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## Pastmasters from another Century

**Richard Leeman**

Translator: Simon Pleasance

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## REFERENCES

Hunter, Sam. *Robert Rauschenberg : œuvres, écrits, entretiens*, Paris : Hazan, 2006

*Pop*, Paris : Phaidon, 2006

*Robert Rauschenberg : Combines*, Paris : Ed. du Centre Pompidou ; Los Angeles : Museum of contemporary art, 2006

- 1 The American show *Robert Rauschenberg: Combines* mounted by Paul Schimmel, senior curator at the Los Angeles MOCA, and on view at the Pompidou Centre this winter, showed works produced in the decade running from 1954 to 1964, a period “enshrined”, to borrow Schimmel’s term, between the period covered by the Walter Hopps exhibition in 1991<sup>1</sup>, and the Roni Feinstein show in 1990<sup>2</sup>. It would be hard, here, to over-emphasize the inconceivable lacuna represented by the absence of any translation of Calvin Tomkins’ biography, and Barbara Rose’s lengthy interview<sup>3</sup>, as well as the crucial book by Hopps, whose exhibition, no less irksomely, failed to make it across to Europe fifteen years ago. This would help us to better situate the abundant bibliography on Rauschenberg—a bibliography which still makes mention of these three reference works.
- 2 In Pontus Hulten’s postface to the catalogue, he movingly recalls the revelation represented, for him, by seeing Rauschenberg’s “combine paintings”—a revelation which issued at once from the basic use of colour in them, their power, their poetry, and their appropriate *rightness*. “Tremendous classical pictorial knowledge”, as Michel Ragon had put it early on back in 1958; “an authority which almost belongs to another century”, added Hulten. We might note, in passing, that, in that generation following in the wake of the Abstract Expressionists, Rauschenberg showed himself to be a pastmaster when it came to composition, while at the same time remaining an artist whom Hopps, according to Tomkins, regarded, along with many others, as “quintessentially American”—heir to

Jackson Pollock, otherwise put—whereas in 1964, the year when Rauschenberg firmly established his reputation in Venice, Minimal Art would be defined upon the principle of something anti-compositional, experienced *inter alia* as a form of anti-Europeanism (by Frank Stella and Donald Judd in particular). Another distinctive feature of Rauschenberg's work, as is shown by many of the titles used (*Rebus*, *Monogram*, *Allegory*), is its cryptographic dimension. Rauschenberg's "combines" are matrices of meaning and interpretation, and the dream and nightmare, alike, of hermeneutics—dream because interpretation may, as "iconographers" are so fond of doing, consist in indefinitely shedding light on the "text" beneath the imagery; and nightmare because, as meaning usually lies in allusion and intertextuality, the commentator is relentlessly referred to the sole interpretative likelihood—and its limit. The catalogue's essays have this "iconophile" attitude as it relates to an in-depth analysis of a work. *Minutiae* (1954) thus enables Charles Stuckey to discuss both the *genre* of the "combine" coming somewhere between painting and sculpture, and some of its possible sources, especially in the arena of theatrical *décor* and ballet *décor*. P. Schimmel works on what William Rubin, in an article written in 1960, had immediately discerned as the "biographical intimacy" of Rauschenberg's pictures, but he remains too timid in his listing of descriptions of the component parts of such and such a "combine", without ever really coming to any conclusions about an interpretation. Starting with *Slow Fall* (1961), Thomas Crow, on the contrary, develops a most persuasive study of both the aspiration to elevation (which might perhaps have gained from being connected with the symbolist Mallarméan theme developed by Motherwell and Twombly), and, more generally, over and above their enigmatic character, of the strictly allegorical dimension of the "combines". *Black Market* (1961) enables Branden W. Joseph to deal with the issues of movement, time, spectator participation, appropriation and "intermedial relations" (to use the term the author borrows from Dick Higgins) which Rauschenberg's *oeuvre* shares with film and writing. An adequately researched, though not terribly novel, "cultural essay" by Jean-Paul Ameline about the European reception extended to Rauschenberg winds up our topic, with, in particular, a special note on the 1964 Venice Biennale "affair".

- 3 In a timely translation of the barely altered re-publication, by the Barcelona-based Polígrafa publishing house, of the book published by Rizzoli in 1999<sup>4</sup>, the book by Sam Hunter, who does not shrink from boldly titling his essay "Rauschenberg, art and life", pursues, from *cliché* to commonplace, a factual, anecdotal, biographical narrative which is nothing more than a compilation of Tomkins, Rose, and the biography by Mary Lynn Kotz<sup>5</sup>, complete with descriptive and formalist comments where one notes the by now inevitable explanations of the *oeuvre* by way of Rauschenberg's dyslexia, explanations which are illustrative of this pseudo-scientific mode involving the pathologization (and *stigmatization*) of artistic praxis, which so delights certain critics<sup>6</sup>. The book—and it is hard to tell exactly whom it may be addressing: a "broad readership"?—is part of the hackneyed genre of hagiography. Hunter talks here of Rauschenberg as the "ultimate modernist"—a definition which applies above all to the author himself.
- 4 Like the catalogue *Combines*, the book *Pop* tacks very close to works and writings alike. The brainchild of Mark Francis, to whom we already owe the work which, to use his own word, "accompanied" the exhibition of the "Pop years" held at the Pompidou Centre in 2001, the book enjoys some kind of linkage with this latter institution—the preface, incidentally, is in part taken from it. It is hard not to subscribe to the didactic approach, in the part dealing with the "works", commenting systematically, as it does, by way of the

notices to the images: this approach contrasts with the riskier method, used in *Les Années pop*, of juxtaposition “in the manner of pin-boards” of documents supposed to “regain words within a narrative”. Hal Foster’s essay—producing, *inter alia*, quotations and documents intended to speak for themselves in the “Pop years” catalogue, and, conversely, showing, in the way it expounds the problem set, with its copious notes and references, the use which may be made of this pile of papers—has the self-appointed goal of drawing up “a typology of Pop imagery, not a history of Pop Art”, through a series of quite refined studies of Reyner Banham’s work, Richard Hamilton’s “tabular image”, Roy Lichtenstein’s “gridded image”, Andy Warhol’s “criss-crossed image”, Gerhard Richter’s “photogenic image”, and Ed Ruscha’s “cinerama image”.

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## NOTES

1. Robert Rauschenberg: *The Early 1950s*, Houston : Fine Art Press, 1991
2. Robert Rauschenberg: *the Silkscreen Paintings, 1962-1964*, Boston : Bulfinch Press, 1990
3. Tomkins, Calvin. *Off the Wall: Robert Rauschenberg and the Art World of Our Time*, New York : Penguin Book, 1980 ; Rose, Barbara. *An Interview with Robert Rauschenberg*, New York : Elizabeth Avedon Editions, Vintage Book, 1987
4. Hunter, Sam. *Robert Rauschenberg*, New York : Rizzoli, 1999
5. Kotz, Mary Lynn. *Rauschenberg: Art and Life*, New York : H.N. Abrams, 1990
6. Mattison, Robert S. *Robert Rauschenberg: breaking boundaries*, New Haven : Yale University Press, c2003
7. We subscribe here, overall, to what Ramon Tio Bellido has to say, “Post Plop”, *Critique d’art* #18, Autumn 2001, pp. 29-30.