



COURTESY EDISON COLLEGE, FORT MYERS, FL

BY JAN GARDEN CASTRO

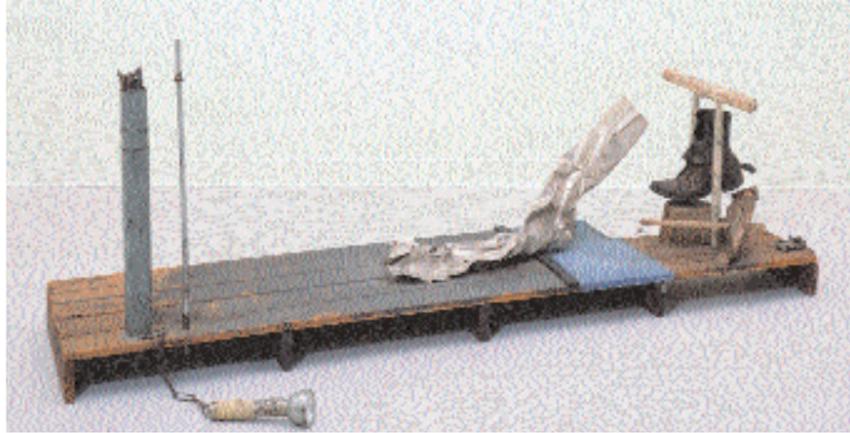
Robert Rauschenberg's Combines, created between 1954 and 1964, were revolutionary in the history of art.<sup>1</sup> Leo Steinberg called them a "shift from nature to culture," and his characterization is still the most successful critical description. Others have discussed the works as collages, grids, "definitive incongruity," and "relaxed symmetry." But critics have not fully addressed the degree to which these works freed painting, sculpture, and design from their genre classifications, the degree to which Rauschenberg integrated into his work what some consider postmodern notions: references to earlier art, found and invented three-dimensional objects, and signs of language. It seems agreed that he firmly rejected the art notions of his day: Abstract Expressionism, the pre-eminence of two-dimensional pictures over other art forms, and the plastic sequences of formalism. Above all, Rauschenberg created a new vision of American culture—one rife with social and political conflict, changing gender and identity roles, and self-deprecating humor. Instead of taking the macho road followed by many of his generation, Rauschenberg took a magnifying glass approach, loading his work with odd, fascinating bits of Americana that seemed, to some, incongruous. Art impresario and friend Marvin Ross Friedman observed, "Robert Rauschenberg clearly articulated a new and concise language all his own. He speaks in a vernacular that is original and at the same time universal. He's heroic yet uses materials of humble origin. His was a new kind of vision."

Rauschenberg, raised with the given name Milton in the Texas Bible belt, has said that the name "Combine" refers both to farming and to the "shortening of the word combinations." This phrase implies shortcuts and easy juxtapositions across media. Rauschenberg's work variously combined color swatches in fabric, paint, and other materials; images from Western art and from popular culture, including an FBI poster whose wanted man resembled the artist; and found materials, from stuffed animals to light bulbs, mirrors, fans, wood furniture, wire, boxes, and tires. The use of sculptural elements and found objects changed the focus by combining art elements that literally interacted

*A Quake in Paradise (Labyrinth)*  
1994, 1994. Mixed media, view  
of work as installed at the Bob  
Rauschenberg Gallery, Edison  
College, Fort Myers, Florida, 2005.

