

Robert Rauschenberg Foundation  
Hunter College MA in Art History

# Reading the Body in Untitled (*Venetian*)

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fig. 1

Robert Rauschenberg, *Untitled (Venetian)*, 1973  
Cardboard, canvas, leather, and rubber, 57 × 76 × 8 inches (144.8 × 193 × 20.3 cm)  
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

## Reading the Body in Untitled (*Venetian*)

In 1971, after his move to Captiva, Florida, Rauschenberg began creating work distinct in style, texture, and allusion from his earlier practice, due to new types of materials and the absence of transferred, mass-media imagery. He produced several significant series in the early 1970s, among them the *Cardboards* (1971–72), *Venetians* (1972–73), *Egyptian Series* (1973), and *Early Egyptians* (1973–74).<sup>1</sup> The *Venetians* represent his definitive turn towards Post-Minimalist or Anti Form aesthetics with works that exploit pliant materials and often traverse the wall and the floor, blurring distinctions between painting and sculpture.<sup>2</sup> These tendencies were inaugurated by Rauschenberg's Combines (1954–64), but reemerge in different ways a decade later. In the *Venetians*, the types and juxtaposition of objects often evoke the body by association (a chair or a bathtub, for example) or more viscerally, with soft shapes, gauzy fabrics, and things coiled and dangling. Untitled (*Venetian*) of 1973 (fig. 1) exemplifies these new characteristics. It contains quasi-geometric, cardboard elements that link it to the immediately preceding *Cardboard* series, but fashions a pillow “belly” and rubber “tail” to create a new kind of anthropomorphic assemblage.

Rauschenberg commenced the *Venetians* shortly after he visited Venice in May of 1972. During this pleasure trip, he was able to explore the city without the interruption of scheduled interviews or looming exhibition deadlines. While the artist had traveled to Italy much earlier in 1952–53 in the company of Cy Twombly, there is no evidence that they visited Venice; rather, his first trip to the city was in 1964 when he won the International Grand Prize in Painting at that year's Biennale. In his own words, he “began to work and tried to translate this still very vivid impression of elegance, of grandeur, of fragility and decay—this feeling of the city digging itself slowly into the waters, without us being able to do anything to help it.”<sup>3</sup> His assistant, Robert Petersen (who worked with the artist throughout the 1970s),<sup>4</sup> recalled that Rauschenberg often admired the faded draperies seen in the windows along Piazza San Marco that provided shade from the afternoon sun. This appreciation may account for the use of sun-bleached fabrics throughout the *Venetians*, which vary in material and have been worn with use.<sup>5</sup> Except in the occasional title, there are few specific references to the storied landmarks or architecture of Venice.

Originally numbering twenty-one in total (one is no longer extant), the *Venetians* are made of found, nontraditional art materials—namely tires, cardboard, metal, rope, and debris such as sticks and stones, in addition to fabric umbrellas, curtains, and sheets. They vary in how they are displayed. Nearly half interact with the wall and floor simultaneously, like Untitled

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### HOW TO CITE THIS ESSAY

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fig. 2

Robert Rauschenberg, *Untitled (Venetian)*, 1972. Cardboard and fabric,  $56\frac{1}{2} \times 54 \times 6\frac{3}{4}$  inches ( $143.5 \times 137.2 \times 17.1$  cm). Robert Rauschenberg Foundation.



(*Venetian*). Others are situated exclusively on the floor or are constructed in a way that bridges the floor and ceiling, such as the dramatic *Sor Aqua* (1973), which has a wood and metal component that hangs from above. Still others strictly occupy the wall. This group is more reminiscent of the *Cardboards* with their assemblage materials flattened and splayed, as with *Untitled (Venetian)* from 1972 (fig. 2). Most of the *Venetians* consist of found materials with subdued or neutral colors (the majority being tan, black, or brown), and hang, droop, or drape in ways that, once associated with the series title, poetically and materially evoke decay.

