



---

Perpetual Inventory

Author(s): Rosalind Krauss

Source: *October*, Vol. 88 (Spring, 1999), pp. 86-116

Published by: [The MIT Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/779226>

Accessed: 01/05/2013 15:51

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



*The MIT Press* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *October*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

# Perpetual Inventory\*

ROSALIND KRAUSS

*I went in for my interview for this fantastic job. . . . The job had a great name—I might use it for a painting—"Perpetual Inventory."*

—Rauschenberg to Barbara Rose

1. Here are three disconcerting remarks and one document:

The first settles out from a discussion of the various strategies Robert Rauschenberg found to defamiliarize perception, so that, in Brian O'Doherty's terms, "the city dweller's rapid scan" would now displace old habits of seeing and "the art audience's stare" would yield to "the vernacular glance."<sup>1</sup> With its voraciousness, its lack of discrimination, its wandering attention, and its equal horror of meaning and of emptiness, this leveling form of perception, he wrote, not only accepts everything—every piece of urban detritus, every homey object, every outré image—into the perceptual situation, but its logic decrees that the magnet for all these elements will be the picture surface, itself now defined as the antimuseum.<sup>2</sup>

This conceptual context, made newly precise by O'Doherty in 1974 but nonetheless familiar by that time to Rauschenberg's audience, does not prepare us for O'Doherty's additional avowal that there is "something that, for all his apparent clowning, he [Rauschenberg] believes in profoundly: the integrity of the picture plane."<sup>3</sup> Coming as it does from the aesthetic vocabulary that Rauschenberg's project would seem to have made defunct, this notion of the picture plane and its integrity, coupled with the idea that they inspire "belief," sounds very strange

\* Originally published in *Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective*, ed. Walter Hopps and Susan Davidson (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1997). Reprinted with permission.

1. Brian O'Doherty, *American Masters: The Voice and the Myth* (New York: Random House, 1974), p. 198. An excerpt of this text was published earlier as O'Doherty, "Rauschenberg and the Vernacular Glance," *Art in America* 61, no. 5 (September-October 1973), pp. 82–87.

2. O'Doherty, *American Masters*, pp. 188–225.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 204.



*Robert Rauschenberg looking through  
the archive of the Miami Herald. 1979.*

indeed. For this vocabulary, linked to a definition of the pictorial itself as irreducibly illusionistic—an illusionism that was thought by such critics as Clement Greenberg to be residual within even the most abstract and flattened painting<sup>4</sup>—evokes a plane whose integrity is constantly breached and just as continually resecured.

If by the mid-1960s the picture plane was something to which Donald Judd was eager to say good riddance, declaring the canvas field as nothing more than one side of a “specific object,”<sup>5</sup> that experience of the impenetrability, the literalness, of the two-dimensional surface had been made possible largely by Rauschenberg’s work itself. The stuffed goat that stands astride the floor-bound picture field in *Monogram* (1955–59), placidly bearing witness to the transformation of visual surface into—as Rauschenberg put it—“pasture,” or the eagle that projects from the solidly wall-like *Canyon* (1959), had in Judd’s eyes written “finis” to centuries of pictorial illusionism with its little dance of opening and closing, its performance of a kind of transcendental two-step.

The art history that Rauschenberg, as well as O’Doherty, knew only too well, the lessons that Josef Albers had after all drilled at Black Mountain College, turned on the yield of *meaning* to be harvested from that fertility of the picture plane. Although still schematically present in the reversible geometries of Albers’s squares, the model of this field as the ground of meaning is perhaps most clearly demonstrated in the kind of Renaissance painting in which a tunnel of deep perspective—an allée of trees, say—is just about to arrive at its destination in the horizon’s vanishing point, when something at the very forefront of the picture—the lily the angel of the Annunciation is handing to the Virgin, for example—blocks that whoosh into depth. All the pressure of the painting now converges on this object, since it must “hold” the surface, preventing its “violation” by an unimpeded spatial rush. Because this “holding” is perforce of a two-dimensional, emblematic kind, it stands in utmost contrast to the illusionistic vista’s offer of a real stage on which imaginatively to project real bodies. But then such “holding” becomes a way of holding up two conflicting modes of being for comparison—real versus ideal, secular versus sacred, physical versus iconic, deep versus flat—all the while performing the magic trick of turning the one into the other, since it is the deep space that is the illusion, and the flattened wafer of the surface-bound icon that is touchably real. It is in this mystery of transposition, in this crossover between flesh and idea, that the meaning of a picture plane that has sealed over its spatial puncture, thus reasserting its “integrity,” announces itself as both the source and expression of “belief.”

4. See, for example, Clement Greenberg’s statement, “The first mark made on a canvas destroys its literal and utter flatness, and the result of the marks made on it by an artist like Mondrian is still a kind of illusion that suggests a kind of third dimension” (Greenberg, “Modernist Painting” (1960), in Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O’Brian, vol. 4, *Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1969* [Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993], p. 90).

5. Donald Judd, “Specific Objects,” *Arts Yearbook* 8 (1965), pp. 74–82.



Fra Filippo Lippi.  
Annunciation. Circa 1440.

All this seems worlds away, of course, from the goat calmly grazing the pasture of *Monogram*, or the tread marks asserting twenty-two feet of unmitigated literalness in *Automobile Tire Print* (1953), the point of which seems to be that along this stretch of road there is no break that would allow the old-time metaphysics of tension and release to occur. Where is there a place in this work for humanist painting's notions of "belief" suspended and refound in a reconfirmed "integrity"?<sup>6</sup> And yet O'Doherty was not just a consummately intelligent critic but

6. In his extremely important essay "Other Criteria," Leo Steinberg quoted Greenberg in taking issue with his prejudicial contrast between Old Master art—"Realistic, illusionist art had dissembled the medium, using art to conceal art"—and the Modernist alternative, which "used art to call attention to art." Insisting that any art, Old Master and Modernist alike, uses "art to call attention to art" and thereby preserves the integrity of the picture plane, Steinberg called for a taxonomy of spaces opened up within that plane by different types of painting. His text then develops the oppositions between nature and culture (or optical and mental) and, in relation to the latter, the characterization of the flatbed picture plane in Rauschenberg's work for which the essay is so widely known. But in this association of the terms "flatbed" and "picture plane," it is important to see that the flatbed does not preserve the old metaphysical implications of "integrity": "If some collage element, such as a pasted-down photograph, threatened to evoke a topical illusion of depth, the surface was casually stained or smeared with paint to recall its irreducible flatness. The 'integrity of the picture plane'—once the accomplishment of good design—was to become that which is given. The picture's 'flatness' was to be no more of a problem than the flatness of a disordered desk or an unswept floor. Against Rauschenberg's picture plane you can pin or project any image because it will not work as the glimpse of a world, but as a scrap of printed material" (Steinberg, "Other Criteria," in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1972], pp. 55–91; quoted material from pp. 68, 88).

also someone who engaged personally with Rauschenberg, both at those places where they would have intersected in the 1960s art world and in the “morgue” of the *New York Times*, where the two examined old photoengraving plates together for Rauschenberg’s 1962 initial foray into printmaking.<sup>7</sup>

2. My second example is not, perhaps, as counterintuitive as the first, but it nonetheless strikes the same kind of discordant note from within Susan Sontag’s “One Culture and the New Sensibility,” her report from the front lines of the 1960s.<sup>8</sup> Taking issue with C. P. Snow’s notorious two-culture argument, in which science and humanism have drifted into two separate worlds, with the occupants of the one regarding the occupants of the other as a set of unrecognizable, nearly inhuman mutants, Sontag claimed a single “advanced” culture for both science and art, with their common enemy now in literature. If electronic music is the model for this “one culture,” she argued, so is the practice of a kind of painting and sculpture made collectively on the principles of industrial fabrication (Minimalism, Pop), as is the understanding shared by both science and art that their high degree of specialization (the twelve-tone row, abstraction) will demand a certain period of apprenticeship on the part of their audiences.

It is in such a context that Sontag then drew up a list of textual sources that she saw as basic to this new nonliterary culture: Antonin Artaud, Roland Barthes, André Breton, Norman O. Brown, John Cage, R. Buckminster Fuller, Siegfried Gideon, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Marshall McLuhan, Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, and Ludwig Wittgenstein.<sup>9</sup> Most of the names—the obvious phalanx of 1960s intellectual realignments—are expected, of course. Breton’s is somehow aberrant, however, striking one as it does as lying at an oblique angle to the line that connects Artaud to Nietzsche or Fuller to Lévi-Strauss. Breton’s commitment to poetry, his insistent literariness, and the fastidiousness of his tastes all seem to drive a wedge between him and this company. Even though Barthes’s 1967 enunciation of “The Death of the Author” includes the Surrealists’ attacks on meaning and the collective nature of their practice as important steps along the path leading away from the writer as the focus of meaning to the reader as its new locus of unity,<sup>10</sup> Breton’s allegiance to psychoanalysis seems to put him specifically out of play.

For the psychoanalytic seems not only to cling to the importance of the source of emission (the writer) but also to privilege chains of association that, in their dependence on further associations to decode them, continue to assert the

7. Brian O’Doherty, *Object and Idea: An Art Critic’s Journal 1961–1967* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1967), p. 115.

8. Susan Sontag, “One Culture and the New Sensibility,” in Sontag, *Against Interpretation* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966), pp. 293–304.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 298.

10. Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author” (1967), in Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), p. 144. This text was first published in *Aspen Magazine*, nos. 5–6 (Fall–Winter 1967), an issue edited by O’Doherty.



private depths of experience underwriting these connections. Furthermore, it is the very nature of such connections as metaphoric that makes them alien to the “new sensibility” Sontag invoked. The ideas of literalness, of deadpan, of the ruthless “cool” that led Frank Stella to declare, “My painting is based on the fact that what can be seen there *is* there. . . . What you see is what you see,”<sup>11</sup> seems to join the whole post-Abstract Expressionist cohort in its rejection of psychological depth and emotiveness.

