



Robert Rauschenberg  
(YouTube video still).

## Rauschenberg, Robert (1925-2008)

by Jeffery Byrd

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Robert Rauschenberg was one of the most prolific and innovative artists of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. He was at the core of a group of interdisciplinary artists including Jasper Johns, John Cage, and Merce Cunningham, whose influence on the face of American art has been nothing short of revolutionary.

Dubbed both Neo-Dada for their use of found objects and Proto-Pop for their inclusion of media imagery, Rauschenberg and Johns led painting away from the introspection of the dominant Abstract Expressionist movement to the everyday world of common objects and recognizable imagery, thus paving the way for such Pop painters as Andy Warhol.

Rauschenberg was born to a blue-collar family in Port Arthur, Texas on October 22, 1925. After a tour in the Navy, he attended the Kansas City Art Institute and the Académie Julian in Paris. He also spent several summers in the late 1940s and early 1950s at Black Mountain College in North Carolina.

The experimental atmosphere at Black Mountain encouraged artists of all disciplines to share ideas and to collaborate. Rauschenberg participated in an early multi-media performance there with composer John Cage and choreographer Merce Cunningham. Cage's interest in Zen Buddhism and his philosophy of favoring outside inspiration rather than personal expression had a great impact on Rauschenberg.

Rauschenberg began including common objects in his art through collage and assemblage. He often employed the bravura brushwork of the Abstract Expressionists, but he also incorporated objects from real life such as pillows, brooms, tires, and all manner of salvaged detritus. *Monogram* (1955-1959), for example, includes a stuffed goat. He liked to say that he operated in the gap between art and life. He christened these works "combines."

Rauschenberg moved to New York City in 1949 and was briefly married to painter Susan Weil. In 1953 he met Jasper Johns, and they formed an intense personal and creative relationship that lasted until 1961. The painters critiqued one another's work, exchanged ideas, and together established a mode of making art that challenged Abstract Expressionism's emphasis on self-revelation.

Rauschenberg questioned the connection between feelings and paint both verbally and visually. For example, in *Factum I* (1957) he apes the spontaneously "unique" drips and splatters of Action Painting and then cleverly reproduces them in *Factum II* (1957).

Rauschenberg's de-emphasis of the self in his work is particularly meaningful when analyzed in the context of McCarthy-era homophobia. How could a gay man explore his inner feelings if revealing his true self meant having to face ostracism and even persecution?

In response, Rauschenberg's strategies ranged from campy coding as he included such telling tidbits as photos of Judy Garland in *Bantam* (1954) to witty all-out assault as he un-drew the work of an older artist

in *Erased de Kooning* (1953).

After the rupture of his relationship with Johns, Rauschenberg explored the potential of silkscreen printing in a series of paintings featuring appropriated images. These pictorially complex works feature photographic images lifted from the news of the day, and they can almost be read as history paintings. With their inclusion in the 1964 Venice Biennale, the artist gained international prominence.

Rauschenberg continued working in a variety of media throughout the 1970s, and in 1985 he launched the ambitious Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Interchange (ROCI). This global enterprise of traveling, exhibiting, and collaborating provided a perfect conduit for Rauschenberg's continued work in the gap between art and life. The ROCI project posits art as a conduit for social interaction and intercultural diplomacy.

In the 1990s, Rauschenberg revived the ancient fresco process, though typically he used photographically based images embedded in the plaster surfaces. For Rauschenberg, this interplay of material and image is reflective of his larger philosophy regarding the connections between art and life.

Rauschenberg died on May 12, 2008 in Captiva Island, Florida, where he owned a home and studio.

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### **About the Author**

**Jeffery Byrd**, Professor of Art at the University of Northern Iowa, is a performance artist and photographer whose work has been featured in numerous solo exhibitions and journals. He has performed at New York City's Lincoln Center and Alternative Museum, Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art, Chicago's N.A.M.E. Gallery, and Cleveland's Performance Festival.