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ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG

# Rauschenberg's Revolution

Indefatigably inquisitive and inventive, the American artist **Robert Rauschenberg** forever changed modern art; now, a major retrospective examines his achievements and legacy.

By Edward M. Gómez



SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, PURCHASE THROUGH A GIFT OF PHYLLIS C. WATTIS, PHOTO: DON ROSS, © 2016 ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG FOUNDATION; PHOTOGRAPH: BABBETTE MANGOLTE © 1979 BABBETTE MANGOLTE (ALL RIGHTS OF REPRODUCTION RESERVED); STEDELIJK MUSEUM, AMSTERDAM, © 2016 ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG FOUNDATION; THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK, PROMISED GIFT OF MARIE-JOSEE AND HENRY R. KRAVIS, © 2016 ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG FOUNDATION

A visitor strolling into the National Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo a few seasons ago would have encountered, in an exhibition of emblematic works from that institution's holdings, an ordinary large, corrugated-cardboard box hanging unframed against a wall, flattened and spread out like a dried, stretched animal skin. That work, dating from the early 1970s, was one of the American artist Robert Rauschenberg's found-object creations in his *Cardboards* series. As a physical object on display, never mind as a work of art, nothing could have been plainer or seemingly more unaffected.

Except, of course, that for all of the familiar art history that had informed it (and whose aesthetics it decisively rebuffed) and the modernist principles in which it was knowingly rooted, it felt unmistakably fresh. Seen in Japan, where traditional aesthetics have been influenced by the animistic Shinto religion, Zen Buddhism, and a sometimes bittersweet appreciation of the old, and where a more modern sensibility has long savored the sleek, shiny, seductive new, Rauschenberg's repurposed-box-as-art felt simultaneously radical and right at home.

That palpable tension between the familiar (all those found and reused car tires, furniture scraps, umbrellas, stuffed chickens, lit light bulbs, printed calendars, Coca-Cola bottles, and other unexpected tchotchkes Rauschenberg liked to appropriate to make his art) and the bracingly new (the genre-busting forms in which he brought them all together in mixed-media "paintings," sculptures and more) is one of the aspects of this prolific artist's vast, multifaceted oeuvre that are examined in "Robert Rauschenberg: Among Friends," a comprehensive survey of his creations and ideas that recently opened at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and will run through September 17. (The exhibition will move on to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, where it will be on view from November 4 through March 25, 2018.)

"Robert Rauschenberg: Among Friends" has arrived at MoMA from Tate Modern in London, where it attracted a large, enthusiastic audience. (In London, the last major Rauschenberg exhibition took place at Tate



Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Robert Rauschenberg with John Cage, *Automobile Tire Print* (detail), 1953, Tire-tread mark (front wheel) and tire-tread mark with house paint (rear wheel) made by Cage's Model A Ford, driven by Cage over twenty sheets of typewriter paper fastened together with library paste, mounted on fabric; Trisha Brown, *Glacial Decoy*, 1979, with costumes, set, and lighting (with Beverly Emmons), by Rauschenberg, this performance at the Marymount Manhattan College Theater, New York, June 20–24, 1979, left to right: Brown, Nina Lundborg, and Lisa Kraus; Robert Rauschenberg, *Charlene*, 1954, Oil, charcoal, printed reproductions, newspaper, wood, plastic mirror, men's undershirt, umbrella, lace, ribbons and other fabrics, and metal on Homasote, mounted on wood, with electric light. This page: Robert Rauschenberg, *Polar Glut*, 1987, Riveted metal street signs.

## Rauschenberg's Revolution



Gallery, Tate Modern's predecessor, in 1981; the artist first showed his work in the British capital at Whitechapel Gallery in 1964.) In New York, the exhibition differs somewhat in form and content from its previous incarnation: There is more of an emphasis on Rauschenberg's innovative activities both during the earlier and final phases of his six-decade-long career. At MoMA, too, the exhibition has become what its organizers call an "open monographic" one, meaning that, at certain points as it recounts the history of the evolution of Rauschenberg's art and ideas, it branches off and pays special-focus attention to projects he undertook with various collaborators or to the work and thinking of other artists who influenced or inspired him.