Rauschenberg’s own distaste for such qualities can be summed up in his frequently repeated instance of “the sad cup of coffee,” his emblem for the endless psychologizing of the artist’s means and hence the promiscuous spread of metaphor within the older (Surrealist-influenced) generation. Speaking of the talk at the Cedar Bar or the Club, he complained, “They even assigned seriousness to certain colors,” and then, turning to the way the New York artists had infected Beat poetry: “I used to think of that line in Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl*, about ‘the sad cup of coffee.’ I’ve had cold coffee and hot coffee, good coffee and lousy coffee, but I’ve never had a sad cup of coffee.”<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, Rauschenberg had been very troubled by the reception of his black paintings (1951–53), which critics and viewers alike assumed were to be understood at that emotive level. “They couldn’t see black as pigment,” he complained. “They moved immediately into association with ‘burned-out,’ ‘tearing,’ ‘nihilism’ and ‘destruction.’ . . . I’m never sure what the impulse is psychologically, I don’t mess around with my subconscious.” For good measure, he added, “If I see any superficial subconscious relationships that I’m familiar with—clichés of association—I change the picture.”<sup>13</sup>

3. This brings me to my third example, dropped by Rauschenberg himself when speaking of his silkscreen practice in the early 1960s. He was addressing a painting that juxtaposes photoreproductions of an army truck, mosquitoes, and, in a somber banner along the midsection, Diego Velázquez’s *Venus and Cupid* (*Rokeby Venus*) (1650), an aggressive X-mark thickly painted in white over a part of it. Explaining why he called the picture *Crocus* (1962), he said, “Because the white X emerges from a gray area in a rather dark painting, like a new season.”<sup>14</sup>

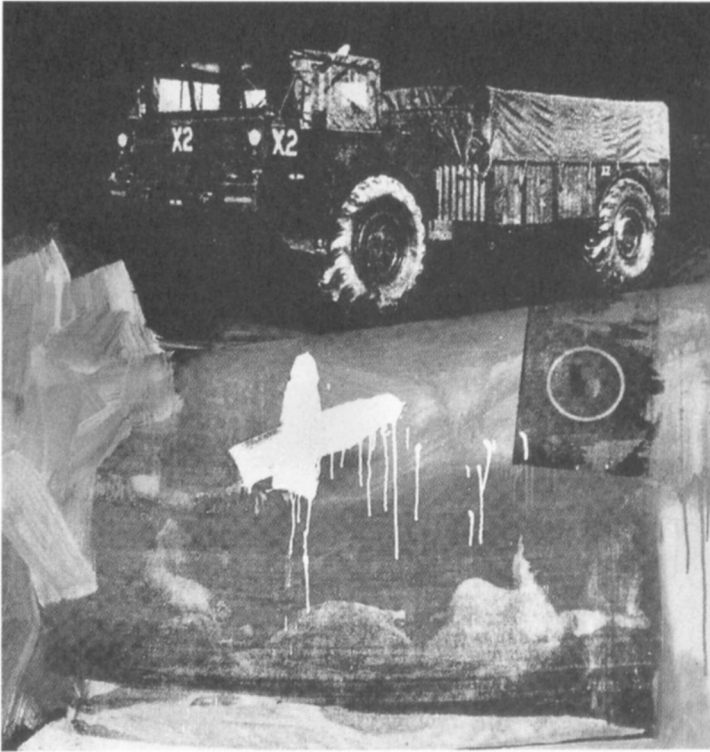
“Like a new season” comes strangely from the lips of someone who cannot imagine a “sad cup of coffee.” But then by the early 1960s, Rauschenberg was also the artist who quite astonishingly had already decided to devote a good part of two

11. Bruce Glaser, “Questions to Stella and Judd,” ed. Lucy R. Lippard, in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1968), p. 158. Reprinted from *Artnews* 65, no. 5 (September 1966), pp. 55–61.

12. Quoted in Calvin Tomkins, *Off the Wall: Robert Rauschenberg and the Art World of Our Time* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1980), p. 89.

13. Quoted in Dorothy Gees Seckler, “The Artist Speaks: Robert Rauschenberg,” *Art in America* 54, no. 3 (May–June 1966), p. 76.

14. Quoted in Tomkins, *Off the Wall*, p. 201.



Rauschenberg.  
Detail of *Crocus*. 1962.

and a half years of his life to the canto-by-canto illustration of Dante's *Inferno*, a work whose very fabric is woven from the rich strands of multiple associations, one famous branch of which invokes just this figure of renewal: "In the turning season of the youthful year when the sun is warming his rays beneath Aquarius /and the days and nights already begin to near their perfect balance; the hoar-frost copies /then the image of his white sister on the ground." Rauschenberg's astonishingly aqueous transfer-drawing devoted to Canto XXIV responds to this image, Dore Ashton tells us, by way of "a compartment, sealed away from the snakes and electric eels below, to house a tender painting of the hoar-frosted trees."<sup>15</sup>

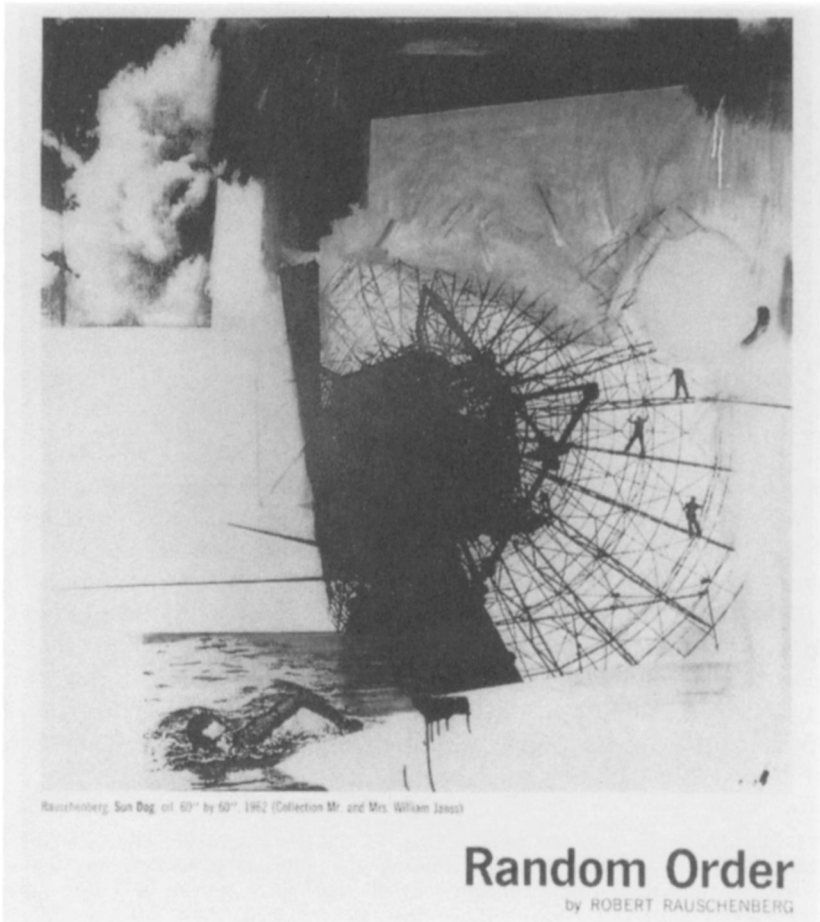
That Dante's text served as a motivating force behind the X metaphorically fecundating *Crocus* is likely but not necessary. The same allegorical use of the seasons stretches from one end of English poetry to another, from Geoffrey Chaucer's evocation of the showers of April piercing the droughts of March, to T. S. Eliot's

15. Dore Ashton, "Rauschenberg's Thirty-four Illustrations for Dante's *Inferno*," *Metro* (Milan) 2 (May 1961), p. 58. In preparing to write an extended commentary for the deluxe edition of the drawings, published by Harry N. Abrams, Ashton spent "hours and hours . . . in his [Rauschenberg's] studio reading over John Ciardi's translation and gazing at the drawings. . . . Rauschenberg and I read the poem together, speaking about Dante's ineffable pride, his sly witticisms, his digs at his artistic rivals . . . his lyrical abandon, his extraordinary feeling for the particular, his forthright language, and above all, his great artistic inconsistencies." Quoted in Dore Ashton, "Art: The Collaboration Wheel: A Comment on Robert Rauschenberg's Comment on Dante," *Arts and Architecture* 80, no. 12 (December 1963), pp. 10, 37.

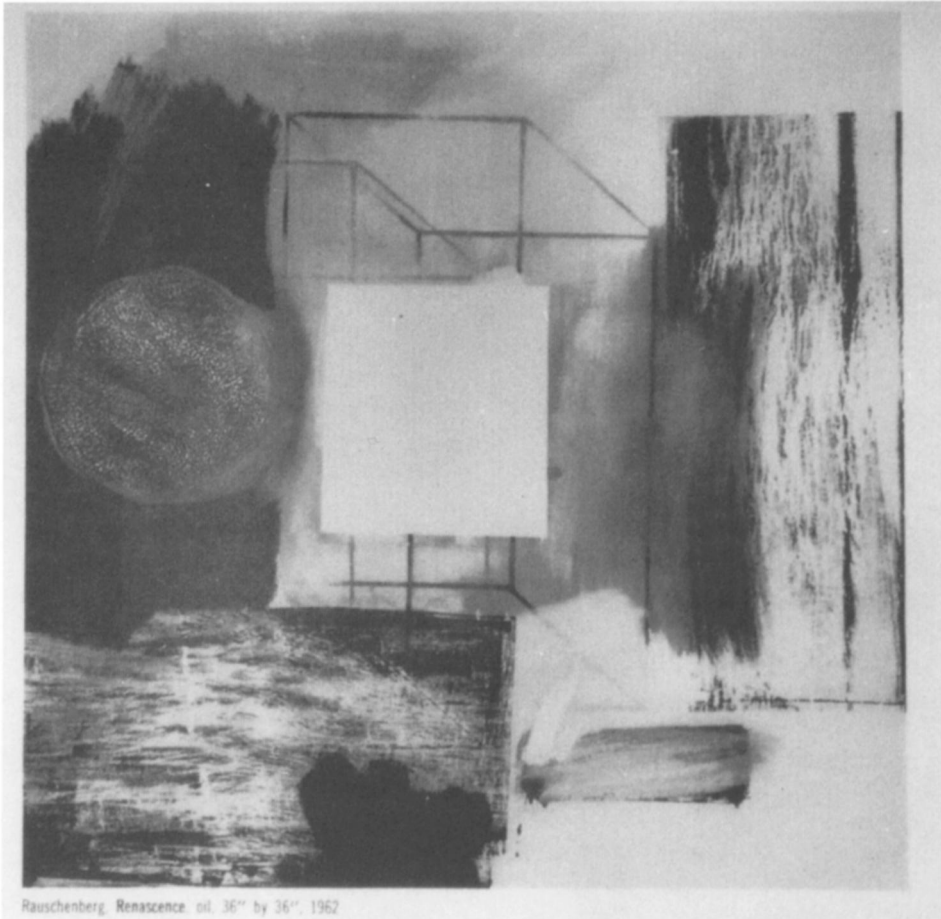


“April is the cruellest month, breeding/Lilacs out of the dead land. . . .” *Crocus* is quite a metaphoric thought for someone who does not want to accept the connotations spun off from the color black.

