

## RRFA 01: Robert Rauschenberg papers

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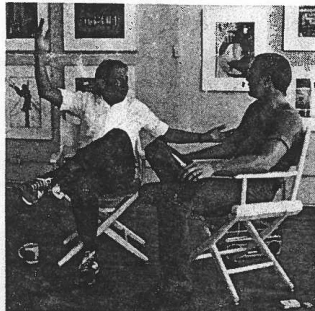
PHOTO M E T R O

### INTERVIEW WITH RAUSCHENBERG By Paul Raedeke

PR: Photographs have been an *element* in your work for a long time. When did you start using photographs in your mixed media work?

RR: I think it was 1950.

PR: It was an innovative step at that time. What brought you to use photographs in your collages? You could have drawn things in. Is there something specific about a photograph that motivated you to use them?



RR: Because they were *actual*. They didn't go through any stylistic process. I studied drawing with Albers at Black Mountain, and things always had the look of my inadequacies. Only my weaknesses showed. With the photographs I was able to open up the work with my sense of reality, as I perceived the outside world. That's always been true. I've always wanted my work to look more like what's going on outside the window than in the studio. That's a very tricky

maneuver seeing as you are in the studio and you're the one who's doing it—to keep that contact up with the streets. The photographs always bring back that objective reality and a sense of information. I seriously believe that photography and painting are the purest act of communication.

PR: What were the sources of the photographic images. Were they images that you have made yourself?

RR: They came from magazines, newspapers and all over—some were my own images. I snuck my kid in there every now and then. (laugh)

PR: When you use a photograph in a collage is it generally preconceived, previsualized? Or do you work more like Jerry Uelsmann who gathers images without a specific use in mind and assembles them later?

RR: Up until a week-and-a-half ago I would have said "never preconception". Right now I'm collaborating with Trisha Brown and Laurie Anderson in a theater event. I'm doing the costumes and the set. I'm lighting the set with four new collage movies that I have to do next week—it's only twenty-two minutes. I told Trisha if she added one more second to that dance, I quit! I don't know how I'm going to do it anyway. I've never even done it before, so that makes it a bit trickier. However, I went out specifically to take photographs to be silkscreened onto the fabric that I'm making the costumes out of. That was one of the first times I went out deliberately to take a piece.

PR: I see the word "transfer" used with some of your mixed media. How do you transfer the photograph onto your collage?

RR: Some are silkscreened, a lot of it is color and regular xerox where the

image is one-to-one. I have solvents, and run it through a press. I can use regular periodical stuff unless it's been coated with some kind of varnish. I can use all the low class stuff. (laughter) It's a bit frustrating, particularly as our economy falls out from under us—magazines are getting smaller and smaller, so the material I can use is getting smaller. You see these enormous, gorgeous posters—I don't know what in hell they do to that ink but you just can't wrench it loose with anything.

PR: What motivated the move toward more purely photographic work? Was there a need to break out of the public's expectations about your work?

RR: No, my big weakness is that I feel I have to move into everything. I never give anything up.

PR: But the renaissance is over! (laughter) Do you think that the fact that your work blurs the lines between established media...

RR: I hope it does. I've been trying to do that all my life.

PR: Does it make it any more difficult for the public or the critics to understand it?

RR: I hope so too. It's awfully hard to keep the public awake. Their main direction is to assume that their main purpose in life is to understand what you're doing. And understanding means that they can go back to sleep. To understand what you're doing is one of the lowest priorities. Anything that you say that's coherent as an explanation is already obsolete. All you're doing is burying the work.

PR: Your painting and drawing are experimental, iconoclastic, even revolutionary. Your photographs seem to operate more within the framework of traditional concerns, closer to the mainstream. Is that something that is occasioned by the medium itself?

RR: I find it tougher. You see, my *forte* is collage, which means I can crop and all sorts of things. That's where I can get embarrassingly sharp. My risk at being traditional in taking pictures is the gamble of hitting on that precise moment without cropping, without collage, without any tricks.

PR: you print all full frame?

RR: Yes. One thing, a bird landing on my picture, is enough to make it not be mine.

PR: So you have less control over the resultant image.

RR: Yes, by being traditional I have much less control.

PR: Does that change your approach to image-making? It's certainly a very different act to make a collage than to make a photograph.

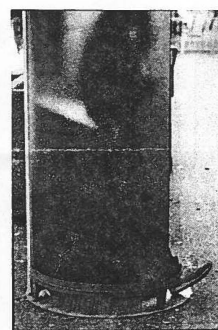
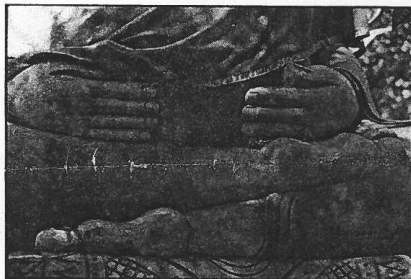
RR: I get so annoyed sometimes. You no sooner get honed in on an image and everybody turns and looks at you or something like that. (laughter)

PR: There is a certain amount of luck involved.