## A New Sculptural Idiom

## Robert Rauschenberg



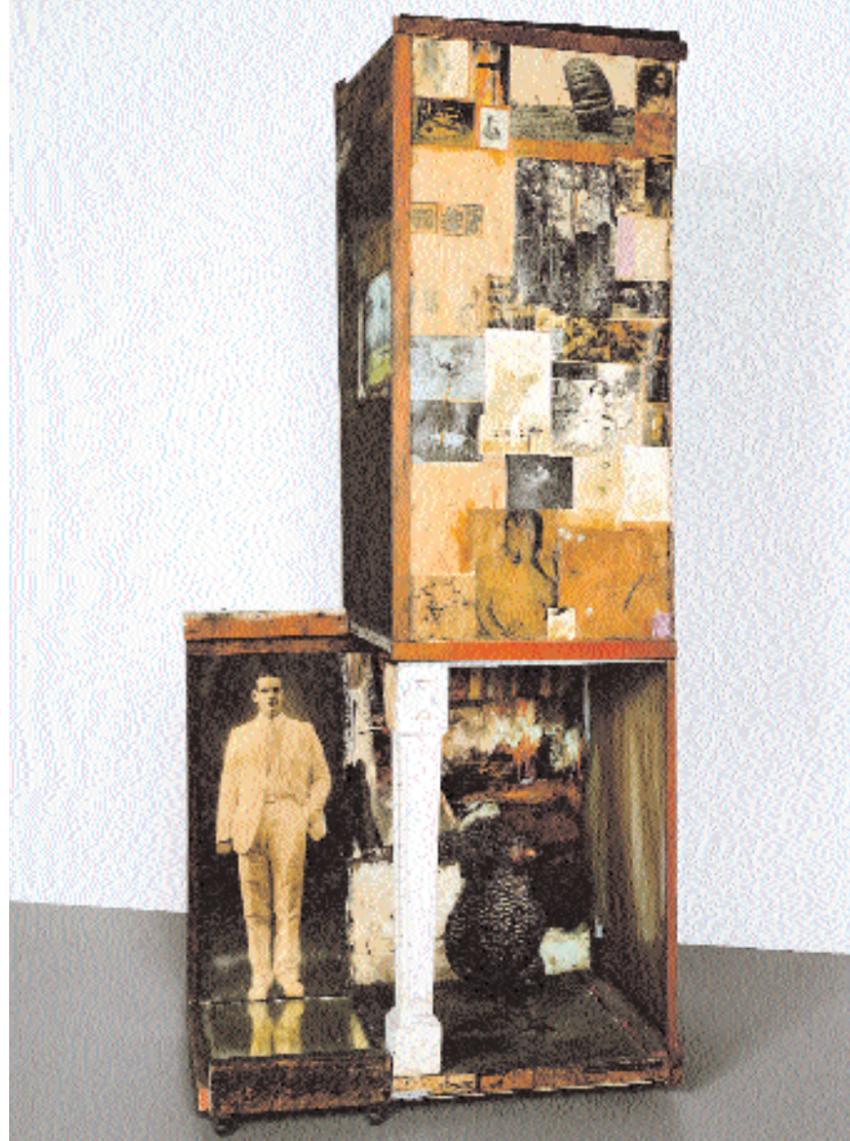
under Joseph Albers at Black Mountain College, helped to inform his aesthetic while freeing his imagination to experiment with notions of culture, clutter, and even chaos in the rebellion against post-World War II order. America's Ozzie-and-Harriet values in the '50s were not the artist's, but he was torn between showing the hypocrisy of American culture and not overly exposing his own orientation. The images in the Combines seem to show materialism, strongly defined masculine and feminine gender roles, religion, sexuality, and sports, which often vie with each other for the viewer's attention. This mix of cultural messages also had special meanings for a masculine-appearing handsome guy with a wife and son, who was personally changing his own sexual orientation and values.

In brief, gender issues and American notions of masculine and feminine behavior underlie many of the Combine constructions. Rauschenberg variously used a stuffed goat with a spare tire stuck around its middle, a pheasant missing its tail (with a false tail inside the picture plane), an eagle flying out of the canvas, and a pair of white shoes mated to a stuffed hen as images that could imply longing, personal loss, and either symbolic castration and/or a new kind of sexual liberation. He denies that these were explicit portraits or autobiographical or sexual, but they clearly stretch the boundaries of art and question the rigid gender paradigms of his era. Like Warhol, Rauschenberg also explored what

was hidden or forbidden by society at large. *Untitled* (c. 1954) contains admittedly autobiographical elements. Paul Schimmel's essay for the "Robert Rauschenberg: Combines" exhibition catalogue describes it as "a box-like construction that rests on a wheeled base" and lists the various photographic and written references to the artist's parents, his Texas home, and his sister Janet whose poignant letter says, "I hope that you still like me Bob cause I still love you. Please wright (sic) me *back* love love..."<sup>3</sup> Below the letter is a photo identified by the artist as a "man awaiting execution in Texas." A photo of a dandy in a white suit—a stand-in for the suit that Rauschenberg wore at his wedding—faces in one direction along with

a stuffed Dominique hen, and a pair of white-painted shoes faces in another direction. Schimmel points out that the sides of the boxes include images that sum up the artist's career, including the white, black, and red paintings. But Schimmel's essay does not mention the images of the artist's wife, whom he divorced, and Jasper Johns, his new partner in the arts, which appear one below the other in the collaged elements. Do the dandy and the hen represent married life? These and other details, including the direction and placement of the pieces in this multi-sided work, seem to show both the artist's love for his family and his increasing need to move away from them into his new identity and space.