4. The document I want to insert here comes from around the time when Rauschenberg was making *Crocus*, for it includes a reproduction of *Renascence* (1962), another of the very first works in the black-and-white silkscreen series he began early in the fall of 1962. Called “Random Order,” it is part manifesto, part diary, part poem. It consists of five pages in the first issue of the magazine *Location*, published in spring 1963, but probably handed in to the editors, Thomas B. Hess and Harold Rosenberg, in late winter. The “cover page” (p. 27) gives the title and reproduces *Sundog* (1962). The next two sheets (pp. 28–29) show an assortment of photographs taken by Rauschenberg and affixed with masking tape to a paper



“Random Order.”  
Location 1, no. 1  
(Spring 1963), p. 27.



*"Random Order." Location 1, no. 1 (Spring 1963), p. 30.*

support to present a messy grid of vignettes between which Rauschenberg's dyslexic lettering meanders in a complex of affirmations. These are followed by two almost full-page images: the painting *Renascence* on the left (p. 30), and a Rauschenberg photograph captioned "View from the artist's studio" on the right (p. 31). Representing two very different notions of seeing through a window, these pages juxtapose Leone Battista Alberti's model of perspective, signaled by *Renascence's* volumetric cube (if a picture is like a window through which we look at what is painted, the viewed material is itself tightly contained on the stage of the pictorial construction<sup>16</sup>), with the photographed windowpane as surrogate for

16. The analysis of Leone Battista Alberti's and Piero della Francesca's model of perspective conceived as a closed, volumetric box, constructed with its sides as absolute limits and specifically foreclosing anything that could be thought of as "off-stage" space, is made in Hubert Damisch, *The Origin of Perspective*, trans. John Goodman (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1994), pp. 350–52.

the camera's aperture in what seems to invoke the indiscriminate appetite of the "vernacular glance."

If I have called this document a manifesto, this is because it made its appearance at the time Rauschenberg's work was undergoing a shift, one that marked all his immediately succeeding work and the vast majority of what he went on to do in the following years. 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 silkscreened paintings of the early 1960s, or their renewed version in the veil-like *Hoarfrosts* (1974–76), or in the guise of audience-activated works, such as *Soundings* (1968) and *Revolvers* (1967)—but as a new conception of the pictorial itself.<sup>17</sup> The ground for this shift was obviously prepared in Rauschenberg's long apprenticeship to the media image via the Dante drawings. But since the solvent-transfer technique of those drawings maintains the actual scale of their original media sources, photographic information could not be married to the greatly increased size and mode of address of Rauschenberg's painterly practice until he gained access to the photomechanical silkscreen process. This, then, provided the possibility both of greatly enlarging the scale of his source material and of making that material's photographic nature far more obvious than it had been in the Dante series, where, due to the vagaries of the transfer technique, it had largely been muted by the veil-like character of the image. Furthermore, Rauschenberg seems to have wanted the continuity of the mirrorlike photographic surface to stamp its character on his newly revised sense of his medium, thereby replacing the collage condition of his Combines with the seamlessness of the photographic print.

This was the departure, at the opening of the 1960s, that seemed to call for some kind of acknowledgment. If "Random Order" is such a declaration of Rauschenberg's newly "photographic" medium, contrasting it and (Renaissance) painting would seem entirely in order, so that its contingency could be compared to painting's compositional program, and its frame, a chance cut from the ongoing fabric of the whole world, could be set against painting's contraction around a gravitational center.

17. Setting aside the fact that Rauschenberg had begun a serious practice of photography itself in the late 1940s and would continue to make photographs throughout his career, a reconsideration of the medium of painting as "photographic" involves a particular leap, which this essay is involved in exploring. Rauschenberg's few blueprint photographic works of 1950–51 might seem to have performed this leap, and, indeed, the great interest in them might elicit the response that he was not starting out in a new direction at the outset of the 1960s but rather returning to one he had initiated early in his career. I should say here that the status of these works in Rauschenberg's oeuvre is not clear to me. They do signal the kind of reorientation of the work to the horizontality that Steinberg named "the flatbed picture plane"; thus, they team up with *Bed* (1955), *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953), and *Automobile Tire Print*. And like the latter two works, or, for that matter, the *White Paintings*, they signal (or maybe initiated) Rauschenberg's pursuit of the index as a way of marking. But Rauschenberg did not return to the photogram technique as a strategy for fusing the photographic index with painting's scale and pictorial logic, perhaps for the very fact that he made these collaborative works together with Susan Weil, then his wife.

But, as we will see, of the various oppositions set up within “Random Order,” the obvious one between photography and painting, or rather between photography and Renaissance painting, does not seem to apply. Instead, one of the major oppositions seems to be between the aural and the visual, with sound annexing itself to language and thus yielding a further opposition between speech and vision.

This occurs with the two-page spread’s first textual grouping, which is written above and along the side of its opening photograph—a truck seen head-on, looming out of the night. In it we read: “With sound scale and insistency trucks mobilize words, and broadside our culture by a combination of law and local motivation which produces an extremely complex random order that cannot be described as accidental.”<sup>18</sup> In the context of all the other images—the two views out the window to facing buildings and a roofscape; the kitchen area with a glimpse of paintings lying on the studio floor beyond; the toilet; the stairs; a potted plant<sup>19</sup>—which continually place us inside Rauschenberg’s Broadway loft, this idea that the truck delivers both noise and words sets up another opposition: that between exterior and interior, public and private. Even if we had not read Calvin Tomkins’s description of Rauschenberg’s loft—“Tall, grimy windows let in the distinctively white light of downtown New York—also the roar of trucks on Broadway”<sup>20</sup>—we would feel the intimacy and interiority of the space of these pages, which only the auditory aggression of the truck as signifier of the outside violates.

If this sense of privacy promotes the conditions of a diary, they are invoked even more by the associative progression of the text itself, as one thought seems to suggest the next, without any authorial plan or argument having been established beforehand. To have pronounced “random order” next to the truck seems to have provoked Rauschenberg to write on the opposite side: “Every step is change,” which in turn called for close-ups of stairs and their risers. That, then, brought on a comment about the volumetric quality of a stairwell—“a sculptural masterpiece clearly, economically and dramatically defining space”—which then moved the author’s thoughts to other spatial volumes. And the one that came immediately to his mind, provided in turn with its own photograph, an out-the-window view, is the following:

An air-filled sense of volume can be had by looking out one window, through the space, to another window and into it. This can be amplified

18. This head-on shot of the truck made its way into at least two of the black-and-white silkscreens: *Buffalo I* and *Overcast II* (both 1962). (The spelling in all quotes from “Random Order” is Rauschenberg’s.)

19. Of these images, two were made into screens. The roofscape with water tanks appears in *Almanac*, *Overcast I*, and *Overcast II* (all 1962), and *Barge* (1962–63), *Die Hard*, *Shaftway*, *Transom*, and *Windward* (all 1963). The potted plant can be seen in *Almanac*. Speaking with Barbara Rose, Rauschenberg said of these photographs: “I needed some very simple images, like perhaps a glass of water, or a piece of string, or the bathroom floor with a roll of toilet paper on it. They didn’t need to have any immediate emotional content. I needed them to dull the social implications, to neutralize the calamities that were going on in the outside world” (Rose, *Rauschenberg* [New York: Vintage Books, 1987], p. 74).

20. Tomkins, *Off the Wall*, p. 211.

by realizing the source of this vision is at a different temperature, brightness and will be subject to change as it moves on. Air volume can be compressed and flattened to the extent that a brushload of paint can hold it to a picture surface.

The frame, the piercing vista, and the “integrity” of the original surface restored by a brushload of paint have landed us, then, in the midst of the very “picture plane” in which O’Doherty would so counterintuitively claim that Rauschenberg believes. And when Rauschenberg’s statement itself yields in turn to the photographic metaphor written on the other flank of the image—“A dirty or foggy window makes what is outside appear to be projected on to the window plane”—what we have is not the opposition between the indexically produced image (the photograph, onto the surface of which things fall like cast shadows) and the iconically constructed one (the painting), but, somehow, magically, their conflation. And what remains as well is the opposition announced at the very outset of the text: the difference between the delicately silent visual spaces and the brassily verbal one of the flow of words.

5. It is this opposition between silence and sound, vision and speech, that this essay is, I suppose, circling around. For the silence of the visual was what Rauschenberg had been insisting on in his resistance to the metaphoric expansion of the color black, that is to say the transformation of it from a physical and unarticulated material (“they couldn’t see black as a pigment”) to an invisible network of language. It is also this silence that connects the understanding of the *White Paintings* (1951) as screens on which to “trap” (no matter how ephemerally) the shadows of passersby to the underlying notion for the later silkscreens, which Rauschenberg thought of as functioning something like “photographic sensitized” surfaces that register the flitting of information passing through the space in front of them.<sup>21</sup> [Rauschenberg himself has emphasized the continuity between his *White Paintings* and his desire to work on photosensitized grounds. *Rauschenberg: “The first photo drawings were done in Cuba in 1952 during a working vacation from Black Mountain, where I was studying with Albers (he never saw them). Silkscreen was [later] a way not to be victimized and limited in scale and color, but still have access to current worldwide information. I did not [then] know about the commercial process of silkscreen and had tried to photosensitize grounds to work on.”*]<sup>22</sup>

21. Rauschenberg suggested that his ultimate project along these lines would be “a project that I have in mind where the walls will absorb whatever images appear in that room” (Rose, *Rauschenberg*, p. 77). In an essay on Rauschenberg, John Cage emphasized that “the white paintings caught whatever fell on them,” calling them “airports for the lights, shadows, and particles” (Cage, “On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and His Work,” in *Silence: Lectures and Writings by John Cage* [Hanover, N.H.: University of New England Press/Wesleyan University Press, 1973], pp. 108, 102, respectively; reprinted from *Metro* [Milan] 2 [May 1961], pp. 36–51).

22. During the editing process of this essay, Rauschenberg read it and on April 1, 1997, sent me several comments that function as expansions or associations to the text. The present remark was



The bridge from the barest monochrome canvas to the most richly photographic concatenation is built, then, on the concept of the index, namely, a type of mark made *causally*, so that it must be conceived as the physical trace of its referent. In structural terms, this is what links the cast shadow to the footprint, or the broken branch to the medical symptom, or the photograph to the wind sock. But, as if in punishment for their utmost degree of truth value, these witnesses to what is passing or has passed are struck dumb; for the index, although a sign, is uncoded and is thus deprived of speech.