Though inspired by Venice, Rauschenberg executed the series upon his return, using materials at hand that he found in and around his Captiva residence. In many cases, therefore, it was the specific titles of individual pieces that conjured particular images of the city's architecture and history. While in Venice, Rauschenberg spent much of his time exploring the city with Michael Sonnabend, a historian (and husband of art dealer Ileana Sonnabend) who knew Venice well.<sup>6</sup> His titles were often derived from Sonnabend's informative tours. For some pieces, this meant taking words from old Italian. Mirta d'Argenzio argues the title *Sor Aqua* (which translates to Sister Water) is taken from the *Canticle of the Creatures*, ca. 1224, by St. Francis of Assisi: "the original title in thirteenth-century Italian," was "far too intellectual to be 'invented' or found by the artist by chance."<sup>7</sup> In the context of the Rauschenberg work, which prominently features a bathtub filled with water, "Sister Water" is likely a wry reference to the city's canals. In three other cases, the titles owe to famous Venetian buildings: *San Pantalone*, *Ca' Pesaro*, and *Sant'Agnese* (all 1973). Both *San Pantalone* and *Sant'Agnese* bear the names of churches, while *Ca' Pesaro* refers to a grand marble palace that is now an art museum. Although the majority of pieces remain untitled, these references to Venice make concrete Rauschenberg's inspiration, and represent the only "material" in the series actually taken from this city.

Typically, Rauschenberg worked quickly in his choice and means of assemblage. Petersen recalls the making of *Sant'Agnese* happened "instantly, within minutes. He took the two chairs, he put them like this, separated. And then he had a piece of cloth . . . then Bob attached the bottle and within five minutes, that was done."<sup>8</sup> Hisachika Takahashi, another assistant of the artist during this time, contributes another interesting view into Rauschenberg's working process: "I have a small drawing for *Sor Aqua*. First, he made the sculpture, then he made a drawing. Like Jasper Johns, first he makes the painting and then the drawing."<sup>9</sup> These observations indicate that Rauschenberg did not work in a linear fashion; rather it appears that memories of a place may have sparked associations with certain objects at hand or vice versa, and that drawings were less preparatory aids than records of a creative event.

Untitled (*Venetian*) is one of the later works in the series, although seventeen of the twenty-one *Venetians* were created that same year, 1973, making it difficult to determine the exact sequence of production. Rauschenberg constructed it mainly from three distinct materials (cardboard, fabric, and rubber), altered little from their found state, though completely removed from their original function. The main section consists of a canvas that was stripped from an umbrella and flattened against the wall into a square. Now transformed into a less recognizable shape, the umbrella was originally attached to Caterpillar equipment to shade the machine operators. The word "Caterpillar" is printed on the reverse left and right sides of the canvas, giving it the quality of a veil. Although umbrellas frequently appear as objects and as images in Rauschenberg's Combines and silkscreen paintings (1962–64), this example was appropriated for its fabric, rendering its original use all but irrelevant. Small stains patinate the surface of the cloth; however, instead of detracting from the work, these blemishes provide a texture of gentle decay, reminiscent of Venice. From the center of the sun-bleached canvas, a long piece of rubber, taken from an old tire or perhaps a machine belt, falls from the wall to the ground, a remarkable move by the artist that incorporates a motif common to his oeuvre—the tire.

On the left side of Untitled (*Venetian*), an arrow-like assembly of two cardboard boxes protrudes from the wall. The first one maintains a square shape, while the one at far left is highly deformed and crushed. It bears a label that reads "Part No.," which can still be clearly seen on its sides. Both of these boxes, like the adjacent canvas, retain traces of earlier mildew stains. Rauschenberg attached the boxes to thin wood boards adhered on the back of the fabric, invisible to the viewer except for the glue stains on the left and right side of the canvas.