Rauschenberg's transition from his family roots to an artistic persona outside of that proscriptive frame plays a huge part in the Combines. Their impact is based on hidden and even missing messages and tensions between the parts of each composition. Rauschenberg's comments on *Monogram*, one of the most recognizable Combines, focus on his obsession with a stuffed angora goat in the window of a second-hand store in Greenwich Village. The goat was "so dirty and so elegant. I saw it every day going to work with (choreographer) Merce Cunningham. One day I went in and said, 'I want to buy that.' The guy said, 'I don't know if I want to sell that...I think it's my good luck piece.' I said, 'If you were going to sell it, how much would it be?' The price quoted was \$35. I only had \$15, and I said, 'Would you take this for a down payment?' He did, and I did. Years went by, and I went back there to repay him, and the store didn't exist anymore. I guess it *was* his good luck piece. Without a goat, you can't go anywhere." Rauschenberg described the goat as a "resistant object," one that he knew "would be awkwardly placed. I thought, it needs a garden, and I can paint that, and that's the way it is now."<sup>4</sup> But Rauschenberg's discussion omitted the tire that hangs around the goat's middle. "The tire is a staple in Bob's image inventory and has been ever since he and John Cage placed a tire track on paper," noted Ron Bishop, Director of the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery at Edison College in Fort Myers, Florida. The circular tire con-



*Untitled (Man with White Shoes)*, c. 1954. Oil, pencil, crayon, paper, canvas, fabric, newspaper, photographs, wood, glass, mirror, tin, cork, and found painting with pair of leather shoes, dried glass, and Dominique hen mounted on wood structure on five casters, 86 x 38 x 26 in.

trasts with the goat's rectangular form, both grounding it and changing its persona. "Bob grappled for four years with how to get beyond the fact that it was a goat, and the tire does it," Bishop added. My reading is that the tire turns the goat into a kind of vehicle. Since ancient times, and notably in the ancient Mesopotamian works excavated at Ur, the goat are somehow partners in crime. The goat's battered face is masked with paint streaks signifying creativity. Its muzzle and ears streaked with primary and secondary color may be emblems of every artist's palette and the world beyond art. The goat resides in what Rauschenberg calls a "garden," or

a pasture, that is itself a complex mixed-media collage of letters that signify a fragmented or incomplete use of language, a dirty tennis ball, a man and his shadow, half of a shirt sleeve, the heel of a shoe, dashes of paint in neutral hues, a news photo of a man on a tightrope crossing Niagara Falls, a debate in the House of Lords, and a Swedish stamp. The stamp has added humor since the goat's home museum is the Moderna Museet in Stockholm. These objects all have significant hues, geometries, and symbolism, but the brilliance of *Monogram* lies in the struggle between forces propelling the goat forward and those holding it back.<sup>5</sup> Many consider this one of the most powerful artworks of the 20th century.

with each other. Rauschenberg was wryly conscious that changing how art is created also changes how it is viewed. He encouraged viewers to bring their own readings and perceptions to each work. Poverty was a factor in the "sort of unbelievable intrigue of making" the combines, according to Rauschenberg. In conversation with Calvin Tomkins at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in February 2006, he bluntly stated, "As I used more and more materials and afforded less, I figured out that if they came out from the wall—there was a whole other side there not doing anything—that gave me twice as much space to work in. Finally, they just walked off the wall."<sup>2</sup> During these early years, the artist stuck to his mother's motto, "If you can't