This big show was organized by Achim Borchardt-Hume, Tate Modern's director of exhibitions, and Leah Dickerman, the Marlene Hess curator of painting and sculpture at MoMA, along with Emily Liebert and Jenny Harris, curatorial assistants in Dickerman's department. With a nod to the collaborative spirit—and ethos—that characterized so much of Rauschenberg's artistic activity, the design of the exhibition at MoMA was created with the participation of the artist and filmmaker Charles Atlas.

The artist who became one of the giants of 20th-century art was born Milton Ernest Rauschenberg in 1925 in Port Arthur, Tex., a Gulf Coast refinery town east of Houston, near the Louisiana border. His paternal grandfather, a German immigrant, was a doctor who had married a Cherokee woman; Rauschenberg's father worked for a utility company, and his fundamentalist Christian family was so frugal that his mother made her son's shirts from



stitched-together fabric scraps. (Not wanting to waste good cloth, she reportedly once used the back of a suit in which her younger brother had been buried to make a skirt.)

In East Texas, the young, dyslexic Robert would have seen examples of homemade "yard art" assemblages of found materials—wood and metal scraps, old tires, wire and more—with which rural African Americans decorated their porches and properties, a folk tradition that can be traced to the ancestral cultures of the slaves who had been brought from West Africa to the Americas in the colonial era. The roots of Rauschenberg's collage- and assemblage-oriented art-making lay in such sources, which were familiar to him from an early age.

This page, from left: Robert Rauschenberg, *Signs*, 1970, Screen-print, comp., Publisher: Castelll Graphics, New York, Edition: 250; Robert Rauschenberg, Poster for *ROCI Cuba* (Museo Nacional site), 1988, All offset lithograph, *ROCI Cuba*: silk-screen and offset lithograph on foil paper, Printer: Universal Limited Art Editions, West Islip, New York. Edition: unnumbered. Opposite: Robert Rauschenberg, *Gift for Apollo*, 1959, Oil, fragments of a pair of men's pants, necktie, wood, fabric, newspaper, printed paper, and printed reproductions on wood with metal bucket, metal chain, doorknob, L-brackets, metal washer, mail, cement, and rubber wheels with metal spokes.

After leaving high school—and requesting his first-ever store-bought shirt as a graduation gift—Rauschenberg enrolled at the University of Texas at Austin, where he briefly studied pharmacy before being drafted during World War II. He served as a medical technician in the U.S. Navy's hospital corps in San Diego, Calif., and during that period saw paintings for the first time ever at the Huntington Art Gallery (now the Huntington Library, Art Collections and Botanical Gardens) in San Marino, near Pasadena, not far to the north of his base. That encounter with art was fateful; it gave him the idea that he could become a painter. (Among the memorable oil-on-canvas pictures he saw at that museum: Thomas Lawrence's *Sarah Goodin Barrett Moulton: "Pinkie"* (1794) and Thomas Gainsborough's iconic *The Blue Boy* (1770), both of which he already had seen reproduced on the backs of playing cards.)

Thanks to the G.I. Bill, Rauschenberg went on to study fashion design at the Kansas City Art Institute and art at the now-defunct Académie Julian, a private school in Paris that focused on painting and sculpture. (He also changed his name to "Robert," believing that it sounded more artistic than "Milton.") In Paris, disappointed by the French school's training, he made the rounds of museums and galleries instead. There he also met and spent many hours conversing with Susan Weil, a painter from New York who was planning to attend Black Mountain College, a progressive art school near Ashe-



## Rauschenberg's Revolution

ville, N.C., where the painting program was overseen by Josef Albers.

Before immigrating to the United States in the early 1930s, Albers had served as an instructor at the legendary Bauhaus art school in Germany, alongside such other artist-teachers as Oskar Schlemmer, Wassily Kandinsky, and Paul Klee. In 1948, Weil and Rauschenberg made their way to Black Mountain, where Albers, a strict modernist who became known for the hard-edged geometry and color-theory experiments of his *Homage to the Square* paintings, encouraged his students to experiment with different materials and techniques. Back in Germany, Albers had described the fundamentals course he had taught at the Bauhaus by noting, "First we seek contact with material.... Instead of pasting it, we will put paper together by sewing, buttoning, riveting, typing, and pinning it [...] [W]e do not always create 'works of art' but rather experiments; it is not our ambition to fill museums; we are gathering experience."