It is in this matrix of connections between shadow and photography, on the one hand, and index and silence, on the other, that Rauschenberg was effortlessly enacting the semiotic analysis that was only explicitly theorized in the early 1960s, when Barthes began to publish on photography. That important texts by Barthes bracket Rauschenberg's turn to silkscreen is convenient but fortuitous. Not much art-historical weather can be made from the fact that "The Photographic Message" appeared in 1961, the year before Rauschenberg found the photomechanical silkscreen medium—through the example of Andy Warhol, who had begun using it in August 1962—(although news photographs had already been serving as his source for the transfer drawings over the preceding few years), and "Rhetoric of the Image" was published in 1964, the year Rauschenberg's success with the silkscreens led to his winning the Grand Prize at the Venice *Biennale*, which he celebrated by telephoning to New York to have all his screens (about 150 of them) cut from their frames and burned, thereby definitively ending the series. About all that can be said about this chronological convergence is that the media saturation of daily life had made the ubiquity of the photographic a subject of some urgency, whether for theory or for making art.

And yet what interests me is both the way these parallel practices turn on the index's muteness, what Barthes characterized as the scandal of its constituting a "message without a code," and the growing realization that in its photographic form this muteness is nonetheless abuzz with connotations, so that, yes, Virginia, there is always and everywhere (and especially once photographed) a potentially "sad cup of coffee."

6. Barthes sets out from the photograph's status as pure denotation, as analogon, in "The Photographic Message." Stenciled off the world itself, it appears to have only one message to convey, which is identical to the reality from which it was taken. The photographic message seems to reduce itself to the brute gesture of pointing to something in physical space and pronouncing the single syllable "this." But behind such a mythic condition as objective, neutral, and all but silent lies a whole variety of connotational dimensions, which, though they cannot code

---

elicited by this section and relates not only to the continuity of his own connection to the index, but to the issue of Warhol's priority in the use of the commercial silkscreen process, frequently repeated in the literature on the subject. Rauschenberg's other comments appear in brackets within this essay.



the photograph in the manner of digital languages, can open up its visual continuity, partitioning it into a scatter of signifieds or meanings. Some of these result from how the photograph is produced (its cropping, lighting, exposure, printing); others arise from the cultural meanings invested in certain gestures, such as the pose a subject is directed to, or caught in the act of taking, or again the cultural knowledge summoned by clothing styles or the typography on signs included within the image. This constant, covertly performed segmentation means that “the photographic ‘language’ [*langage*] is not unlike certain ideographic languages which mix analogical and specifying units, the difference being,” Barthes stressed, “that the ideogram is experienced as a sign whereas the photographic ‘copy’ is taken as the pure and simple denotation of reality.”<sup>23</sup>

So strong is the experience of pure continuity, uninterrupted like the flow of reality itself, that the photograph has the power to subsume even the coded, linguistic nature of its own caption into this blank, denotational status: “It is not the image which comes to elucidate or ‘realize’ the text,” as in older forms of illustration, “but the latter which comes to sublimate, patheticize or rationalize the image.” For, parasitic as it is on the photograph, “the text is only a kind of secondary vibration, almost without consequence” in relationship to an “objective (denoted) message,” and “connotation is now experienced only as the natural resonance of the fundamental denotation constituted by the photographic analogy.”<sup>24</sup>

Beginning in 1961, then, the structural paradox Barthes was exploring was that of a connotational system hiding behind the seemingly unbroken façade of denotation’s objectivity, its naturalness, its “innocence.” In “Rhetoric of the Image,” he went even further in developing an analysis of the way connotation striates the image, allowing himself to do so by confining his demonstration to a specific photograph used as an advertising image, the various connotative “messages” of which could reasonably be understood as intentional. Always returning to the way the denotative “fact” of the photograph closes over these readings to naturalize them—“the discontinuous connotators are connected, actualized, ‘spoken’ through the syntagm of the denotation, the discontinuous world of symbols plunges into the story of the denoted scene as though into a lustral bath of innocence”<sup>25</sup>—he tried nonetheless to systematize the connotational swarms.

The system, he suggested, always moves from the particular to the general, from the green, yellow, and red found in the Panzani advertising photo, for example, to the connotator “Italianicity,” itself generalized onto a certain axis, that of nationalities, which can in turn be seen as part of a structurally oppositional network that organizes a whole associative field. This common domain was identified by Barthes as that of ideology, which “speaks” itself through a rhetoric, no matter in what medium the speech is conducted, whether in image, articulated sound, or

23. Barthes, “The Photographic Message,” in *Image, Music, Text*, p. 28.

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 25–26.

25. Barthes, “Rhetoric of the Image,” in *Image, Music, Text*, p. 51.

gesture. These different supports for the “speech” affect the substance of the signifiers, he said, but they do not affect its *form*, by which he meant the functional organization of the signifieds in relationship to each other. And if rhetorics, that is, the set of connotators, have form, Barthes speculated, “it is even probable that there exists a single rhetorical *form*, common for instance to dream, literature and image.”<sup>26</sup> For the psyche, structured like a language, also seems to move from the specific (as in the daily residue from which dream images are in part fabricated) to the general (the dream’s highly repetitive “kernel”), such that “the further one ‘descends’ into the psychic depths of an individual, the more rarified and the more classifiable the signs become. What could be more systematic,” Barthes finally asked, “than the readings of Rorschach tests?”<sup>27</sup>

7. Which brings us back to Breton, the focus of my second counterintuitive example, and, more specifically, to the Breton who, like Rauschenberg in “Random Order,” insisted on inserting the supposedly silent testimony of documentary photographs into the pages of his diarylike novels *Nadja* (1928) and *L’Amour fou* (*Mad Love*, 1937).<sup>28</sup> Thus in *Nadja*, no sooner does Breton tell us that he is sitting in the Manoir d’Ango in August 1927, writing the account of his relationship with the quixotic, clairvoyant, mad Nadja, than we have a photograph of the manor house, with its dovecote and courtyard onto which a dead pigeon falls, announcing the closure of the story in the past (Nadja’s) and the opening onto a future Breton has yet to live, much less to record. (That future will enter the book’s final pages.) The account itself continues with diary entries and photographic documents, the entries turning on the “predictive” nature of Nadja’s relation to future events (and Breton’s to her), something Breton understood as the working of Surrealism’s concept of objective chance.

Among the usual explanations as to why Breton would have proceeded in this curious way are that he was using photographs as a means to dispense with the descriptions that litter naturalistic novels, as Breton himself claimed at one point, and to authenticate the nonfictional status of his narratives. (“Provide me with the real names,” Breton famously wrote, “prove to me that you in no way had free reign over your heroes.”<sup>29</sup>) These have been swept aside by Denis Hollier, who has argued that the heart of the matter lies in the two forms of the index converging in these pages: (1) the photograph, which can only be a precipitate of the real, and (2) the diaristic, first-person narrator, whose verbal position is equally (deictic-

26. Ibid., p. 49.

27. Ibid., p. 47.

28. During a conversation with Yve-Alain Bois, in which we were discussing the enigmatic yet suggestive character of “Random Order” as a manifesto, he said that these sheets somehow reminded him of *Nadja*, a comment for which, as will be obvious, I am extremely grateful.

29. André Breton, “Introduction to the Discourse on the Paucity of Reality” (1924), trans. Richard Sieburth and Jennifer Gordon, *October* 69 (Summer 1994), p. 134. Previously published as “Introduction au discours sur le peu de réalité” (1924), in *Point du jour* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1970).

cally) dependent on reality, in this case upon the actual, existential conditions of saying "I." So that which is at stake in a work like *Nadja*

is not a change in the referent, a passage from imaginary to real characters as one would do by leaving the novel for historiography. Rather it is a change in the mode of enunciation; the passage to the real must be inferred not by a change of object as much as by the entry onto the stage of the subject and its index.<sup>30</sup>

And what this means is that the writer leaves the backstage of the novel to go sit in the theater with the rest of the audience. Placing himself on the same side of the page as his reader, the writer not only casts his own shadow onto the field of the book, but allows the events unfolding in a future he cannot foresee to cast theirs onto the same space. If, for the plastic arts, the indexical principle had meant that "a real shadow, falling onto Miró's *Spanish Dancer*, opens the internal space of the work to the context of its reception, mixing it with that of its beholder," then "in the same way, what [Michel] Leiris called the literary equivalent of the shadow of the bull's horn should propel the autobiographical text in the shared space of history."<sup>31</sup> What is crucial about this space is that it is open; if Breton calls *Nadja* a book that is like a door left ajar, he means that when he began to write it he knew no more than did his reader, who by book's end would walk through that door. "The one who writes has no privilege," Hollier writes, "no advance over the one who reads. He doesn't know any more about it than the other."<sup>32</sup>

Leaving things "open" has been Rauschenberg's most frequently used expression in describing his artistic stance; whatever happens, he must always conspire to leave the situation open, so that, like Breton, he will be surprised.<sup>33</sup>

30. Denis Hollier, "Surrealist Precipitates: Shadows Don't Cast Shadows," trans. Rosalind Krauss, *October* 69 (Summer 1994), p. 126.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 124.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 129.

33. In her summary of Rauschenberg's aesthetic stance, Seckler introduced her long interview with him by saying that although Rauschenberg "does not recall having paid much attention to abstract expressionism's philosophical premises in existentialism and Zen, he apparently took seriously that part of its moral position which emphasized risk and openness and keeping the artist's activity—with all its precarious balancing—clearly in view." In the interview itself, Rauschenberg stated this by saying, "This insistence on the piece operating in the time situation it was observed in is another one of the ways of trying to put off the death of the work" (Seckler, "The Artist Speaks," pp. 74, 84). Cage also quoted a typical expression of Rauschenberg's drive for openness: "I am trying to check my habits of seeing, to counter them for the sake of greater freshness. I am trying to be unfamiliar with what I'm doing" (Cage, "On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and His Work," p. 106). Or again, Rauschenberg said several times to Philip Smith that he wanted to be open to events in order to create an art that would not "tell you something that you already know" (Smith, "To and about Robert Rauschenberg," *Arts Magazine* 51, no. 7 [March 1977], p. 121). The most frequently repeated version is Rauschenberg's refrain about his "collaboration with materials" (see Calvin Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors: The Heretical Courtship in Modern Art* [New York: The Viking Press, 1965], pp. 204, 232), which he enunciated to John Gruen as "I put my trust in the materials that confront me, because they put me in touch with the unknown" (Gruen, "Robert Rauschenberg: An Audience of One," *Artnews* 76, no. 2 [February 1977], p. 48).

