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Robert Rauschenberg, Performance and the Visual Arts in the 1950's and 60's

This paper will consider Robert Rauschenberg's use of performance to further explore ideas already embedded within his visual artworks. His compositional processes and operational strategies will be scrutinized to distinguish commonalities and dissimilarities in his approaches. In particular, Rauschenberg's effort to conflate seemingly disparate genres or concepts will be examined not as a mere act of blending, but as a method of juxtaposition that allows differences to coexist and manifest into an artwork not already defined.

Rauschenberg's performance piece, *Pelican* (1963), was originally staged in a roller-skating rink and featured Rauschenberg, Per Olof Ultvelt, Carolyn Brown, and two pair of bicycle wheels on axles. The men performed on roller skates with a multi colored, parachute-like apparatus attached to their backs. Critic Erica Abeel describes their entrance, "the two male dancers entered the rink in wheelbarrow fashion, their hands pulling their bodies forward as their padded knees rested on the chromed axles of the bicycle wheels."<sup>1</sup> The prominence of the bicycle wheels increase when one considers that *Pelican* was made in honor of Orville and Wilbur Wright, as do the apparatus on the men's backs; perhaps inspired by a parachute, spokes in a bicycle wheel, or a propeller on a plane.

In many ways, *Pelican* is Rauschenberg's most traditional performance piece. In figure 1 we see Carolyn Brown, a classically trained dancer and member of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, executing a technically demanding balletic leap. Wearing pointe shoes and employing the skills of a highly trained dancer, Brown's actions forces both the performer and

audience into pre-established roles where the viewer is pedestrian and the performer, hyper-physical.

In another image of the performance (fig. 2), Rauschenberg and an unidentified dancer (perhaps Ultvelt, though Steve Paxton and Alex Hay were also credited performers) parallel Brown's concentration and deliberateness as they execute partnering moves. Partnering a ballerina or dancer on pointe is a serious enterprise. The ballerina is often completely dependent on her partners for support, and her safety is largely in their hands; a wrong move could end or impede a career. This style of partnering necessitated, especially with the men on skates, that the choreography be predetermined and carefully rehearsed, as in a traditional performing company.

Figure 3 is a widely used shot of *Pelican*. With his head lowered, Rauschenberg exhibits strength and drive as he pushes forward, offering the viewer a visceral opportunity to careen and soar. Figure 4, a detail from Rauschenberg's lithograph, *Autobiography* (1968) shows another view of *Pelican*, a kind of statuesque portrait or heroic pose, a traditional concept of the "can do" American male; with wind in his sails, the far sighted adventurer fearlessly goes forward, behold, the intrepid inventor creates flight.

One of the pitfalls of using photographs to talk about performance, especially these well-known photographs, is that "A single image often becomes iconic, that is, it comes to represent an entire event."<sup>2</sup> Up to this point, I have set aside the avant-garde nature of *Pelican* and used the photographs to focus on the traditional aspects of the performer's physical posture or choreographic execution. But photographs take the images out of context and isolate a spatial section or moment of the performance, permitting my focus on tradition to be merely one of many interpretations that an analysis of these images could emphasize without telling us much about the actual performance.

A different approach would be to emphasize the avant-garde methods of *Pelican's* creative process, such as costuming the performers in sweatpants. Doing so emphasized the performers ordinariness and non-hierarchical relationships and cast a quotidian aura that rejected the spectacle of elaborate costuming associated with "characters" or "roles" employed by conventional performing genres. The *Pelican* performers were workers, executing their chores in a non-theatrical, matter of fact way. Steve Paxton; dancer, choreographer and close colleague stated, "In his [Rauschenberg's] choreography, he animated people with tasks within images: the task of the men in *Pelican*, for example, was to wear the animating parachutes and skates and to kneel and wheel."<sup>3</sup>

In figure 3, Rauschenberg's dynamic, forwardly aggressive posture was not a premeditated attempt to communicate meaning, or create a symbol or metaphor as practiced in traditional ballet and modern dance. The movement was simply dictated by his props and costume, that is, his posture was a result of restrictions placed on his body as he moved through space. It was a joint effort, he and his materials were performing together, Rauschenberg explained:

"I've always felt as though, whatever I've used and whatever I've done, the method was always closer to a collaboration with materials than to any kind of conscious manipulation and control...I'd really like to think that the artist could be just another kind of material in the picture, working in collaboration with all the other materials."<sup>4</sup>

This methodology is an important departure from the Abstract Expressionistic aesthetic of a masterly display of the artist's tools and techniques to reveal his soul. Though Rauschenberg studied with and was colleagues of several Abstract Expressionist painters, and continued to exploit Abstract Expressionistic traits, such as the gestural stroke (figs. 5 and 6), he chose not to utilize the imposition of will to create a painting. He did not want to be the great initiator and conductor, but simply a participant in the art-making process. Unlike the Abstract

Expressionists, he saw the conception of the aggrandized artist struggling to expose his inner self as limiting, the final artistic product could only be as good as the artist. But as a collaborator, the work of art could go beyond the artist, staying open to possibilities, one could work with any material or idea and the work of art could become wider and stronger than any singular artist.

The operational strategy of "staying open to possibilities" is at the core of Rauschenberg's work, in all disciplines. As an open and passive receptor, one could allow the beauty that was everywhere and in everything to appear. By not imposing his will or predetermined ideas, Rauschenberg was able to juxtapose images without requiring them to define or relinquish their differences. Without a pre-conceived artistic vision he was able to allow the performers, images or objects and their counterparts to co-exist without demanding a fusion into metaphor or language that was designed to communicate a message.

In the spring of 1963, nearly simultaneously with the premiere of *Pelican*, Rauschenberg's *Random Order* (figs. 7 and 8) appeared as a five page spread in the periodical *Location*. Art historian Rosalind Krauss calls it a manifesto declaring a new direction from the assemblage-based work of his so-called, Combines. "This was a shift to photography not only as the image bank on which his pictorial practice would then rely...whether in the form of the silk-screened paintings of the early 1960's, or the audience-activated works, such as *Soundings* (1968)...but as a new conception of the pictorial itself."<sup>5</sup>

Krauss sees the presumably inherent opposition between photography's contingency and framing, and painting's compositional program and gravitational center, no longer applicable in *Random Order*. Supporting her argument is Rauschenberg's text next to the open window in figure 8, "Air volume can be compressed and flattened to the extent that a brushload of paint can

hold it to a picture surface."<sup>6</sup> With this statement Rauschenberg takes us through the (Renaissance) window frame, back into the voluminous air of illusory space, then assimilates this use of perspective to the picture plane with a "brushload of paint." Krauss continues, "what we have is not the opposition between the indexically produced image (the photograph...) and the iconically constructed one (the painting...), but somehow, magically, their conflation."<sup>7</sup>

As in Krauss's estimation of *Random Order*, Rauschenberg's experimental methods of composition in *Pelican* do not obstruct traditional performance conventions. The men on roller skates executing pedestrian tasks, do not denounce the balletic choreography of Brown, but enhance it, and co-existed along the same line of action. This course of action supporting simultaneous events is a compositional method influenced by Rauschenberg's association with John Cage and Merce Cunningham.

Musical composer John Cage had a wide and deep influence on many prominent postwar avant-garde artists in a variety of disciplines. After studying music with Arnold Schonberg, he pursued an interest in Zen Buddhism, was inspired by Marcel Duchamp's *readymades* and became close colleagues with the artist, instigating what some refer to as a Neo-Dada movement. While teaching at Black Mountain College in 1952, Cage delved into Antonin Artaud's *The Theatre and its Double*, which encouraged the rejection of narrative and simultaneity of disparate events. Coupling these readings with his work in chance procedures, Cage presented *Theatre Event #1* or *Black Mountain College Event*, which has been widely regarded as the first postwar *happening* or hybrid performance event. In the event, Cage lectured from a step ladder and sometimes stopped and just listened, David Tudor played the piano, M.C. Richards and Charles Olsen read their poetry from ladders, Rauschenberg hung his *White Paintings* (1951) from the

ceiling as he played recordings on an old gramophone, and Merce Cunningham danced in and around the audience.