MoMA curator Dickerman explains that, similarly, at Black



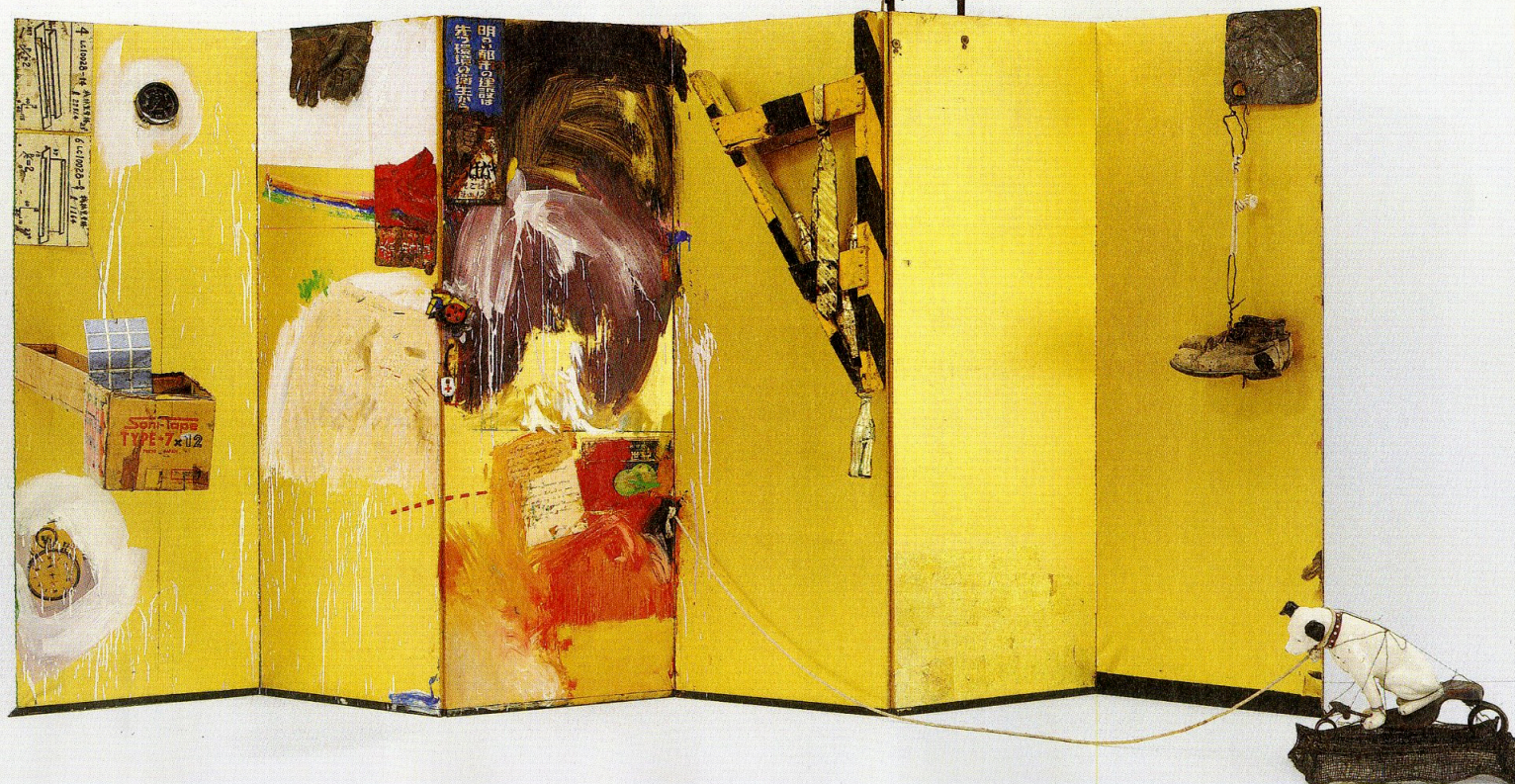
Mountain, Albers "coached his students in collage-making procedures," adding, however, that Rauschenberg "regarded his own efforts as more than merely student exercises; from them, he developed collage-making strategies and an egalitarian approach to his materials that would serve him throughout his life."