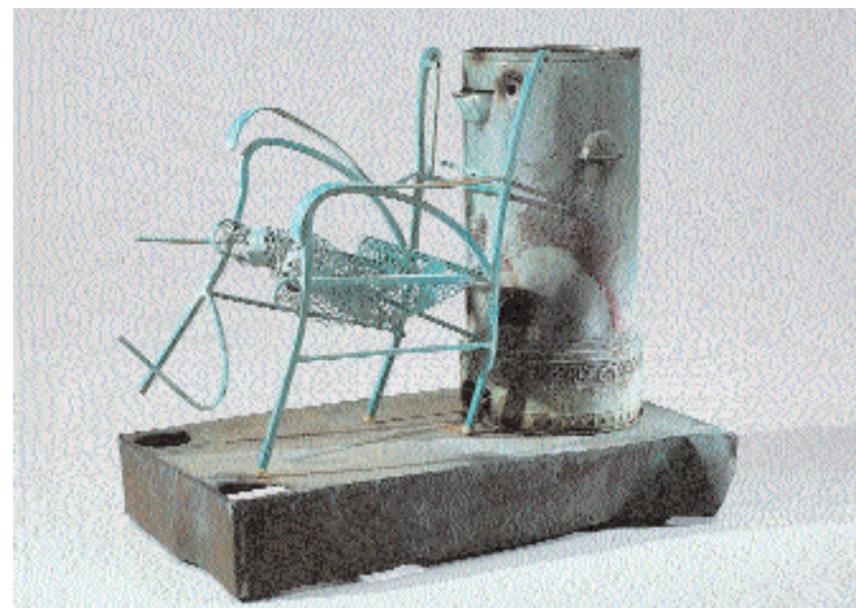
afford it, you don't need it.' That's a practical attitude. You never feel poor. I had so much *joy*—and I don't use that word lightly—working. Every day I felt wealthy because I never knew what I was going to do. That sustained me and kept me from self-pity or something like that." Most of Rauschenberg's choices of materials were "dependent on availability and the way that the painting was growing. I never started with a plan. I just felt the appetite of the particular artwork and tried to be as sensitive to that as possible. I was just as surprised about how every painting turned out as it was. I liked being the first to see it." Rauschenberg's art training, taking off from experiments with color and grids

TOP: COURTESY PACEWILDENSTEIN, NY / BOTH: © ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG/LICENCED BY VAGA, NY

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Top: *Canyon*, 1959. Oil, pencil, paper, fabric, metal, cardboard box, printed paper and reproductions, photograph, wood, paint tube, and mirror with oil on bald eagle, string and pillow, 86.5 x 70.5 x 23 in. Above: *Nile Throne Glut*, 1992. Copper and aluminum parts on wheels, 38.9 x 27 x 50.75 in.



Regarding the creation of *Bed* (1955), another crucial work in this pivotal series, Rauschenberg stated, "I ran out of stuff to paint. It was a hot summer. I had this old quilt. I think I stole it from the laundry [from Dorothea Rockburne]. I put it on a

frame. I thought with the pattern that it would immediately yield itself to abstraction. It never did. Finally I gave in and put a pillow on it, because it was just a bed, no matter what I did—until I encouraged its being a bed by adding a pillow. At least I wasn't lying. I wasn't lying *in* it either. That was another thing about materials. Of course, with my taste, anything would do."

The Combines may seem haphazard, but both the content—from nudes by Titian to those in girly magazines, to comic book frames—and the shapes were always carefully chosen. Rauschenberg favored geometric forms, including round and found shapes. He was inspired by Duchamp's bicycle wheel at the Museum of Modern Art: "It was between a Maillol and a Léger. I was shocked that a simple and beautiful bicycle wheel on a stool could hold up to the physicality and the excess of the other two." In making his own work, his choices of building materials were similarly geometric: "There are nearly no building materials that aren't just horizontal and vertical...It always comes to that climax of how things are held together. Wheels are one of a few things in the outside world that are round. I wanted to insist on as many possibilities as possible, so that's why (I used) ties and tires and wheels."