This, he has stressed, is different from chance, since chance is programmed ahead of time, which is exactly what Rauschenberg has insisted upon avoiding.<sup>34</sup> Instead, if he has continually referred to his process as a collaboration with objects and materials, it is because he never wants it said that he in any way has, as Breton would put it, “had free reign over his heroes.”

In Breton’s case, openness is equally a matter of diaristic, autobiographical writing and “psychic automatism,” or a kind of automatic writing intended to register unconscious thoughts. But since both forms—the diary as a demonstration of the “psychopathology of everyday life” (read: objective chance), and automatic writing as an unconscious precipitate—are viewed as being in collaboration with the unconscious, in their attempt to register this psychic dimension they are equally indexical. They both share in the index’s “mode of enunciation.” Hollier points out:

The specific feature of Surrealist writing, whether it be autobiographical or automatic, is, in fact, less the lack of knowledge of its final destination as such than the identical position into which this lack places both the reader and the author in the face of a text whose unfolding neither the one nor the other controls, and about which both of them know neither the future nor the ending.<sup>35</sup>

The *Nadja*-like quality of “Random Order”—in its unfolding that feels both aleatory and associative, in its mixture of intimacy and veracity, and in the dream-like quality of what impresses one as a nocturnal atmosphere no matter if some of the photographs were taken in daylight—puts Breton back in the interpretative picture. Not in any direct, historical way, of course, but as a means of flagging the experience of a certain kind of field: full of associations, metaphors, connotations.

This was a field Rauschenberg had expressly courted in the *Inferno* drawings. [*Rauschenberg*: “Dante was sought and completed to have the adventure of what, and if, I could apply my abstract sensibility to a classical restrictive assignment. A one-on-one handling and no embarrassment to either. Illustration with compulsive respect.”]

8. There are causal questions that are extremely hard to answer. For example, why would Rauschenberg have chosen the Dante project, not only selecting it, but doggedly deciding as well to continue it, necessitating intermittent work over two and a half years, and, toward the end, six months of isolation in Florida in order to bring it to completion? Rauschenberg has given several different explanations.

34. Rauschenberg said, “I was interested in many of John Cage’s chance operations and I liked the sense of experimentation he is involved in, but painting is just a different ground for activities. I could never figure out an interesting way to use any kind of programmed activity—and even though chance deals with the unexpected and unplanned, it still has to be organized. Working with chance, I would end up with something that was quite geometric: I felt as though I were carrying out an idea rather than witnessing an unknown idea taking shape.” In Seckler, “The Artist Speaks,” p. 81.

35. Hollier, “Surrealist Precipitates,” p. 129.

As he told Dorothy Gees Seckler in 1966, he wanted the figurative project demanded by illustration: "The problem when I started the Dante illustrations was to see if I was working abstractly because I couldn't work any other way or whether I was doing it by choice. So I insisted on the challenge of being restricted by a particular subject where it meant that I'd have to be involved in symbolism."<sup>36</sup> Earlier, however, he had told Tomkins that he was simply trying to find a way of solving the problem that his drawings did not follow one from the other the way his paintings did: "I really wanted to make a whole lot of drawings, though, so I began looking around for a vehicle, something to keep them going."<sup>37</sup> If this was his explanation in 1964, however, it had become far more generalized by the time Tomkins wrote *Off the Wall: Robert Rauschenberg and the Art World of Our Time* (published in 1980), which quotes Rauschenberg's pretext as simply wanting to be taken more seriously as an artist.<sup>38</sup> [Rauschenberg: "It is mentioned why I spent such a long period of time on this work. (1) I was not going to leave it undone. (2) I became extremely irritated by the self-servicing of the text disguised as righteousness. Attempting Dante was a private exercise in my growth and self-exploration to face my weaknesses. A test. By doing it I had equal opportunity to alienate or to ally."]

If Rauschenberg was forcing himself to engage with "symbolism," was this because his Combine paintings had been truly abstract, as he claimed? Or was it because they had already been invoking connotational fields, particularly in the matrices set up between objects, words, and photographic reproductions on the surfaces of works like *Rebus* (1955), *Talisman* (1958), or *Trophy I (for Merce Cunningham)* (1959)? [Rauschenberg: "In the canto . . . the space allowed for each image was a measure made by the space occupied by the author's words, literally. (Not to exaggerate or edit.) I was the reporter."] And was the figurative nature of the new project both a way of acknowledging this and of extending it? Further, in the three-way connection set up in these drawings between the figurative, the symbolic, and the photographic, which element is primary?<sup>39</sup> Does the avowed desire to break with abstraction promote figuration, which then leads to the allegorical requirement of a master text (in this case the *Inferno*) and the subsequent need for a (photographic) image bank from which to draw? Or do the photographic forces already

36. Quoted in Seckler, "The Artist Speaks," p. 84.

37. Quoted in Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors*, p. 224.

38. Tomkins, *Off the Wall*, p. 157. That Rauschenberg continues to be defensive about the early characterization of himself as an unserious jokester (in a January 1956 review, Steinberg had written "Eulenspiegel is abroad again") is witnessed by the many interviews in which, referring to his reception in the 1950s, he made remarks like "I was considered a clown." See Leo Steinberg, "Month in Review: Contemporary Group at Stable Gallery," *Arts* 30, no. 4 (January 1956), p. 47, and Paul Taylor, "Robert Rauschenberg," *Interview* 20, no. 12 (December 1990), p. 147.

39. I am using "symbolic" here in a rather loose way, to gather together the idea of images symbolizing other sensory data or specific textual ideas, and thus the drive toward the textual or the linguistic ("symbol" in the semiological sense). In this usage, symbol overlaps with the idea of the allegorical emblem, rather than opposing it, as it does in Walter Benjamin's analysis of the fragmentary and disunified nature of allegory contrasted to the organic character of the work understood as symbol. See Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: New Left Books, 1977).

assembling on the surfaces of the Combine paintings, themselves releasing uncontainable networks of association, simultaneously demand the figurative and its textual support?

Whatever the first, originary term in this departure, the *Inferno* certainly plunged Rauschenberg into the domain of the connotational, in which messages overlay one another in a pile-up of substitutions and metaphors. From the kind of visual symbols used for smells (Canto VI's "putrid slush" is metaphorized as a stinking fish in Rauschenberg's illustration), for sounds (Canto IV's "roar and trembling of Hell" becomes a racing car), and for tactile sensations (Canto XXXII's icy wilderness, where tears freeze the eyes shut, is visualized by a transparent cube with an eye inside it),<sup>40</sup> to those for conceptual conditions (Canto XX's idea of fortune-tellers and diviners is rendered by a large head of Sigmund Freud and by the fact that all the bodies have their heads on backward), the drawings explore the allegorical dimension of the image. But whatever the specific symbolic associations released may be, their interconnections could not pass from one part of the drawing to another without another dimension. That aspect is the technical one, in which rubbing, veiling, and liquidity not only open vignettes of space within the surface of the pages but, by reaffirming that surface, convert it into the vehicle that allows one such space to flow into another.

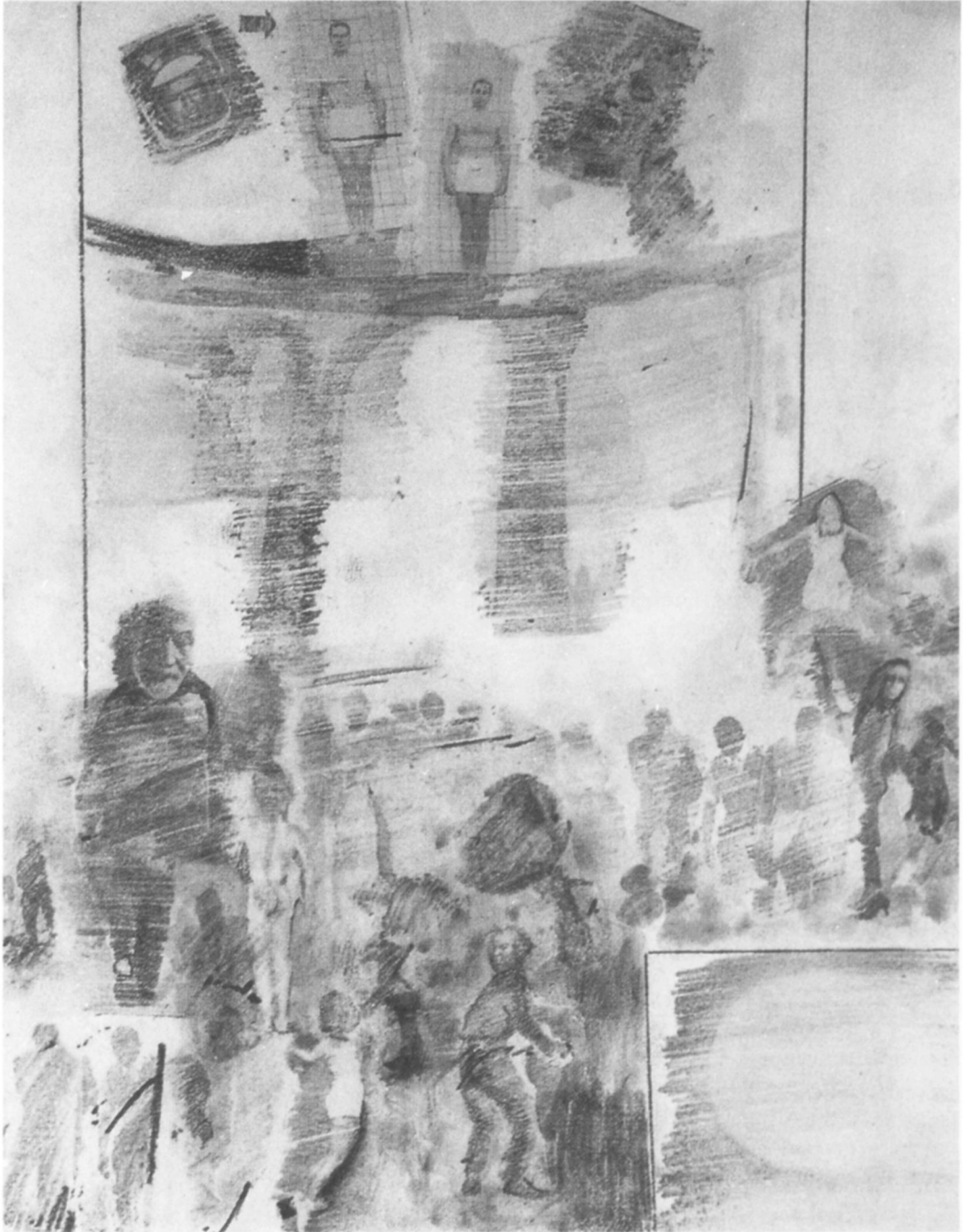
In creating a unified stroke as the medium of all the images in the series, the act of rubbing necessary to Rauschenberg's solvent-transfer process (in which a magazine or newsprint page is soaked with lighter fluid or some other solvent, laid face down on top of the drawing sheet, and then rubbed with a blunt instrument to force the ink of the printed page onto the underlying sheet) serves as the matrix of slippage between one image and the next, which the spills and flows of watercolor and gouache merely heighten.<sup>41</sup> But the rubbing also produces two more effects. Since a rubbing most often takes the form of a rectangular unit capturing a given figure or object along with a patch of its background, the first is that individual images are framed, something heightened not only by the many found, internal frames within individual images (such as the astronaut's visored helmet in Canto XXX) but by the numerous rectangular elements collaged to the pages. The second is that the rubbing's visual blur promotes the sensation that the images are "veiled."