RR: Right, and that's part of the gamble too.

PR: But there are elements of luck in any art form, they just take different forms.

RR: But there isn't that time element, which is a risk. A photograph can get up and walk away from you, a cloud can change, anything. It's not just pigeons that sit on your pictures. (laughter) I used to delude myself that I could come back the next day at the same time and get a picture I missed—well *forget it!* It just doesn't work that way. But I can affect



it in a painting studio. It doesn't really matter because there's not the original record there anyway. It comes together in a much different sense of time.

PR: But the danger you feel in the studio is the loss of direct contact with reality?

RR: That's right. That's the affectation that has to be maintained—there is no affectation when you're on the spot taking photographs.

PR: Are the concerns you deal with in photographic art different than those in your collage?

RR: I don't think so. It's all just to try to keep everybody aware of as many differences in our life as they can stand.

PR: Someone wrote that you are more of a journalist than an artist.

RR: *I said that.* I'm more interested in being a reporter than in being an aesthete.

PR: Didn't you once, early in your career, conceive of a project to walk across the country and photograph every inch of it?

RR: Yes, and I've kind of renewed that idea with a little more general scheme in the In and Out City Limits work. A lot of this work comes from that. I have portraits of different cities. I have nearly the whole East Coast now. I have hundreds of photographs of each city, and along the road—that's why it's called In

and Out City Limits. I just haven't had shows of all those things. I wanted to do the work and then come back to the town and show them what the town looked like. I've only done Los Angeles, New York, Boston, Fort Meyers. I'm half way through Chicago and Miami . . .

PR: So you're doing something like the original idea but with more spaces in between.

RR: Right. And I've expanded it to Sri Lanka, China and Bangkok which were not in the original plan. I may be the last American photographer that ever does Sri Lanka.

PR: Do you process and print your images yourself?

RR: Yes. I have an assistant who follows through—we work very close together.

PR: I take it you are not hung-up on technique, that it's secondary. You once stated that you "didn't necessarily desire a perfect photograph, if by perfect photography one means maximum contrast, light and darks and extreme focus."

RR: I like a good, honest photograph, as rich as you can make it. But if it doesn't come out that way and the image is great, then it doesn't matter. In focus, out of focus, that's not what makes the moment.

PR: You work mostly in 35mm and some 2 1/4. Do you work with normal length lenses or do you use wide and telephoto also for effect?

RR: That's my favorite one [pointing] and I don't even know what it's number is.

PR: It's a zoom, isn't it?

RR: Yes. I started using the zoom in the South. If I hadn't had it I would have had an ass full of buckshot! You can be photographing somebody's clothesline and they'll come out and scream at you

and cuss you and call the police. People are so paranoid nowadays; they either think you're setting up a robbery or reporting them to the IRS. It's nothing so romantic as invading their privacy or stealing their spirits. (laughter)

PR: Have you had any formal photo education or did you teach yourself?

RR: I studied it at Etack Mountain College.

PR: Wasn't Aaron Siskind there?

RR: Yes, and Callahan and deKooning too. Siskind was a friend of mine already from New York. He loves being a painter with his photographs, doesn't he.

PR: Have any of these people influenced your photography?

RR: Oh, I hope so! Actually all of them. The integrity and seriousness necessary to be an artist is something I learned from photographers before other painters. Painters seem to be a lot vaguer about values—intrinsic values and ethics.

PR: Does this exhibition herald a new direction in your career? Are you moving more toward photography? The fact that you came here personally might suggest some particular importance in this work.

RR: No. I always hang my own shows if at all possible, and meet the people who look at it. That's my input. I give what I can, but don't think I don't take from what they say. It's not superficial. It's very difficult. It's not harder as a successful artist, to maintain some one-to-one relationship with your work and its purpose. I could stay in New York or Captiva and just do work and ship it around

and that would be perfectly acceptable. But I would be starving. If you're trying to communicate you have to have some kind of feedback.

PR: Speaking of success, does it ever concern you that a lot of the people who come tonight [to the reception] will be coming to see *Rauschenberg* rather than the photographs?

RR: I don't think they're coming here to do that. You never know when there might be a breakthrough and somebody might actually look at something. Early on I said there was no bad reason to buy a painting. A lot of painters get very paranoid about that, and very prissy.

PR: Not even if it's just to match the color of a sofa? (laughter)

RR: Even if it's the most corrupt collector. Once that painting is out being seen, you never know what its influence is going to be. If somebody's maid goes home and talks to her children about it, something has happened.