Even after Rauschenberg moved into his silkscreen period, which began in 1962, he would return to sculpture: "Any time I've worked flat long enough, I always want to move away from the wall. That's happened over and over again. Sometimes I go to collage, sometimes to metal and sculpture. To me, change is refreshing. Working with new material brings in a whole set of problems and responsibilities that weren't confronted before." Space does not permit a full consideration of every phase of Rauschenberg's career, but each period involved change, the use of new materials, and the erasure—he once erased a de Kooning drawing—of that era's barriers and boundaries between artistic disciplines. The silkscreen period led to ongoing explorations of images transferred from one thing or medium to another, and this, in turn, led to processes facilitated by emerging computer technologies. In 1966, Rauschenberg founded E.A.T. (Experiments in

BOTTOM: ELLEN PAGE WILSON, COURTESY PACEWILDENSTEIN, NY / BOTH: © ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG/LICENCED BY VAGA, NY

Art & Technology) with artist Robert Whitman and engineers Billy Kliver and Fred Waldhauer. The first results of their investigations were presented at New York City's 69th Regiment Armory and featured 40 engineers and 10 artists. This forward-looking project offered technical services to artists, spread to other countries, and nurtured collaborations and interdisciplinary events joining artists and scientists/technicians. In 1980, E.A.T. distributed its own archive of over 300 documents to major libraries in seven countries.

E.A.T. was also one of the first steps in Rauschenberg's ongoing generosity toward emerging artists, friends, neighbors, and fellow human beings. Ron Bishop recounted that Rauschenberg moved to Captiva Island, Florida, over 30 years ago and "has become a longtime friend of this community in many ways, helping charitable organizations such as the Trauma Center. He also donates original art annually to the Abuse Counseling and Treatment Center, which is supported by all of the artists in the community, and he has helped bring in people like Lily Tomlin, Lauren Hutton, and Sharon Stone as celebrity auctioneers for the center's annual fundraiser. He and Darryl Pottorf have done the same with a lot of organizations in the area."

Bishop continued, "Edison College has had 12 shows with him—one is pending in February 2007—and almost every show we do with Bob is a world premiere. The *1/4 Mile or 2 Furlong* piece was shown here first, in '82, '83, and '86. Our 2005 show with Bob was a remarkable sculpture, *A Quake in Paradise (Labyrinth)* 1994, containing images from all parts of the planet. There were 29 panels configured in Ls, Ts, and Xs, allowing viewers to walk through and be part of the piece. It varies in installation from location to location. It was shown in Switzerland, outdoors in the snow in Ferrara, Italy, and also went to Nice, France, and to Denmark. It may land in an American collection."

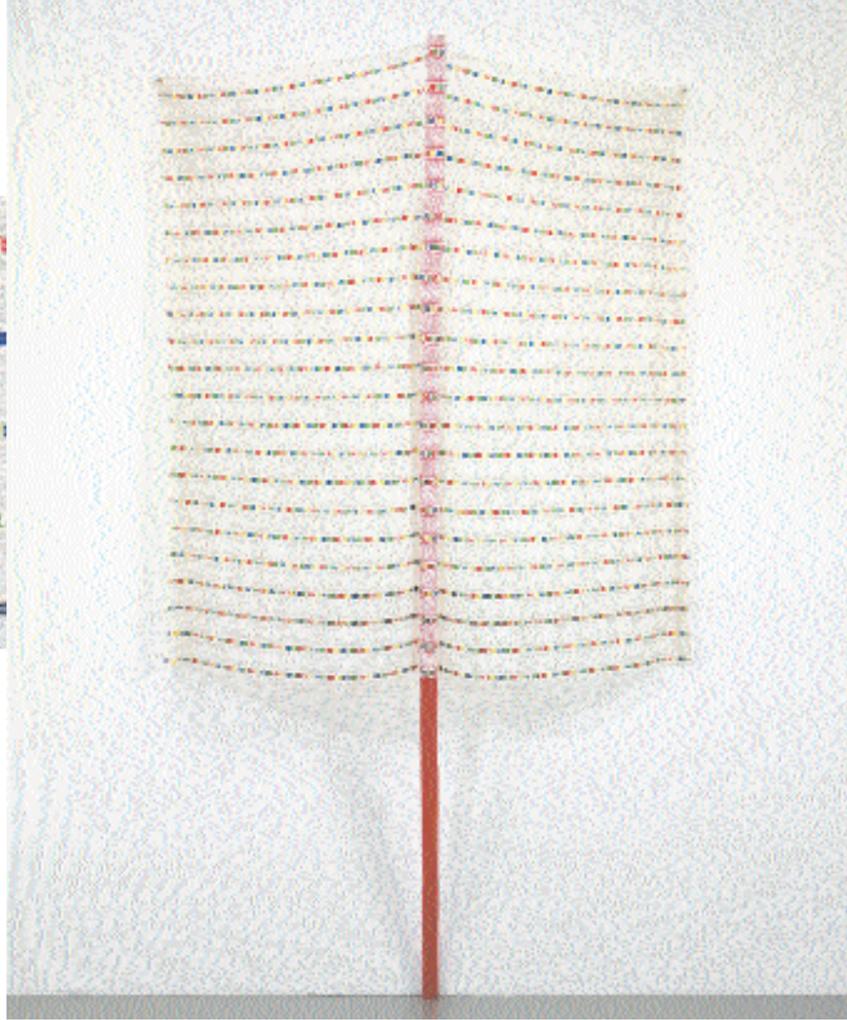
*A Quake in Paradise (Labyrinth)* carries forward the processes of the earlier Combines on a larger scale. It was created using acrylic and graphite on 29 panels of bonded aluminum, anodized mirrored aluminum and polycarbonate (Lexan) with aluminum