It is this combination of framing and veiling that paradoxically restores these drawings to the very dimension that Leo Steinberg was to call the "diaphane," in

40. These have been pointed out in Ashton, "Rauschenberg's Thirty-four Illustrations," pp. 57, 61. For another reading of the drawings' relations to the text of *Inferno*, see Bitite Vinklers, "Why Not Dante? A Study of Rauschenberg's Drawings for the *Inferno*," *Art International* (Lugano) 12, no. 6 (Summer 1968), pp. 99–106.

41. A precedent for the use of rubbing to promote associative readings and slippage is, of course, Max Ernst's frottage technique, which I do not think is connected historically to Rauschenberg's method. Far more likely is the connection between the parallel strokes of the rubbing and Jasper Johns's drawing technique of using parallel hatching to open up pockets of shallow space.





**Canto XX: Circle Eight, Bolgia 4,  
The Fortune Tellers and Diviners. 1959-60.**

distinguishing it (and the whole tradition of picture making before Rauschenberg) from the very “flatbed picture plane” that he saw Rauschenberg’s Combines as inaugurating. The sense of the visual field falling in a transparent but decidedly vertical veil before the viewer’s upright body connects the “diaphanic” with a dimension of nature that Steinberg went on to contrast explicitly to Rauschenberg’s exploitation of the “post-Modern” dimension of culture, understood now, in the Combines, as a horizontal “receptor surface on which objects are scattered, on which data is entered, on which information may be received, printed, impressed.”<sup>42</sup> To return to the veil, and thereby to the diaphane—or to the frame, and hence to the window model of the picture plane—was, then, to arise from this flatbed, in which Rauschenberg’s originality as an artist had been invested.

But the return to this vertical axis in the Dante drawings seems to have been motivated less by a need to connect to nature (or landscape) than to what we would have to call an “image logic,” which is to say that, whether stored within the imaginary spaces of our dreams, fantasies, or memories, or observed in the external world, images are vertically oriented, with heads at the top, feet at the bottom. If Rauschenberg was exploring the associational field of those chains of connotations that, as Barthes had noted, make up the rhetorical form “common for instance to dream, literature and image,” he had no choice but to seek the image logic’s vector, which is vertical. This is the reason why it is hard to see which was foremost in Rauschenberg’s set of choices in 1958: the condition of the symbol; its existence as figurative; or the support of the photograph. This is also why there is no break between the image logic exploited in the Dante drawings and the oneiric feeling of “Random Order.” The mental spaces of dream, of memory, and of the imagination are equally upright.

9. Heads contained by frames appear throughout the Dante drawings, either because Rauschenberg encased faces within framing rectangles (as in Cantos X and XXXI) or because he found such framing in the borrowed images themselves (the diver’s helmet in Canto XX, the astronaut’s in Canto XXX). This resource is carried over into the silkscreened paintings. In *Transom* (1963), *Flush* (1964), and *Trapeze* (1964), for example, mirrors from both the *Rokeby Venus* and Peter Paul Rubens’s *The Toilet of Venus* (ca. 1613–14) isolate the female faces and are themselves further isolated by the painting’s field, and in *Retroactive II* (1964) and *Press* (1964), John F. Kennedy’s head is tightly framed. Enclosing the head and face, the frame seems to organize an image of the mental, or of thought, meditation, or reflection.

Steinberg had indeed spoken of the flatbed of Rauschenberg’s Combine paintings as a turning away from the optical toward the mental. “It seemed at times,” he wrote, “that Rauschenberg’s work surface stood for the mind itself—dump, reservoir, switching center, abundant with concrete references freely

42. Steinberg, “Other Criteria,” p. 84.

associated as in an internal monologue—the outward symbol of the mind as a running transformer of the external world, constantly ingesting incoming unprocessed data to be mapped in an overcharged field.”<sup>43</sup> And building on that suggestion, plus the sense that the wildly diverse elements “dumped” onto this surface were nonetheless physically embedded within it in such a way as to produce a peculiar homogeneity among the varied elements, and between them and that surface, I myself tried to develop the particular dimension of the mental space suggested by the Combines, namely memory.<sup>44</sup>

If from the Combines to the Dante drawings to the silkscreens via “Random Order,” the assortment of material objects gives way to the framed image—a two-dimensional element whose substance is now truly at one with its planar support and whose medium is consistently photographic—this experience of a mnemonic space becomes ever more specific. For not only does the verticality of the image become pervasive, but now, as assertively presented in the manifestolike “Random Order,” the formula for the entire silkscreen series is to be a loose grid of enframed photographic spaces that seems to present one with nothing so much as a visual archive: the storage and retrieval matrix of the organized miscellany of images, which presents the memory as a kind of filing cabinet of the mind.

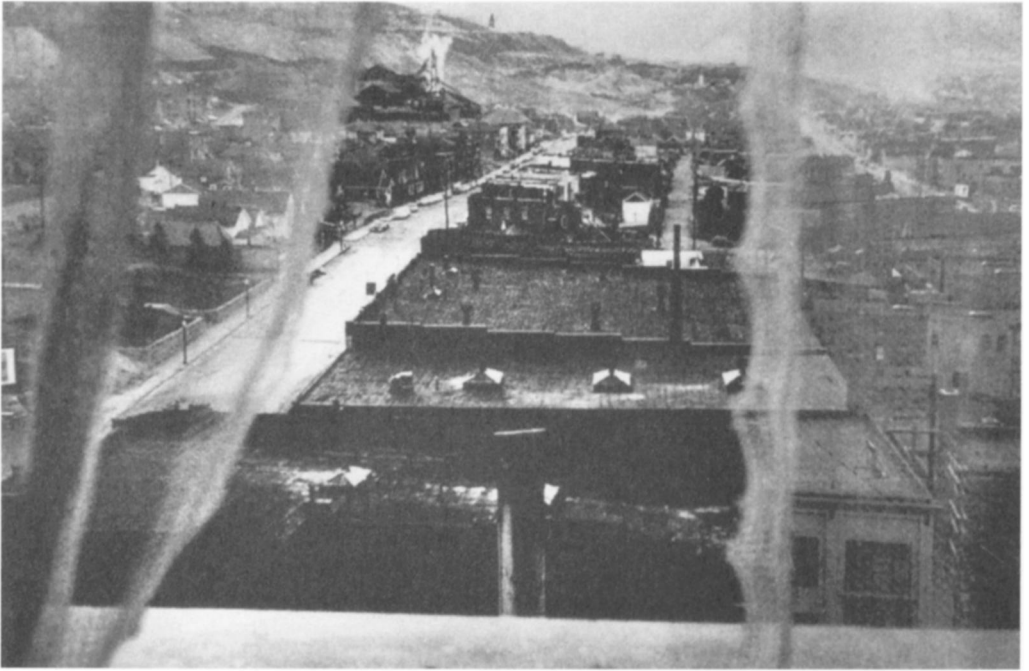
10. The photographic archive was not wholly foreign to Rauschenberg’s Identikit. He is fond of saying that he almost became a photographer, and the project he imagined embarking on, inspired by the presence at Black Mountain College of Harry Callahan and Aaron Siskind, was, W.P.A.-like, to photograph America, foot by foot, “in actual size.”<sup>45</sup>

Given Rauschenberg’s generation, the W.P.A. characterization is surprising. We would sooner expect him to share a sensibility with someone like Robert Frank. We would predict that Rauschenberg’s handling of photography would give us the sense of our connection to a place that is only possible through the intensity of our experience of separation from it, the sense that to see it directly is so painful that the image must somehow be mediated by the presence of a veil. This is true of Frank’s famous *Barber Shop through Screen Door—McClellanville, South Carolina* (1955) and his *Fourth of July—Jay, New York* (1954), in which the mesh of screening that paradoxically serves as both focusing device and barrier in the former and the American flag dropping a vertical curtain through the space of the latter produce the simultaneous connection and distance that is the heart of Frank’s ambivalence. Whether we are looking at *View from Hotel Window—Butte, Montana* (1956) or *Elevator—Miami Beach* (1955), there is always the effect of a veil, created

43. Ibid., p. 88.

44. See my “Rauschenberg and the Materialized Image,” *Artforum* 13, no. 4 (December 1974), pp. 41–43.

45. Quoted in Rose, *Rauschenberg*, p. 75. In 1979, Rauschenberg undertook a project of this nature, *In + Out City Limits*.