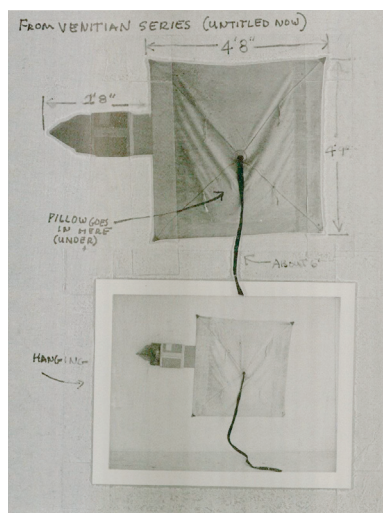
Rauschenberg inserted a pillow underneath the flattened canvas, pushing the piece further into the viewer's space and endowing it with an anthropomorphic quality. The exact dimensions of this bodily protuberance can vary, as demonstrated by an installation diagram featured in the catalogue of the 1973 exhibition *Soft as Art* (fig. 3). The introduction of chance was typical for the artist but dovetailed with anti-form practices that had entered into the art world by the mid-1960s. Untitled (*Venetian*) was not the first piece in this series to connect the wall and floor in

fig. 3

Diagram of Untitled (*Venetian*) reproduced in exhibition catalogue, *Soft as Art*, published by New York Culture Center, 1973.

fig. 4

Robert Rauschenberg, *Franciscan II (Venetian)*, 1972. Fabric, cardboard, tape, string, and stone, 72 × 116 × 47 ½ inches (182.9 × 294.6 × 120.7 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York.





such a way; *Franciscan II (Venetian)*, an earlier work in the series, also features a square piece of fabric hanging on the wall, with cardboard flourishes, like arms, extending from each side (fig. 4). Here the artist created the protruding “belly” of the Saint’s figure by a taut line of string joining to a rock on the floor, an object that resembles a skull. The manipulation of found materials to suggest bodily forms and textures also evidence Rauschenberg’s awareness and adaptation of the anti-form aesthetic.

After moving to Captiva, the artist stated “a desire built up in me to work in a material of waste and softness. Something yielding with its only message a collection of lines imprinted like a friendly joke. A silent discussion of their history exposed by their new shapes. Boxes.”<sup>10</sup> This desire came to fruition through the *Cardboards*, the first series produced in his new home. His novel focus on a single material, as opposed to the heterogeneity of the Combines is striking in ways visual and sociological. Cardboard was ubiquitous, cheap, and abundant. Perhaps what interested Rauschenberg most about the cardboard box was its identity as a “consumer object that is not consumed, the remainder of commodities, the container disregarded for its contents.”<sup>11</sup> The *Cardboards* did not entail the use of something previously owned, filled with sentiment and nostalgia, as was the case with most of the objects in the Combines. Instead, the boxes were simply—and fully—empty, the former containers of more valuable items.

fig. 5

Robert Rauschenberg, *Nabisco Shredded Wheat (Cardboard)*, 1971. Cardboard, 70 × 95 × 11 inches (177.8 × 241.3 × 27.9 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Gift of Robert Rauschenberg Foundation and Committee on Painting and Sculpture Funds.



fig. 6

Robert Rauschenberg, *Untitled (Cardboard)*, 1972. Cardboard, tape, and rubber hose, 52 ½ × 107 × 11 inches (133.4 × 271.8 × 27.9 cm). Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona.



The *Cardboards* had already introduced an anti-form approach through the use of an everyday and malleable material: in many cases, Rauschenberg reduced the structured, geometric box into something flat, sagging, or even disintegrating. Most of the pieces in this series are mounted on the wall, such as *Nabisco Shredded Wheat (Cardboard)* of 1971 (fig. 5). The boxes indicate their original purpose and brand identity, some left intact and others deconstructed. As the *Cardboard* series progressed, other materials appeared, and Rauschenberg experimented with connecting the wall and the floor in ways that anticipated the *Venetians*. In *Untitled (Cardboard)* of 1972 (fig. 6) one fully intact box juts out, while the brutally flattened ones to its left expand, paradoxically, into beautiful organic shapes that seem to flourish on the wall. It recalls the arrow-shaped cardboard assemblage of *Untitled (Venetian)* that functions like a directional sign, and similarly draws the viewer's eye to the left.