Beginning in the early 1940's, Cage's collaborations with choreographer and dancer Merce Cunningham broke with many performance conventions, notably narrative and musically synchronized presentations. Cunningham stated, "We have chosen to have the music and the dance act as separate identities...one not dependent on the other, but they coexist, as sight and sound do in our daily lives."<sup>8</sup> Cunningham also declared that any movement, no matter how commonplace, such as walking, sitting or standing could be used for dance (as in Rauschenberg's use of everyday objects.) Because his choreography had no linear development, or hierarchy among the performers, there was no need for a central focus; every part of the stage, at any time, was as important as any other part, (not unlike Pollock's "all-over" compositions.) Cunningham used these radical concepts, while simultaneously training his dancers in a style combining conventional ballet and modern dance. Such practices served Cunningham well, as he is widely regarded as an essential bridge from modern to post-modern dance

These inclusive approaches to artmaking espoused by Cage and Cunningham deeply marked Rauschenberg, who worked with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company (Cage was an integral part of the company from its inception) as a set, costume and lighting designer from 1954 to 1964, collaborating on 21 dances.

In 1960 Cunningham invited Robert Dunn to teach a composition workshop at the Cunningham dance studio. Dunn had studied music composition with Cage at the New School and utilized many of Cage's compositional ideas in his classes, particularly those dealing with chance procedures. Among the students in the 1960-61 classes were many of the pioneers of postmodern dance, such as Yvonne Rainer, Steve Paxton, Simone Forti, Trisha Brown, David

Gordon, Deborah Hay, and Rauschenberg. On July 6, 1962 (the same year Rauschenberg discovered the silkscreen process and started formulating *Random Order*) Dunn organized the first concert of his students work at the Judson Church. Rainer and Paxton maintained the group's momentum and created what came to be known as the Judson Dance Theatre. In April, 1963, Rainer presented *Terrain*, with lighting design by Robert Rauschenberg.

As the Judson Dance Theatre was aligned with the teachings of Cage and Cunningham, and supported and presented untrained dancers and choreographers, Rauschenberg was well positioned to expand from creating two and three-dimensional works to performance pieces. He continued to work with Rainer, and performed in her works *We Shall Run* (1963) and *Parts of Some Sextets* (1964-65) (fig. 9). Rainer's works were often based on textual instructions, chance procedures, improvisation and game structures that emphasized the everydayness of life (like Rauschenberg's visual art) and proved to be an excellent training ground for an inexperienced choreographer.

As Rainer's individual performance aesthetic developed, she defined her stance in a 1965 declaration:

"NO to spectacle no to virtuosity no to transformations and magic and make-believe no to the glamour and transcendency of the star image no to the heroic no to the anti-heroic no to trash imagery no to involvement of performer or spectator no to style no to camp no to seduction of spectator by the wiles of the performer no to eccentricity no to moving or being moved."<sup>9</sup>

Rauschenberg shared many of Rainer's interests in breaking with stultifying dramatic traditions and searching for alternative methods and modes of performance. However, in keeping with the tolerant juxtapositions Krauss identifies in *Random Order*, and the inclusive operational strategies of Cage and Cunningham, Rauschenberg circumvented Rainer's exclusionary method of negation. Commenting on Rauschenberg's relation to Rainer's

declaration, Branden Joseph suggests: "since his [Rauschenberg's] own artistic project had, for more than a decade, been engaged in problematizing such a direct form of aesthetic negation-- instead positing difference on the unstable edge between a spectral, shifting negation and an affirmation of difference as a positive force."<sup>10</sup>

It should be noted however, that this "difference as a positive force," was not a routine celebration of opposites. Even though Rauschenberg's working strategy was to remain "open," his interactions with conventional theatre and Abstract Expressionism involved radical negations and harsh rejections. But unlike Rainer's unmovable "NO," Rauschenberg's negations did not paralyze its counterpart, but through Joseph's "shifting negation" allowed him to stay flexible in the process, he did not have to maintain a pre-meditated stance of contrariness, but was able to remain available to possibilities.