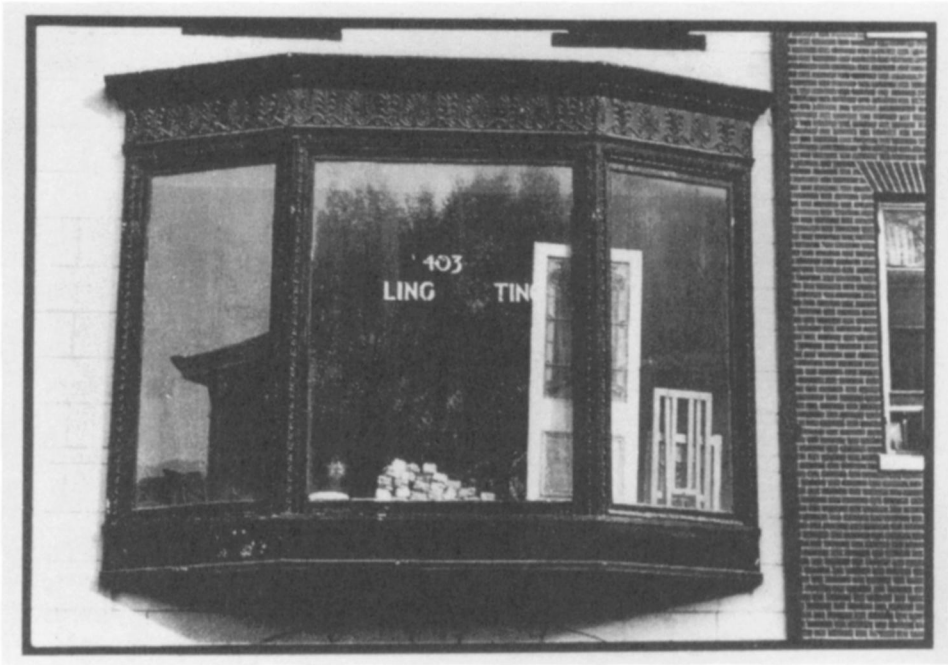
*Robert Frank. View from Hotel Window—Butte, Montana. 1956.*

either by the literal means of photographed fabric or by the technical means of blur, flare, or pulled focus.

Veils do function in Rauschenberg's treatment of found photographs within his Combines, famously so in the gauze that falls over a group of photos in *Rebus* and over the reproduction of the stag in *Curfew* (1958). In these instances, the veils can be seen as working to create a balance between the assumed transparency of the photographic image's relation to reality and the opaque presence of the other objects piled onto the Combine. The skin of paint that often scabs over these objects, marrying them to the flatbed surface, is thus mimicked by the veil that is dropped in front of the occasional photographic image.

However, in Rauschenberg's own photography, we see something far more in tune with the example of Walker Evans's works: the frontality; the relentless focus; the quality of light falling on textured surfaces (clapboard siding, for example, or brick) acting as a kind of graphic, or drawn, stroke; and the fascination with two-dimensional "fronts" (billboards, torn posters, shop windows) standing in for the deep space of the "real," which they effectively block. It is these qualities, combined with the survey mentality expressed by the photographic project Rauschenberg initially imagined, that make the connection to the idea of an archive, a photographic corpus through which reality is somehow ingested, organized, catalogued, and retrieved. Indeed, beginning with the silkscreens—Rauschenberg's systematic turn to photography as the basis for his paintings—this procedure of the survey has marked his approach in various ways.





*Above: Rauschenberg. Baltimore, Maryland. 1979.*

*Below: Rauschenberg. N.Y.C. Midtown. 1979.*



One of them is the amassing of the archive on the basis of certain preconceived categories. A precedent can be found in the notorious “shooting scripts” handed out by Roy Stryker in 1936 to his W.P.A. cameramen, including Evans, who were directed to record certain kinds of settings, social types, and accoutrements. In collecting his own material for the silkscreen series and for subsequent works, Rauschenberg has also looked for certain types of subjects in his media sources. As he and his assistants scour these sources, they arrange this material in prescribed categories—athletes, space travel, animals, domestic objects, transport, and American emblems, among others—in piles on the worktables in his Captiva studio.<sup>46</sup>

But the most important aspect of the archival is the idea of the standardized format, which allows for its informational space to be mapped. This is where Rauschenberg’s two choices—his employment of the loose grid as a structure and the conveyance of the image in its frame, so clearly enunciated in “Random Order” and so faithfully followed in the silkscreens—become important. [*Rauschenberg: “Re the archives: I also arrange my other colors and materials in such a way to keep them in my reach. Everything I can organize I do, so I am free to work in chaos, spontaneity, and the not yet done.”*]

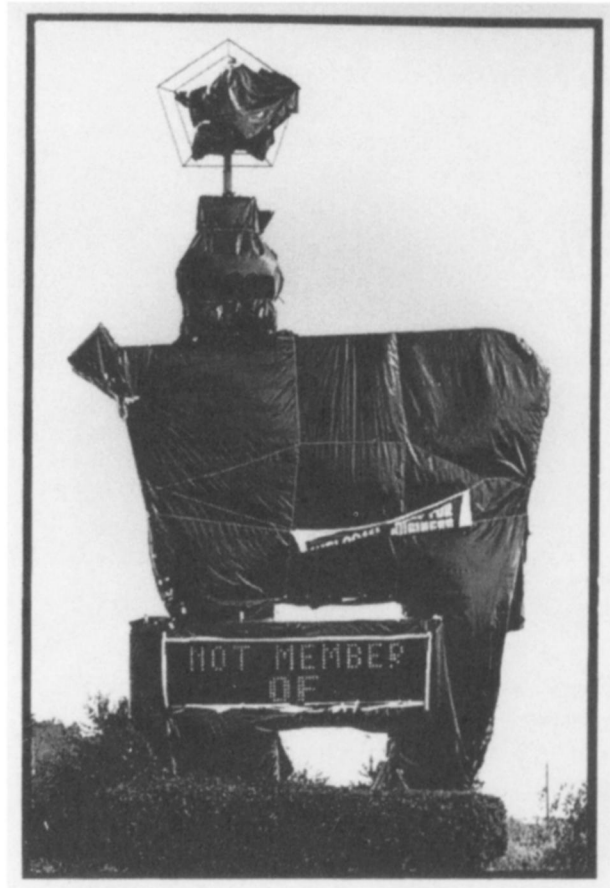
11. The archive is a documentary project, a public act of collective memory; or at least that is its ideal form, the one projected by various prewar archival surveys, like the W.P.A.’s in America, or August Sander’s *Das Antlitz der Zeit* (*The Face of Time*, 1929) in Germany. Benjamin Buchloh has written about the peculiar relation of postwar avant-garde artists to these earlier demonstrations of a belief not only in the transparency of the photographic medium but in the common-sense assumption of the transparency of the reality itself onto which the camera was focused. Gerhard Richter, as his complex project *Atlas* (1962–present) reflects, is peculiarly adamant about the impossibility of any such transparency and the need to puncture its mythological status. If the archival project is founded on memory, Richter’s own example seems to say, it must be based as well on a notion of subjectivity for which (or for whom) coherent memory is possible. But what *Atlas* questions, over the meander of its burgeoning but hapless categorical spaces, is just this option at a historical point at which, to use Buchloh’s terms, “anomie” has taken over in such a way as to eclipse the subject, to produce that subject as the basis of mnemonic activity no longer.<sup>47</sup>

In Buchloh’s reconstruction of Richter’s development, Richter’s experience of seeing Rauschenberg’s work in the 1959 exhibition *Documenta II: Kunst nach*

46. This was described to me by Nan Rosenthal, who was struck by it on her first visit to Captiva in 1983.

47. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “L’Archive anomique de Gerhard Richter,” a chapter of his seminal study of Richter, *Gerhard Richter*, exhibition catalog, vol. 2, *La Peinture à la fin du sujet* (Paris: Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1993), pp. 7–17. See also Buchloh’s essay in this issue of *October*, starting on p. 117.





Rauschenberg. Charleston. 1980.

1945 in Kassel was crucial to his embrace of modernism and redirection of his own project, which *Atlas* inaugurated.<sup>48</sup> It is therefore fortuitous that by 1962 Rauschenberg himself had embarked on a series not unrelated to *Atlas* in various aspects: the use of “amateur-type” photos (here supplied by Rauschenberg, taking them with his Roloflex camera) combined with images culled from magazines and newspapers; the exploitation of serialization and repetition; the coordination of the framed photographic image with the geometrically patterned layout of the grid; and the ultimate quarry, which is the now highly problematic space of memory.

12. The last word of the two-page spread in “Random Order” is “allegory,” which is penciled by itself under the layered interior space of Rauschenberg’s loft,

48. *Ibid.*, p. 13. The Rauschenberg works that Richter saw at the 1959 *Documenta* were *Bed*, *Kickback* (1959), and *Thaw* (1958).

stove and sink lined up parallel to the surface plane in the image's foreground, countertop repeating this parallel in the middle ground, and floor-bound works in progress in the background. This image shows interior space as organized by the language of perspective, which makes the order of the asserted "allegory" not exactly what we would have expected.

If "allegory" has been applied as a term of critical appraisal to Rauschenberg's work, this has been to align it with a variety of deployments, including fragmentation, appropriation, and indeterminacy of reading, that characterize certain postmodern practices.<sup>49</sup> It has also been to annex it to Walter Benjamin's use of baroque systems of allegory to address the reified status of the human subject within a culture of the commodity.<sup>50</sup> In my consideration of "Random Order," however, I would like to do something both more limited and more precise. If allegory begins with the doubling of one text (or image) by another, Rauschenberg is clearly placing photography and (Renaissance) painting into such a reciprocal relationship. Not only has he told us what he thinks Renaissance painting is (the volume that can be flattened "to the extent that a brushload of paint can hold it to a picture surface"), but he has made an emblem of this bellows-like opening and closing every bit as graphic as Albers's reversible squares. The opaque, two-dimensional plane, or square, in *Renascence* is suspended within the schematic, perspectival rendering of the cube as one of its dimensions now "holding volume to the surface"; the cube is a figure that will reappear persistently throughout the silkscreen series in works such as *Exile*, *New Painting*, *Payload*, and *Vault* (all 1962); *Die Hard* (1963); *Bicycle*, *Stop Gap*, and *Transom* (all 1963); and *Press*, *Stunt*, and *Trap* (all 1964).

But in "Random Order," what Rauschenberg has also said is that the photographic mark is not just an imprint falling onto the emulsion of the light-sensitive surface from the space in front of the camera (as in the example of the *White Paintings*, which catch cast shadows), but that the mark seems to be welling up from within the camera itself, as in the case of a foggy or dirty pane, where "what is outside appear[s] to be projected onto the window plane." In the artist's description, the photograph is neither considered the "transparent" access to reality that is part of the ideology of the document, nor conceived of as the indexically opaque mark of the cast shadow. Rather, it is understood—on the model of the Renaissance picture, which stands as its allegory—as layered: a depth and a surface forced into some kind of contact.

The model of that contact is not the *same* as the Renaissance picture; if it were, we would not be speaking of an allegory. Rather, this relationship, or contact, between surface and depth is made—hence the "integrity of the picture plane"—and then broken—the allegorical condition. The figure that comes to mind in

49. See Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," *October* 12 (Spring 1980), pp. 67–86; and *October* 13 (Summer 1980), pp. 59–80.

