

RRFA 01: Robert Rauschenberg papers

Interviews: Brooks, Rosetta / "Round the Block Once or Twice" / Modern Painters, 2005

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Hi Bob,

It was so great to see you again in LA a couple of weeks ago. Hope you had a terrific 80th birthday party. I thought of you as I winged my way to New York City. Did you make it back to Captiva at the beginning of the week?

Bradley may have told you that I would fax you the interview today (Saturday) before noon. However, I managed to 'buy' a little more time from the magazine. We actually did a lot of talking (as we always do), so it's a matter of organization. We also covered a lot of ground in terms of themes and ideas. Since Modern Painters wants only 1500 words, I'm thinking we might keep the interview quite tight, dealing primarily with the Combines. But perhaps, if it's OK with you, I might call Artforum and suggest something to them, too. There is certainly enough material for 2 pieces The Artforum (or another magazine) could be a combo article/interview. What do you think?

In any event, I'll email and fax the interview on Monday. And I'll run the idea by Bradley, too.

Hope I can make it to NYC to the Met preview. It would be great to see you again so soon.

In any event, take real good care of yourself. Love ya, Bob.

Rosetta

Round The Block Once or Twice

Rosetta Brooks

Interviews

Robert Rauschenberg

Gossip is serious business. Whenever Bob Rauschenberg and I get together we ‘gossip’ about his work. Here are the results of our most recent visit.

RB: For some reason, I’ve always thought that your Combines came about because you had a habit of walking round the block before the trash was picked up in the city, collecting what interested you and taking it back to the studio. Is that true?

RR: Yes. That’s right. I wanted something other than I could make myself and I wanted to use the surprise and the collectiveness and the generosity of finding surprises. And if it wasn’t a surprise at first, by the time I got through with it, it was. So the object itself was changed by its context and therefore it became a new thing.

RB: Why a surprise?

RR: To feed my curiosity. The objects’ uniqueness were what fed my curiosity. They didn’t have a choice but to become something new. Then you put them in juxtaposition with something else and you very quickly get a world of surprises.

RB: So by combining junk objects, you were making connections between objects and images that were normally enclosed in different private spaces and you were making new connections. When objects are thrown out as trash, they are also closed down spatially. Your juxtapositions and contrapositions in the Combines opened the space up again to reveal hidden connections in people’s lives, possessions, objects and spirits that had previously remained separate.

By the same token, the process you used to create the Combines (collecting trash from the street) opened us up to what the street really is and what the city really is. Our perception of both street and city changed. And by extension, the Combines also opened up the studio to its spatial surroundings. Like the street and the city, the studio then became a social gathering point. And *your* studio has continued to be that way ever since. The idea of 'the social' is a significant factor in all your work, isn't it? Throughout your career, you go through periods where you both surround yourself with junk, and you surround yourself with people

BB: It's the same thing really isn't it? They're both full of surprises.

RB: Do you think you were instinctively trying to change the conventional role of the artist as being isolated in his studio and cut off from the world and getting closer to the more tribal, more social approach of the artist as being part of the community, part of the world? Do you have a social agenda for your work? Because there seems to be a firm belief that art can change lives.

BB: If it can. If it doesn't, then it isn't art.

RB: You seem to use the political or cultural climate around you as just another object like a bed or a rooster or as just another color on your painter's palette. They feel solid, tangible.

RR: Or circumstances. They are.

RB: People have talked about the early Combines as explorations of the autobiographical. I've always had difficulty with that kind of interpretation. Are they autobiographical in any sense?

RR: Absolutely not. I was young. I had less experience. So that's what I had to draw on. Personal doesn't mean to me what it clearly means to others. The works are not autobiographical. I think the personal I knew was out of their reach.

RB: And maybe out of your reach initially. That may have been your reason for using that material in the first place - to discover what 'personal' was for you. You've always used your art as a tool to discover things rather than a tool to do things that you already know the answer to.

So when people interpret the work as autobiographical because you've used family photographs etc. how do you counter their interpretation?

BB: The photos combined with all the other material in the work are just presentations of information. I've heard it said that women are sentimental and men reminisce, so I thought I'd reminisce and see what it felt like. But it was a dangerous area. I was hesitant about going there because it was too familiar to me and I didn't want to spend too much time in that neighborhood because I used to live there.

RB: Yes, when I look at the early Combines, the fact that I see family photographs, some of which were and others which weren't taken by you, I see them as fragments plucked from the stillness of the past like all the other materials now sharing the same space as them. They are incidents, like all the other incidents occupying the same spatial plane. Retrospectively, what do you think your focus on the accidental and the incidental have contributed to your work and to art history generally? John Cage in "A year From Monday" tends to associate chance and the accidental in your work with synchronicity and the power of chance to reveal a hidden, predetermining force (a kind of mystical force). I sense that you are more of a libertarian. Would you describe your relationship to the accidental in a different way?