The most significant shared component of *Untitled (Cardboard)* and *Untitled (Venetian)* is the rubber appendage emerging from the materials and coming to rest, evocatively, on the floor. The tire motif had earlier appeared in the center of *80 Ft. (Cardboard)* of 1971 (fig. 7), though in the form of treads left imprinted across the surface. It is reminiscent of Rauschenberg's infamous *Automobile Tire Print* (fig. 8) made in collaboration with John Cage in 1953. In *80 FT. (Cardboard)*, however, this indexical sign did not result from a collaboration with another person, but from chance—an image ready-made in the found materials.

All told, the role of the tire remnant in *Untitled (Venetian)* is arguably more provocative than anything found in the *Cardboards*. The work's visceral and scatological qualities had preoccupied Rauschenberg from almost the beginning of his career, according to art historian Helen Molesworth. In her essay "Before Bed" (a reference to Rauschenberg's canonical 1955 Combine), she describes "the uneasiness and disgust that accompany the intense visual pleasure" of the artist's black paintings (1951–53).<sup>12</sup> The artist reveled in the texture and sensual feeling of the paint, using his hands, making messes with it, or as he stated, "I couldn't stand a brush coming between me and the canvas."<sup>13</sup> According to Molesworth, Rauschenberg wanted to "have the painting be on his body, and conversely, to have his physicality be on the canvas," and connects this idea to the artist's excremental fantasies.<sup>14</sup> In this sense, the black paintings "manifest the desire to explore the interior body through what might be called 'bodily knowledge.'"<sup>15</sup> Rauschenberg did not reserve this physicality only for his paintings. *Monogram* from 1955–59 is a pertinent example: this Combine contains a stuffed Angora goat encircled by a tire, its neck and head protruding through the center, with smears of paint covering the goat's face. The allusions to bodily orifices in *Monogram* find echoes in *Untitled (Venetian)* from 1973 (fig. 9), where a large stick (reminiscent of the handle of a gondola oar protruding from the

water) leans against the wall, prodding and propping up a tire.

As described earlier, *Untitled (Venetian)* prominently features a black rubber cord emerging from an orifice at the peak of the pillow's protrusion, which can be seen as a tail, or as an excretion from the inside (fig. 1). Additionally, the canvas is covered in stains, including the glue remnants, which, while evidencing the artist's hand, are also

fig. 7

Robert Rauschenberg,  
*80 FT. (Cardboard)*, 1971.  
Cardboard, 51 ¼ × 82 ½ ×  
6 ¾ inches (130.2 × 209.6 ×  
17.1 cm). Robert Rauschenberg  
Foundation.



fig. 8

Robert Rauschenberg,  
*Automobile Tire Print* (detail),  
1953. Monoprint: house  
paint on 20 sheets of paper,  
mounted on fabric, 16 ½ × 286  
inches (41.9 × 726.4 cm). San  
Francisco Museum of Modern  
Art. Purchase through a gift of  
Phyllis Wattis.