TOP: COURTESY EDISON COLLEGE, FORT MYERS, FL / BOTTOM: © ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG/LICENCED BY VAGA, NY



framing. The tall panels, transparent, reflective, opaque, and tinted, form a maze designed both to engage viewers and to stop them inside new visual terrains. Silkscreen, hand-applied paint and graphite, computer-generated transfer, and other processes juxtapose diverse images

Top: *A Quake in Paradise (Labyrinth)* 1994, 1994. Mixed media, detail of installation at the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery, Edison College, Fort Myers, Florida, 2005. Above: *Minutiae*, 1954. Oil, paper, fabric, newspaper, wood, metal, and plastic with mirror on string on wood, 84.5 x 81 x 30 in.



Left: *Interview*, c. 1955. Oil, pencil, paper, fabric, photographs, printed reproductions, string, newspaper, wood, baseball, metal fork, found paintings, hinged wood door and brick on wood structure, 72.75 x 48.25 x 12 in. Above and detail: *Scan (jammer)*, 1975–76. Satin-covered rattan, lace, and fabric, 86 x 47 x 24 in.

and hues: red acorn leaves on white, blue “stop” and “no trespassing” signs near a yellow “EAT” sign, an orange basketball backboard, part of a chair, the front wheel of a small motorcycle, part of an American flag in black and white covered by a gray chain link fence, two sepia flatbed truck wheels on black and cream surfaces, red mystery tents on white, and white brood hens on red. The objects have clear geometric properties. Even the hens represent three roundish shapes in relation to each

other; the circles, contrasting with square forms, often connote positive values including change, mobility, unity, and progress. Rauschenberg likewise variously uses color—in swatches, in combinations of two or three hues, and in combinations that make a particular statement yet reframe old color field notions to say that composing with color is not limited to one approach or school.

According to Bishop, *ROCI* (pronounced Rocky) is a more direct continuation of the Combines than *Quake*. “Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange,” was a traveling exhibition that culminated in 1991 at the National Gallery in Washington, DC: “It was one of the largest undertakings ever by an artist. Bob went to nine countries and spent six years working with artists around the world. He did it because he felt that artists should take an active role in communication between cultures.” Jack Cowart,

former curator of 20th-century art at the National Gallery, has suggested that the NGA’s *Altar Peace/ROCI Mexico*, *Copperhead Grande/ROCI Chile*, and *Wall-Eyed Carp/ROCI Japan* are key works in this series.<sup>6</sup>

“If you’ve seen 10 pieces of Bob’s, you know anything’s fair game,” Bishop added. “His materials are ubiquitous. He is not making pieces about something. There is no narrative in Bob’s work. That frees us to bring our experiences to each piece. His transfer process starts in the computer. He scans an image taken by himself or one of his staff. The image can be printed in any size with a water-based ink onto a vellum-like material that is transferred with pressure onto the surface of another material with a water-based medium on it. The process is a little like old bubble gum tattoos that you could transfer with liquid to the back of your

hand...Bob’s new work makes me think of Matisse’s later work. Everything is down to the essentials, the purest of the elements that get the image across.”