PR: Do you feel the expectations that go with being a legend have helped you or hindered you? There are people who will ask why you're exhibiting photographs. You're a painter, after all. Why shouldn't Ansel Adams exhibit his paintings then?

PR: Let him try! (laughter) I'm not a professional record album man either [a reference to the recently released limited edition Rauschenberg cover for the new Talking Heads album]. And Laurie's piece is the first time I've ever

printed fabrics. I think it's marvelous, all these things you can use. If you just get a rich enough palate of activities you can break down all of those hierarchies.

PR: Do you think your photographs, given your reputation, will be difficult to judge objectively?

RR: I hope so. I know for a fact that I could have sat back someplace in the late 60's or early 70's and just held my ground and raised the prices. But that's not what life is to me. This show should make it clearer that I'm working for them and not for me. I'm just a vehicle here, just the carrier. The only reason I'm in this business is to change people's minds about something or open their eyes.

PR: One article I read recently began with a quote to the effect that "although known primarily as an artist, Rauschenberg has recently begun to work as a photographer." Do you find that disconcerting?

RR: I don't know what that means. I think photographers are artists, I think musicians are artists . . .

PR: I find the statement rather provincial.

RR: I'd say "retarded"! (laughter)

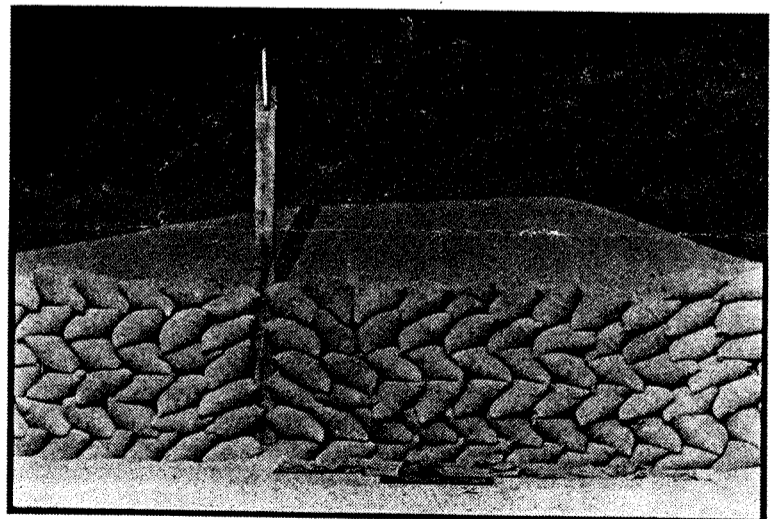
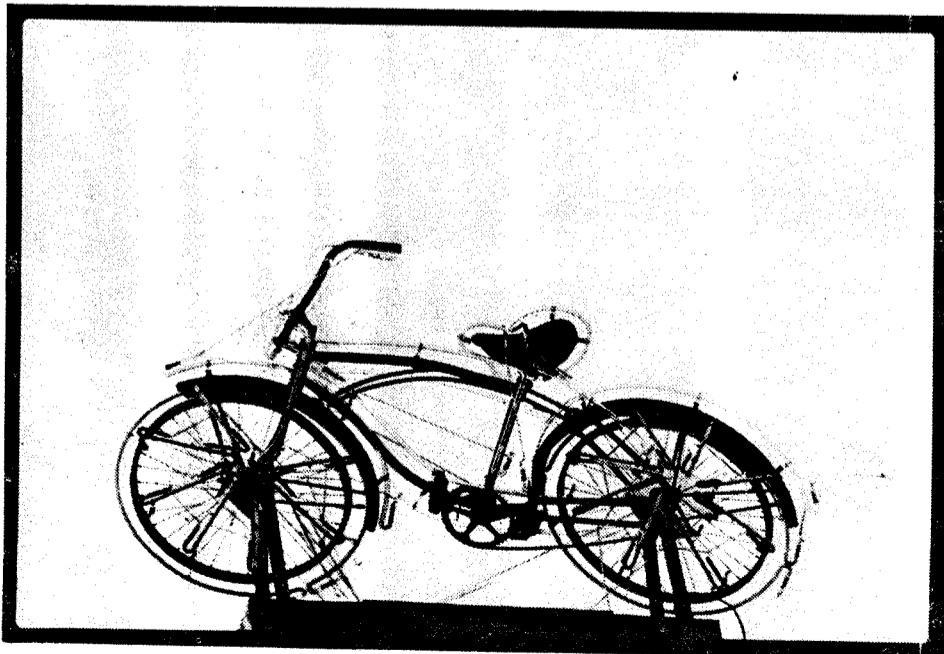
PR: I thought we'd gotten over those debates about a century ago.

RR: But obviously we didn't. We missed a few.

PR: Was there any particular reason you chose San Francisco for this exhibition?

RR: I came here just so I could get into PHOTO METRO! (much laughter)

The exhibition runs through October 28.



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