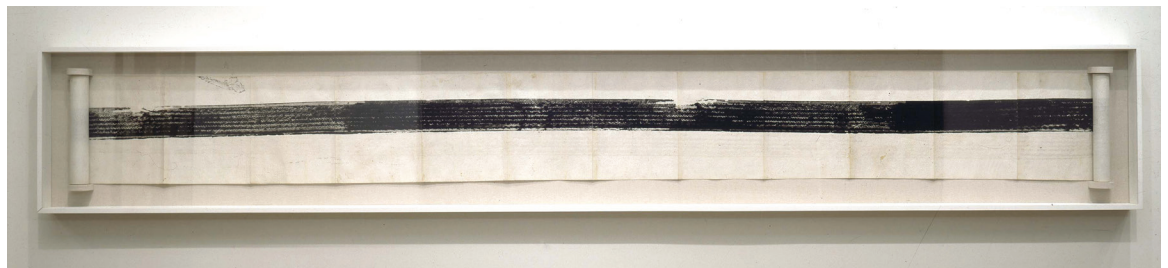


fig. 9

Robert Rauschenberg, *Untitled (Venetian)*, 1973. Tire and wood pole, 109 1/2 x 26 1/2 x 19 inches (278.1 x 67.3 x 48.3 cm). Robert Rauschenberg Foundation.



fig. 10

Eva Hesse, *Total Zero*, 1966. Acrylic, polyurethane, papier-mâché, plastic, metal, rubber, 27 x 27 x 36 inches (68.6 x 68.6 x 91.4 cm). © The Estate of Eva Hesse. Courtesy Hauser & Wirth.

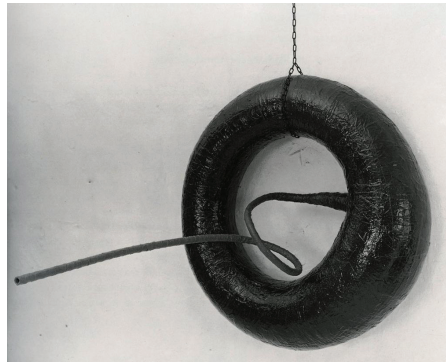
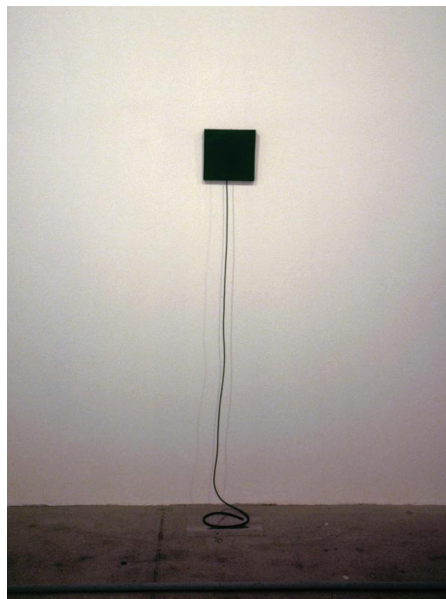


fig. 11

Eva Hesse, no title, 1966. Paint, papier-mâché, wood shavings, unknown modeling compound, wood, rubber, 9 x 9 x 1 inches (22.9 x 22.9 x 2.5 cm). © The Estate of Eva Hesse. Courtesy Hauser & Wirth.



suggestive of excretions—an indication of uncleanness left by the body.<sup>16</sup> Yet the exact insides remain unknowable and tantalizingly mysterious. The work hangs at eye level with the viewer, the body of the work in confrontation with the body of the viewer. It appears “pregnant” because of the swollen center, and, consequently, the hanging strip of rubber takes on the look of an umbilical cord emerging from a navel. This alternative reading of the dangling appendage—more umbilical cord than tail or excrement—compares to uterine forms found in certain sculptures by Eva Hesse, whose work Rauschenberg would have known by this time. *Total Zero* (fig. 10) from 1966, for example, consists of a tire-like object that at first glance may look like a coiled tube connected to a valve. This work has been interpreted as representing the female reproductive system, implying “both uterine container and slashed umbilicus.”<sup>17</sup> Hesse's pieces often feature clusters of thin, tangled threads that traverse the wall and floor, or a single string hanging down and coiled, as is the case with the 1966 no title (fig. 11), in a manner remarkably similar to the rope and rubber found in several of Rauschenberg's *Cardboards* and *Venetians*.