In his 1961 article, *On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist and His Work*, John Cage offered a description of Rauschenberg's "Combine painting," *Rebus* (1955) (fig. 10), though it could also be used to describe *Pelican*:

"This is not a composition. It is a place where things are, as on a table or on a town seen from the air: any one of them could be removed and another come into its place through circumstances analogous to birth and death, travel, housecleaning, or cluttering."<sup>11</sup>

Like *Rebus*, *Pelican* lacks traditional compositional elements, in its case, linear narrative and synchronicity of movement and music (Rauschenberg created a sound score of random noises.) As a performance event, *Pelican* happens in "a place" and the analogies to the transfer of objects through everyday circumstances can be seen in the quotidian attitudes, postures and tasks of the performers.

While it is obvious that *Pelican* happens in a place, it is less so for *Rebus*. To understand Cage we must eschew our view of art on a wall as a painting and see *Rebus* as an object. Putting aside our reliance on a purely optical perception of a painting where we experience it in our mind (the "disembodied eye" of Formalism,) Cage asks us to see *Rebus* as a thing in the room with us (the "corporeal eye" of Minimalism.) As an actual thing, we could put other things on it, making it "a place where things are."

While *Rebus* does not confront our space like a Minimalist construction, Rauschenberg does subordinate the relational unity of traditional pictorial composition to his treatment of the objects in *Rebus*. Bypassing compositional constraints, the objects in *Rebus* could then be seen to be arranged by other requirements, such as the force of gravity. Of course it seems illogical to consider gravity arranging a vertically oriented object like a stretched canvas hung on a wall. Gravity only functions on horizontal planes.

Leo Steinberg addresses these issues in his 1972 essay, *Reflections on the State of Criticism*,<sup>12</sup> arguing that painters made their pictures as part of an optical interaction with nature: "The top of the picture corresponds to where we hold our heads aloft; while its lower edge gravitates to where we place our feet." Both the artist and the viewer experienced art "with an erect human posture" that related their vertical awareness inherent in their standing or sitting position. This is an essential relationship in painting unaffected by the application of concepts such as illusionistic, realistic, abstract, or representational.

But Steinberg suggests that beginning in the 1950's, there were artists, most notably Rauschenberg, who no longer worked in this way. Their images were not communicating their upright, optical experiences with nature, but "operational processes." Steinberg elaborated, "Rauschenberg's picture plane had to become a surface to which anything reachable-thinkable

would adhere. It had to be whatever a billboard or dashboard is." All the "reachable-thinkable" things are not Rauschenberg's optical experiences with nature, but Steinberg's "operational processes." They are the everyday objects making up Rauschenberg's artworks, such as in *Rebus* and *Pelican*, that do not offer views of the natural world, but are actual parts of the world.

These ideas were part of Steinberg's concept he referred to as the *flatbed picture plane*, "I borrow the term from the flatbed printing press--'a horizontal bed on which a horizontal printing surface rests' [Webster.]" This imaginative horizontal surface is where the objects comprising *Rebus* can be held in place by gravity and it is Cage's "a place where things are, as on a table."

It is obvious to see how the freestanding *Monogram* (fig. 11) is "a place where things are." Given the platform the goat is on (referred to by Rauschenberg as the goat's 'pasture') one can make a literal interpretation of Steinberg's horizontal printing press, scattered with data and objects from our everyday world. It is a collection of detritus from the streets of Rauschenberg's neighborhood where he would take walks and gather "art elements." The appearance of these "junk assemblages" in exhibitions were not well received by the Abstract Expressionist painters or eminent critics. They either did not take Rauschenberg seriously, or did not consider his Combines to be art.

