chance compositions that were created from the process suggested to me that we should put canvas there. We did; I liked the results. It was rich raw material. I let it develop into what is being recognized as the most recent change in my work. This is one example of why collaboration in all sorts of professions is so rewarding to me. (This is a formal thanks to Trisha, Laurie, and those wonderful dancers.)

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

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

Presently my priority preoccupation is a 22-nations and all continent cultural odyssey named R.O.C.I. (Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange). Its goal is to promote peace through direct artistic contact and exchange. People are not the trouble, ignorance is.
Q. You seem to have always been easily distracted from the actual production of art. Is this because you simply need other outlets for your creative energy, or because you tend to see these other activities as being part of your art?

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

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

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

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

A. I deal with both of them about the same, with suspicion. The notion that there is such a thing as "the public" doesn't interest me. Vitality is in the individual. There may be groups of singular agreement or disagreement, but without information or communication or individual thoughtfulness. The concept of public is a cowardly fantasy.
Q. You had several intimate friendships with other painters. How did you resist the competitive urge?

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

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

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

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

A. I think by now it might be overwhelmingly the work of nature.
Q. What role do you think abstraction plays in your work?

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

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

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

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

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

A. I have always considered Albers my greatest teacher. I learned from the exposure to his discipline that one could be certain and in control and remain right for the rest of his life, and it is a full time job. It is also a full time job to take chances, encourage curiosity, try things that you can't do and stop when you can. If you find the world exciting your work can communicate the hope for the future.
Q. Plato, in his Republic preferred the work of the craftsman
to the work of the artist, because the craftsman makes a copy
of a perfect form and the artist makes a copy of a copy.
Succeeding generations of artists seem to have overcome this
criticism, making it clear that art is not a copy of anything.
In view of modern art, and your own work in particular, what
is the difference between the artist and the craftsman?

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

(Note change in wording of question:)
Q. XXX Would your definition of art differ from that of Marcel
Duchamp?

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

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

A. My thrill is the trip, not the destination. The act of making
one thing is the beginning of another thing. It would be easy
for me to agree that I have done but one work and it is not
finished. The housing and retrospective attention is a separate
duty. (By the way, I am a collector myself.)
Q. You were raised by fundamentalist Christian parents. How much, if anything, of those fundamentalist attitudes do you still retain?

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

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

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

Q. You have always loved contributing to the fields of music, dance and theatre. Recently, you designed the Talking Heads album "Speaking in Tongues." How did that come about?
A. It was arranged through friends that I met David Byrne at Jim Rosenquist's place in New York City. We liked each other. The "Talking Heads" are the greatest. It was an honor to be associated with them.

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

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

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SALVAGE SERIES - TRISHA BROWN
SET + RESET

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

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

4. Do you agree with John Cage about indeterminate creation? For instance, do you consider his 4’33” to be analogous to your white paintings? I didn't but John did. If the WHT Paintings were...

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

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

7. Like Picasso and Braque, you and Jasper Johns were intimately and regularly involved with each other's work; yet unlike them, the two of you were going in different directions artistically. Was it difficult to retain your individuality?

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

9. Wasn't the erased de Kooning drawing an act of patricide, as Tomkins said?

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

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

12. Your work could hardly be called representational, yet you consistently use familiar objects and images, sometimes from other media, in your work. What part do these familiar images play?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

22. Because your design for the Talking Heads album proved too costly for general distribution, the record company issued another version of the album, without your design, along with the more expensive version. In 1957, John Cage asked you to design a program for a series of performances of his works, which he decided not to use, for similar reasons. When you start a project, what importance do you give to the time, effort or expense it will involve?

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

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Presently my priority preoccupation is a 22 nations + allcontinent cultural odyssey named R.O.C.I. (RAUSCHENBERG OVERSEAS CULTURAL INTERCHANGE). Its goal is to promote peace through direct artistic contact and exchange. People is not the trouble ignorance is.

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MUSI CIANS, AND VISITING FOREIGN CUL TURAL CELEBRITIES, AND I ALMOST FORGOT, SOME CLAIM JUMPING CRITICS MOVING IN ON THE FIRST WAVE OF NOTARIETY.

I THINK BY NOW IT MIGHT BE OVERWHELMINGLY THE WORK OR NATURE.

I AM NEVERSURE EVEN WHEN I USE IT, WHAT THE WORD 'ABSTRACTION MEANS'. WHEN AN IMAGE FROM THE REAL WORLD IS REPRESENTED BUT THE MATERIAL, SCALE, COLOR AND FORM ARE PUSHED TO THE BRINK OF NONRECOGNITION IS THAT ABSTRACT?

WHEN A COMMON, FAMILIAR OBJECT FROM THE REAL WORLD IS DISPLACED AND CONSIDERED IN A TOTALLY FOREIGN ENVIRONMENT WITH A NON UTILITARIAN FUNCTION IS THAT ABSTRACT?

YES, I'VE USED MY OWN PHOTOS IN WORKS SINCE EARLY 50'S BUT ONLY RECENTLY EXCLUSIVELY. MY CLOTHES, RAGS AND ARTIFACTS AND OBJECTS ARE AND HAVE BEEN UP FOR ART GRABS FOR WORKS.
I have always considered Albers my greatest teacher. I learned from the exposure to his discipline that one could be certain and in control and remain right for the rest of their life, and it is a full time job. It is also a full time job to take chances, encourage curiosity, try things that you can't do, and stop when you can. If you find the world exciting your work can communicate the hope for the future.

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1. Salvage Series
2. "Abstraction"
3. What Albers taught RR
4. Marcel Duchamp
   Art definition
5. Making Art vs. End product
6. James Lipton (+ press)
   + Tan ya + Dodge-M.
7. Good stuff
   bj. separate
   subjects
Interview Topics

> Salvage Series
> Philosophies
> Competition
> Early Influences
> Art in Arno Riviere
> 'Abstraction'
> Albers' Influence
> Artist vs. Craftsman
> Duchamp
> Parental Influence
> Janis Joplin
> Future of Art