Rauschenberg himself emphasizes the viewer’s freedom to interpret the cacophony of the Combines and his other works. Asked by an audience member at the Met discussion how his prolific use of pre-existing images should be read—as images, as content, or as just another compositional element, he replied, “In actuality, like exactly what they are...and where they are in relationship to other things. Bring in as much complexity as you can face.”

Arne Glimcher has closely followed Rauschenberg’s work since they met in the ‘60s when the artist was showing at Leo Castelli. Glimcher invited Rauschenberg to join his gallery, now Pace Wildenstein, around 1984 and considers their long association “one of the thrills of my career.” He says that he does not favor any single work or period: “I’m interested in the force that is Robert Rauschenberg—this dynamic wind that blows through his entire career.” He agreed that Rauschenberg did for art in America what Picasso was doing in Europe: “Picasso was an artist who made sculpture as well as paintings as well as prints as well as drawings. Rauschenberg is clearly the most important and the most influential artist of the second half of the 20th century. You not only have painting turning into sculpture turning into photography turning into performance turning into installation. All of those sensibilities, even video, that were gravid in those early paintings became the watershed for the second half of the 20th century. He blurs the line between sculpture and painting, and he



*Coca Cola Plan*, 1958. Pencil on paper, oil on three Coca-Cola bottles, wood newel cap, and cast metal wings on wood structure, 26.75 x 25.25 x 4.75 in.

blurs the line between what a drawing is and isn’t when he erases de Kooning’s drawing in *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, 1953. Rauschenberg works, as he says, “in the gap between art and life.” Art is no longer a magic window or anything like that. It is a part of life. Whereas the Abstract Expressionists were working toward something sublime, another kind of transcendent aesthetic, as were Agnes Martin, Ad Rinehardt, and Newman, Rauschenberg is actually creating the sublime out of

the detritus of society. When he selects things that already exist in society—broken objects, pipes, air conditioning systems, crates and barrels, things made of metal—and he re-assigns them a new identity by their juxtaposition, it becomes a sculptural act. He creates something like *Oracle*, a complex sculpture, out of pieces of found objects. It’s a new sculptural idiom.”

*Jan Garden Castro is a writer in New York and a frequent contributor to Sculpture.*

Notes

<sup>1</sup> Many thanks to Robert Rauschenberg, Arne Glimcher, Ron Bishop, Nan Rosenthal, Bradley Jeffries, David White, Marvin Ross Friedman, Bernice Steinbaum, Robert Chambers, Jennifer Joy, the staff at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and all who contributed to or facilitated this essay.

<sup>2</sup> All quotations from the artist are from his conversation with Calvin Tompkins and Met curator Nan Rosenthal, at the Metropolitan Museum on February 5, 2006, and are used with the permission of the artist and the Metropolitan Museum. The discussion was held in conjunction with the exhibition “Robert Rauschenberg: Combines,” which traveled to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles through September 4, 2006 and will be shown at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris (October 11,

2006–January 7, 2007) and the Moderna Museet in Stockholm (February 4, 2007–April 29, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> The catalogue incorrectly attributes this letter to the artist’s son Christopher, according to correspondence with Mary Beth Carosello and Christopher Rauschenberg conducted by the Met.

<sup>4</sup> There are two earlier states of *Monogram*, both illustrated in *Robert Rauschenberg: Combines*, the large catalogue published by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles and Steidl Verlag. Nan Rosenthal recounted that several conservators helped to uncrate this work when it arrived at the Met. Once the goat was standing in its pasture, a conservator from the Moderna Museet primly brought out the goat’s own comb to arrange its hair.

<sup>5</sup> *Monogram* conjoins full color and monochrome passages, a juxtaposition that Nan Rosenthal also noted in relation to *Wager* (1957–59). She suggested to Rauschenberg during the discussion that his work “seems to combine two tendencies...The middle is full of cacophony and looks very dense and the sides are kind of monochrome...It seems to me all through your work there’s a kind of back and forth between that cacophony on the one hand and the monochrome on the other.” “That’s the way life is,” the artist replied. “A very simple thing is contrasted and obscured by complications. It’s happening right now.”

<sup>6</sup> Cowart’s comments are from “Curators Can Curate, But Writers Can Try, Too” by Judith H. Dobrynski, *New York Times*, March 29, 2006.