The art establishment was looking at *Monogram* using Formalist criteria of line, shape, color, and light to deduce a meaning, perceive a mood, or discover something about the artist. But such criteria could not be applied to Rauschenberg's Combines, a new way of looking was called for. Brian O'Doherty proposed using what he called the "vernacular glance."<sup>13</sup> O'Doherty suggested that Rauschenberg's work is better suited to the kind of looking that "carries us through the city every day," as opposed to the traditional mode of viewing art in a museum. The

viewer must employ the kind of looking he uses when he looks at a billboard, or watches television, a casual mode of vision that jumps from one subject or stimulus to the next.

Using O'Doherty's vernacular gaze, one scans a Combine, moving from object to object, sometimes making connections between things, sometimes not. However, whether connections are made is irrelevant, as a resolution resulting in a compositional awareness or in a realization of a structure is not a goal. Rauschenberg strove for a multiplicitous quality in his Combines, a quality where the work would be perceived differently at different times, even by the same person. Cage commented:

"There is no more subject in a combine than there is in a page from a newspaper. Each thing that is there is a subject. It is a situation involving multiplicity. (It is no reflection on the weather that such-and-such a government sent a note to another.)"<sup>14</sup>

Employing the contingency of the viewer's vernacular gaze to separate and connect the heterogeneous nature of the work, Rauschenberg's Combines could continuously and simultaneously create new associations and disparities.

Moving from his Combines to performance events, Rauschenberg broadened his exploration of "situations involving multiplicity." In *Spring Training* (1965) (fig. 12), Lucinda Childs and Rauschenberg unexpressively walk and stand as thirty desert turtles with flashlights taped to their backs roam the performance area. This image of the turtles is strong and surprising, the viewer does not expect it and cannot call upon an established criteria of viewing to elicit meaning from the image. However, one could make connections such as relating the slow and awkward gait of the turtle and the speed of light, or the random paths of the turtles and the effect their flashlights would have on the lighting plot, or on the choreography of the performers. Additionally, one could recognize the disparity of Rauschenberg's ability to

dominate a turtle by taping a flashlight to its shell and the turtle's unknowing participation in a rebellious, avant-garde performance event. But perhaps some viewers did not get to the point of making connections, or did not choose to, perhaps some viewers simply wondered why someone would do something like that.

Rauschenberg's drive to compose performance events partly came from his longheld operational strategy of emphasizing process over product. Emphasis on process as a vital engagement and active perception can be seen as early as 1951 in his *White Paintings* (fig. 13), which enlisted the external environmental sources of dust and light and shadow to activate and animate its pertinence. The *White Paintings's* involvement with external forces placed the paintings in a situation, it was not a static piece of art to view, but needed interaction with the viewer and the space around it to become a realized work. Resistance to static representation was integral to Rauschenberg's process oriented focus and conducive to his foray into performance. He commented,

"Getting the room in the picture was important because I've always felt a little strange about the fixedness of a painting...and so the use of mirrors and putting open areas in the painting for the wall, which would change from time to time and place to place, to come through and be part of the active image was a way of counteracting that kind of stillness that...I didn't find anything in life to relate to."<sup>15</sup>

And relating to life was central to Rauschenberg, not the subconscious, inner life of the artist, but everyday, urban life as seen through O'Doherty's vernacular glance. He strove to make art that exemplified a relationship to life that investigated the coexistence of the multiple parts and ideas of the world, not a single artist's emotional experience of it. It was the daily process of interacting, juxtaposing, failing and trying again that transformed Rauschenberg and his work into something strong enough, or ambiguous enough, to work as artist and art.

By extending the ideas behind the *White Paintings* to performance, we find the incorporation of external forces no longer necessary, as they are no longer external. The performer is not inside or outside the space but part of it. The audience is also actively engaged in the space, not a passive viewer, and as such, they and performers experience the event as a unified group. Unlike Brown's traditional relationship with the audience in *Pelican*, Rauschenberg's pedestrian presentation enabled him and the audience to encounter a new and undefined moment together, as equals. This act of encountering, or the moment of contact, before one's perceptions were relegated to a familiar regiment of seeing, was the promise of performance.