50. See Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art," *Artforum* 21, no. 1 (September 1982), pp. 44, 46–47.

this regard is Freud's model of memory, the "Mystic Writing-Pad." How, he asked, can we conceive of the storage of information necessary to memory occurring in the very same neurological system that provides the perpetually virgin fields of impression requisite for new, incoming perceptions?<sup>51</sup> In thinking about the relationship between two systems of neurons—those of permanent impression (that is, storage) and those of perception—Freud turned to a child's toy, the Wunderblock, which is comprised of a plastic sheet layered over a wax tablet. The pressure of drawing on the sheet with a stylus makes the sheet stick to the tablet, producing a graphic outline. But this configuration can be made to disappear simply by lifting the plastic sheet, thereby pulling it away from the tablet to which it had been temporarily attached. The sheet is then virgin once more, and, like the perceptual system, ready to accept fresh data. The tablet has nonetheless retained the marks of the stylus's impression and, like memory, bears a permanent network of traces in the part of the apparatus that lies below.

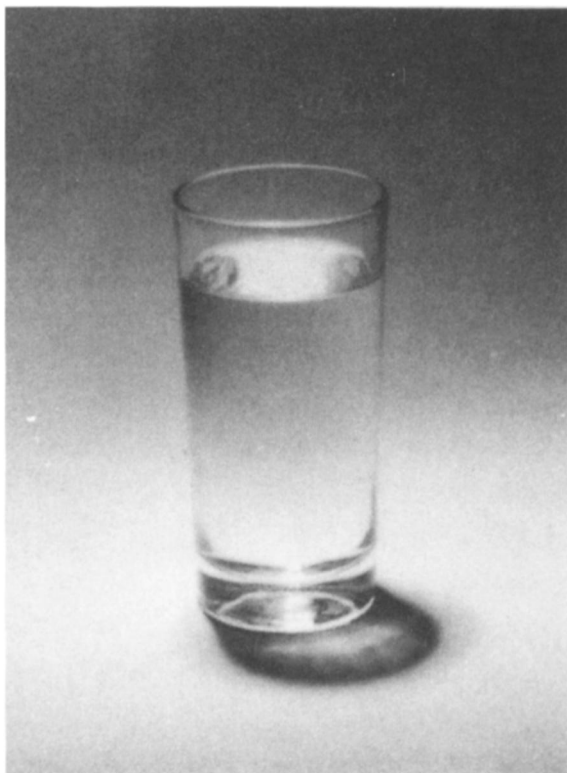
If "Random Order" is an allegory, it is one that attempts to triangulate memory, photography, and text, with the allegorical exemplar being the oscillating space of painting in which inside and outside, virtual and actual, depth and surface are bound and parted only to be bound and parted again. If there was a "belief" in the early 1960s that these could have something to do with one another, it would surely not have been along the lines of the prewar archive. Rather, although there is no immediate historical connection, the relationships are on the order of Barthes's discussion in "Rhetoric of the Image," in which connotational chains, anarchic and metastatic, open a kind of echo chamber of unstable meanings ricocheting around the archival structure that Barthes later called the "stereophonic space" of the endlessly multiple associational codes.

By 1964, at the height of his silkscreen production, it was clear to Rauschenberg that these chains were both what he was confronting and what he could never control. Accordingly, he said to David Sylvester,

We have ideas about bricks. A brick just isn't a physical mass of a certain dimension that one builds houses or chimneys with. The whole world of associations, all the information that we have—the fact that it's made of dirt, that it's been through a kiln, romantic ideas about little brick cottages, or the chimney which is so romantic, or labor—you have to deal with as many of the things as you know about. Because if you don't, I think you start working more like an eccentric, or primitive, which, you know, who can be anymore, or the insane, which is very obsessive.<sup>52</sup>

51. Sigmund Freud, "A Note upon the 'Mystic Writing-Pad'" (1924), in Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, vol. 19 (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute for Psycho-analysis, 1961), pp. 227–32.

52. Quoted in Roni Feinstein, *Robert Rauschenberg: The Silkscreen Paintings, 1962–64* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art in association with Little, Brown, Boston, 1990), p. 25, from David Sylvester, interview with Rauschenberg, BBC, August 1964, audiotape in Chelsea School of Art Library, London.



*Rauschenberg. Photograph of a glass of water used as source material in silkscreened paintings. 1962.*

Another instance he provided Sylvester was the image of a glass of water, which entered into the silkscreen repertory by means of his own photograph. Not only was it a purely physical or functional object—"the fact that it's this big, this high, that it might topple over, that it evaporates and has to be refilled, that it picks up reflections"—but, he admitted, adhering to it were "all the psychological implications of a glass of water." Speaking of the glass that appears in *Persimmon* (1964), he gave an example of one such implication, an interesting demonstration for the person who insisted that there was no such thing as a sad cup of coffee:

In most cases, my manipulation of the psychological is to try to avoid the ones that I know about. I had trouble in one painting. . . . I was silkscreening a glass of water and I put it over green and that whole painting had to change to destroy the look of poison, which is just simply an association that one has with a glass of green, I think.<sup>53</sup>

53. Quoted in *ibid.*

The year before this conversation, Rauschenberg had written “Note on Painting,”<sup>54</sup> in which he returned to his rejection of the connotational as the “clichés” that psychological common sense annexes to certain objects (“If I see any superficial subconscious relationship that I’m familiar with—clichés of association—I change the picture”).<sup>55</sup> In “Note on Painting,” he wrote, “The work then has a chance to *electric service* become its own cliché,” with the interjection of “electric service” into the sentence functioning somewhat in the manner of the insertions of photographs into the flow of “Random Order.” Indeed, these strange interruptions in “Note on Painting”—“open 24 hrs.,” “heated pool,” “Denver 39”—have the quality of textual fragments lifted from advertising, journalism, or any of a number of other sources for those words that “broadside our culture,” which the trucks of “Random Order” are pictured as delivering. It’s just that the word “cliché,” which in Rauschenberg’s usage curiously joins the psychological—“clichés of association”—and the material—the words that “broadside our culture”—sets up a relationship between the external source of the image and the internal space of its reception.

Because Rauschenberg has repeatedly said, “I always wanted my works—whatever happened in the studio—to look more like what was going on outside the window,”<sup>56</sup> we are not surprised that with the advent of the silkscreen series he should have identified that outside with photographic media: “I was bombarded with TV sets and magazines by the excess of the world. I thought an honest work should incorporate all of these elements, which were and are a reality.”<sup>57</sup> What is more surprising is that he should have conceived of “whatever happened in the studio” as “its own cliché,” now considered as a positive quality.

This cliché, a precipitate of his characterization of the media image as “the complex interlocking of disparate visual facts *heated pool* that have no respect for grammar,”<sup>58</sup> is nonetheless the stuff of the “subconscious.” It is like the kernel of the dream, or the repetitively simple wish, encircled by the elaborate disjuncture of its imagery, much of which is fabricated from the “daily residue” of one’s recent waking life. This relationship between the *form* of a rhetoric and its wildly proliferating, manifest content is what Barthes had been getting at as well when he spoke about the endless lexis into which images of reality can be divided (the ideolects); however, as one *descends* toward the “psychic depths of an individual . . . the more

54. The handwritten text, dated October 31–November 2, 1963, is reproduced as Robert Rauschenberg, “Note on Painting,” in John Russell and Suzi Gablik, *Pop Art Redefined* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers, 1969), pp. 101–2.

55. This particular quotation is taken from the Seckler interview, which took place two years after “Note on Painting” was written. But at the time he made his black paintings, Rauschenberg’s hostility to associations was expressed in his distress about the connotations critics wanted to annex to what he considered a simple material.

56. Quoted in Taylor, “Robert Rauschenberg,” p. 146.

57. Quoted in Mary Lynn Kotz, *Robert Rauschenberg: Art and Life* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990), p. 99.

58. Rauschenberg, “Note on Painting,” p. 101. Italics added.

classifiable the signs become. What could be more systematic than the readings of Rorschach tests?"

The allegory of inside and outside, of front and back, of the photographic striking the subject from the outside but welling up in a different *form* (the grammar of the cliché) from within, emblemized by a reversible cube, is the message of "Random Order." As allegories go, it is both simple and moving, evincing a particular faith in the renewability of painting, capable of emerging "like a new season."<sup>59</sup>

59. I would like to address in this last footnote the pressure that has been exerted on Rauschenberg's work in attempts to read it as the encoding of a coherent message and in some cases to use the conventional procedures of iconography to decode that message. This began with Charles F. Stuckey's self-proclaimed deciphering of the rebus in *Rebus* ("Reading Rauschenberg," *Art in America* 65, no. 2 [March–April 1977], pp. 74–84) and has continued in the kind of thematic readings developed by Roni Feinstein, where, among other things, she sees certain of the silkscreened paintings as allegories of Marcel Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (Large Glass)* (1915–23; Feinstein, *Robert Rauschenberg*, pp. 75–90). More recently the iconography has been understood as encrypting themes of gay subculture, whether through allusions to myths resonant within gay sensibility (the Ganymede myth in *Canyon* in Kenneth Bendiner, "Robert Rauschenberg's *Canyon*," *Arts Magazine* 56, no. 10 [June 1982], pp. 57–59) or, in the case of the entire Dante drawings project, through hidden references to bathhouse culture and the media support for homoerotic displays of male bodies (Jonathan Katz, "The Art of Code: Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg," in *Significant Others: Creativity and Intimate Partnership*, ed. Whitney Chadwick and Isabelle de Courtivron [London: Thames and Hudson, 1993], pp. 188–207; and Laura Auricchio, "Lifting the Veil: Robert Rauschenberg's *Thirty-four Drawings for Dante's Inferno* and the Commercial Homoerotic Imagery of 1950s America," in *The Gay 90s: Disciplinary and Interdisciplinary Formation in Queer Studies*, ed. Thomas Foster, Carol Siegel, and Ellen E. Berry, *Genders* 26 [1997]). This idea of the iconographic as the encoding of a relatively coherent text that underlies and explains the images is, of course, miles away from the complex theories of allegory put in place by Walter Benjamin and then used by other authors, from Paul de Man for literature to Benjamin Buchloh and Craig Owens for the visual arts. In those theories, baroque allegory is brought forward to demonstrate what in twentieth-century experience is not readable through the iconographic model of a stable relation between two texts. It is precisely the message of uncertainty, of slippage, of unreadability and fragmentation that allegory not only conveys but also, in a necessary act of redoubling, itself becomes. The subject of allegory is thus precisely not the subject of iconography. This would seem to me to be clear from Rauschenberg's own allegory of the subject of media. But, then, the convinced iconographer is almost impossible to dissuade.