That Rauschenberg's work of the early 1970s can be understood in the context of Post-Minimalism is confirmed not only by comparisons to Hesse's work, but also by the exhibition history of *Untitled (Venetian)*. It was shown in the 1973 exhibition *Soft as Art* at the New York Cultural Center and the following year in *Art Now 74: A Celebration of the American Arts* at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C., alongside pieces by artists such as Vito Acconci, Robert Morris, and Keith Sonnier.<sup>18</sup> The style and materials found in the *Venetian* series on the whole reveal that, despite his relocation to Captiva—and despite the exotic title of the series—Rauschenberg remained very much engaged with developments in the New York art world.



## ENDNOTES

- 1 Leah Dickerman and Achim Borchardt-Hume, eds., *Robert Rauschenberg*, exh. cat. (New York and London: The Museum of Modern Art and Tate Publishing, 2016), p. 286. Also see "Chronology, 1972–1973," Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, accessed December 21, 2018.
- 2 Anti Form is a term often used in conjunction with Post-Minimalism to describe the principle that an artwork should evolve from the inherent qualities of a given material, which is often subjected to chance operations and routine actions. This term comes from Robert Morris's essay by the same name, where he emphasized that process is often invisible in anti-form art, but materials therefore become more visible. See Robert Morris, "Anti Form," *Artforum* 6, no. 8, April 1968.
- 3 Rauschenberg quoted in Irmeline Lebeer, *L'Art? C'est une meilleure idée!* (Nîmes, France: J. Chambon, 1997), p. 124, as cited in Dickerman and Borchardt-Hume, *Robert Rauschenberg*, p. 292.
- 4 Robert Petersen, "Biography," Robert Petersen Fine Art, accessed December 20, 2018.
- 5 Mary Lynn Kotz, *Rauschenberg: Art and Life*, rev. ed. (1990; repr., New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2004), p. 189.
- 6 The Reminiscences of Robert Peterson, 2014–2015. *Robert Rauschenberg Oral History Project*. Conducted in collaboration with INCITE/Columbia Center for Oral History Research. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, pp. 363–64.
- 7 Mirta d'Argenzio, "Robert Rauschenberg: Travelling" in João Fernandes, *Robert Rauschenberg: Em Viagem 70–76 / Robert Rauschenberg: Travelling '70–'76* (Porto: Fundação de Serralves, 2007), p. 56.
- 8 The Reminiscences of Robert Peterson, p. 364.
- 9 D'Argenzio, "Robert Rauschenberg: Travelling," p. 56n41.
- 10 Robert Rauschenberg, "Note: Cardbirds" in Cardbirds (Los Angeles: Gemini G.E.L., 1971), n.p. Quoted in João Fernandes, *Robert Rauschenberg: Em Viagem 70–76*, p. 24.
- 11 Mark Godrey, "'Source and Reserve of my Energies': Working from Captiva," in João Fernandes, *Robert Rauschenberg: Em Viagem 70–76*, p. 24.
- 12 Helen Molesworth, "Before Bed," *October* 63 (Winter 1993): p. 71.
- 13 Barbara Rose and Robert Rauschenberg, *An Interview with Robert Rauschenberg by Barbara Rose* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987), p. 23; quoted in Molesworth, "Before Bed," p. 73.
- 14 Molesworth, "Before Bed," pp. 74–75.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 76.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 79.
- 17 Robert Pincus-Witten, *Postminimalism into Maximalism: American Art 1966–1986* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Books on Demand, 2007), p. 48.
- 18 Mario Amaya, *Soft as Art*, exh. cat. (New York: New York Culture Center, 1973), n.p. See Peter Schjeldahl, "Let's Be Flexible, But Let's Not Be Flabby," *New York Times*, April 1, 1973. Nina Sundell and Anne Sue Hirshorn, eds., *Art Now 74: A Celebration of the American Arts*, exh. cat. (Washington, D.C.: John F. Kennedy Center for Performing Arts, 1974), pp. 91–95.