Performance allowed Rauschenberg to become a material, that is, he was simply one of the elements in the composition that combined with other elements to make a visual impression. It is key to recognize that the foundation of the non-hierarchical relationship among performers, as well as props, that allowed Rauschenberg to experience this unmitigated collaboration is the compositional and performative choice to execute the staged actions void of theatrical histrionics.

Ten years after *Monogram* was ridiculed (then lionized,) Rauschenberg again collaborated with tires, but this time in his performance piece *Map Room II* (1965) (fig. 14). Figure 14 shows Rauschenberg rolling a tire offstage, Deborah Hay lying on a settee, and Steve Paxton inside a group of tires. The performer's movements required no specific dramatic training, and as Rauschenberg did in *Pelican*, they worked in tandem with their props.

This style of collaboration which was essential to Rauschenberg's conflation of objects, genres and concepts, was most effectively empowered by focusing on its additive quality. In his "notes" or "score" for *Map Room II*, we can see his inclusive compositional procedure:

"in front:	tuxs + words + masks + stools (fig. 15)
open [curtain]	
Mt Rush:	slide + proj + noxon + <i>Bob</i>
Birds:	<i>Deb</i> + 3 doves + cage + dress + pack belt (fig. 16)
trisha solo:	<i>Trisha</i> + tire
etc..." <sup>16</sup>	

Though this list of materials being added together apply specifically to *Map Room II*, the compositional method could easily be applied to many of Rauschenberg's images, Combines, or other performance pieces. Unlike pedantic addition however, Rauschenberg's combinations do not result in a known total. *Monogram's* or *Map Room II's* addition of tires to a goat or person do not add up to a meaning or story, there is no final totality to be calculated.

Krauss described Rauschenberg's art as creating an "uncontainable network of associations."<sup>17</sup> He achieved this by moving beyond a mere adding or blending of elements. Rauschenberg's work did not subsume the differences of the elements into a definable whole, but produced ambiguities that did not negotiate a meaning. Rauschenberg offered the idea, "It's like adding two and two and not getting four *or* five."

As Rauschenberg's paintings and Combines of the 1950's were gradually accepted by arts institutions and slowly assimilated into the world of artistic interpretation, they gained meanings, and static definitions. Performance allowed Rauschenberg to apply the operational strategies and compositional processes he developed in his visual art in a new way. Live presentations offered direct contact with an active viewer where ideas and images were immediately encountered and shared. In this temporal setting, the process, not the product was guaranteed to be the art.

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- <sup>1</sup> Joseph, Branden W. *Random Order, Robert Rauschenberg and the Neo-Avant-Garde*. Cambridge: MIT Press. 2003.
- <sup>2</sup> The Tate Modern Website *Art Lies and Videotaope: Exposing Performance from Image as Icon* gallery <[www.tate.org.uk/liverpool/exhibitions/artliesvideo/icon.htm](http://www.tate.org.uk/liverpool/exhibitions/artliesvideo/icon.htm)>
- <sup>3</sup> Same as 1
- <sup>4</sup> Fineberg, Jonathan. *Art Since 1940: Strategies of Being*. Prentice Hall. New Jersey 2000
- <sup>5</sup> Krauss Rosalind. "Perpetual Inventory." In *Robert Rauschenberg*, edited by Branden W. Joseph. Cambridge: MIT Press 2002.
- <sup>6</sup> Same as 5
- <sup>7</sup> Same as 5
- <sup>8</sup> Same as 4
- <sup>9</sup> Banes, Sally. *Terpsichore in Sneakers*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin 1987.
- <sup>10</sup> Same as 1
- <sup>11</sup> "On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and his Work." by John Cage in *Art in Theory*, edited by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, pp. 00-00. United Kingdom: Blackwell Publishing 2003.
- <sup>12</sup> Steinberg, Leo. *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art*. New York: Oxford University Press 1972
- <sup>13</sup> Same as 1
- <sup>14</sup> Same as 11
- <sup>15</sup> Kotz, Mary Lynn. *Rauschenberg/Art and Life*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Incorporated. 1990
- <sup>16</sup> Same as 1
- <sup>17</sup> Same as 5