RR: Yes. Would you?

RB: Yes. I always think that accidents reveal something about technology. Paul Virilio said that 'the riddle of technology was the riddle of the accident'; that without accidents of old technology, we couldn't create newer technologies. So for me, the accidental (and the incidental) is revelatory. It's not about predetermination, it's about revelation. The accidental reveals, opens things up to scrutiny, investigation. The Combines are like small gatherings of heterogeneous obsolescence's. They are technological objects gathered together, stripped of their original function. You've brought them together in a sort of mutual visual dependence. In the Combines, they seem buoyed up as if avoiding the gravitational pull of redundancy and obsolescence and market turnover. They also look as though they're floating upwards, away from the wall or floor. And yet they *always* look like garbage. I love that. I love the idea informing the Combines; that you gather two or three things together on trash day and, in a way you've created a little world haven't you? You've created a memory by retrieving objects that belong to a world that's already lost, already gone but which now cohabits the same space and time if only as junk, garbage, trash, refuse. In a way it's a resistance to the cultural amnesia of the media world or the commodity world.

RR: Yes, yes.

RB: I guess that's a little different take on the accidental and chance than John Cage, who emphasized the concept of predetermination. I know he was very learned in the art of Zen too wasn't he?

RR: Yes John used to tease me that he'd spent years studying Zen and that I was just naturally Zen. I'd never been particularly curious about what Zen is because I think to understand it is to not understand it. It's beyond reason. But what it does is it gives you acres of intellectual airtime to wander around in.

RB: I think you're probably right. It's an attitude that certainly served you well through the years.

It's interesting that contemporary appropriation art has grown in scale over the years as if to avoid any kind of visual containment. For example, Richard Wilson appropriated the space of the Saatchi gallery in London by flooding it with gallons of sump oil. Or Rachel Whiteread appropriated a building by filling an entire house with concrete, then casting it in concrete. In essence she took the house away. These two artists seem to be examples of modern appropriators who seem less concerned with giving us a visual spectacle, than with giving us a spectacle that cannot be contained visually. It's like a non-spectacle, because you can't take possession of it. It makes you feel rudderless.

By contrast, your work is very seductively visual. It's also about that formal and distanced relationship with those things that we normally encounter in very different contexts. You draw attention to things we normally overlook.

RR: The unnecessary.

RB: Right. Contemporary appropriation artists seem to be looking for the visually anorexic. You seem to be giving us redemption through the visual and returning to us an attraction to the world again. For me a prime example of this would be to look at an installation work by British artist Tracey Emmins entitled *Ghost* (**check title**) and your combine *Bed*. I can imagine your *Bed Combine* may have seemed violent and shocking in its time, though your objective had nothing to do with shocking the viewer.

Emmins, on the other hand exhibited an unmade bed in a gallery. But her bed is all about abjection. Vodka bottles are stashed under the bed. Ashtrays full of cigarettes litter the floor around the bed. Yet it's a very, pristine, clean-looking bed. It looks as though the sheets are newly changed. But when we look at your *Bed* from 1959 with the paint smeared across it, it looks anything but pristine or sanitized. It's much more transgressive than the suggestion of transgression implied by Emmins bed. Hers is a staged event. It's theatrical in its neatness, sanitation and squalor.

BB: I think mine is like a bouquet of some of the most beautiful moments in bed.

RB: And that's precisely what being in bed sexually is about: transgression and beauty combined, right?

RR: It is, isn't it?

RB: Yes. But the contemporary appropriators aren't about to go there. There is an absence of the visual in their work, By contrast, your ideas of appropriation always seem redemptive, and while they may sometimes deplete or flatten, (like the Gluts or the Cardboard series), they never dissimulate. But the newer generation seems to want to throttle the life force out of the visually stimulating.

RR: Then they're shutting down the most luxurious aspect and the most mysterious aspect of art. It's the thing that most draws you into art.

RB: Well, I guess this is the eternal battle of the generations.

But the exhibition of your Combines at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in NYC and MOCA in LA is a retrospective of sorts. Retrospectives always make one look back. Do you think about your position or place in art? Do you think there was a defining moment for you in this amazing career of yours?

RR: Y'know there's a moment for everyone when you fall into your own shadow and the fact is that it's *your* shadow and you're forced to live in it. And this is nothing to celebrate or not celebrate. It simply *is*. We all do so many things in life, we have so many experiences, meet so many people, share so many ideas and somehow your shadow just catches up with you. (laughs)

Postscript

This is a section from an ongoing conversation with the artist.