Later, Albers would eschew his former student's art-making efforts and even deny that he had ever known him, while Rauschenberg would remember his Black Mountain instructor as "a beautiful teacher and an impossible person."

Albers, he recalled, "wasn't easy to talk to, and I found his criticism so excruciating and so devastating that I never asked for it. Years later, though, I'm still learning what he taught me." In addition to learning to embrace a wide range of materials and art-making methods, from Albers Rauschenberg acquired an appreciation of the grid as an organizational tool for developing certain compositions.

In 1949, now based in New York, Rauschenberg took classes at the Art Students League. The following year, he and Weil were

From top: Robert Rauschenberg, *Cy + Relics, Rome, 1952*, printed 1980s, Gelatin silver print; *Gold Standard, 1964*, Oil, paper, printed reproductions, clock, cardboard box, metal, fabric, wood, string, pair of men's boots, and Coca-Cola bottles on gold folding Japanese screen, with electric light, rope, and ceramic dog on bicycle seat and wire-mesh base.



married. (Together they had one child, a son, but they divorced in 1953.) "Robert Rauschenberg: Among Friends" points out that, already with Weil, in an early phase of his career, Rauschenberg had begun working collaboratively. During the time they were together, for example, they created ghostly, silhouetted images of their own bodies on exposed blueprint paper.

It was in New York in the 1950s that Rauschenberg produced many of the seminal works of his career, including all-black paintings whose support surfaces consisted of plain sheets of newspaper (they possessed "complexity without...revealing anything" he said), and pristine, all-white paintings that pointedly negated the touch of the artist's hand and the very notion of subject matter. In them, there was no expressive brushwork to be seen. The young artist also developed mixed-media creations he called "Combines," which brought together aspects of painting and sculpture in what felt like a revolutionary manner.

In modern art, constructing or building up sculptural form through the assembling of assorted elements, including found objects, as opposed to extracting form in a traditional way from a block of stone or wood, was an art-making approach that had been kicking around at least since Picasso's experiments during the Cubist era of the early 20th century. However, Rauschenberg's creations—a real quilt mounted on canvas and slathered with paint in *Bed* (1955), or a stuffed Angora goat squeezed through an automobile tire in *Monogram* (1955–59)—seemed to confront viewers with a special mixture of ingenuity and audacity. Of that emblematic goat, which the artist had found in the display window of a secondhand office-furniture store in Manhattan, the critic Calvin Tomkins once observed that Rauschenberg had labored long and hard until feeling that "the animal looked as though it belonged in a painting."



From top: Robert Rauschenberg, *Overdrive, 1963*, Oil and silkscreen ink on canvas; *Monogram, 1955–59*, Oil, paper, fabric, printed reproductions, metal, wood, rubber shoe-heel, and tennis ball on two conjoined canvases with oil on taxidermied Angora goat with brass plaque and rubber tire on wood platform mounted on four casters.

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## Rauschenberg's Revolution



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In New York, Rauschenberg's numerous artist friends included Jasper Johns and Cy Twombly, with whom he had romantic relationships and would go on to maintain lasting, meaningful artistic dialogues; others included the avant-garde composer John Cage and the dancer-choreographers Merce Cunningham and Trisha Brown. Rauschenberg had met Twombly at the Art Students League and, in 1952, the two embarked together on a trip to Italy, Morocco and Spain during which they pursued some of their earliest experiments in drawing, photography, sculpture and other genres.

Art historians often note that the work of Rauschenberg and Johns anticipated Pop Art, one of the dominant styles of the 1960s. However, whereas many pictures or sculptures by Pop's recognized leader, Andy Warhol, tended to focus on single subjects, usually with a detached sense of irony that ultimately felt more nihilistic than cynical, Rauschenberg's collage-oriented works, full of emotional heat and engagement with the real world, regularly mixed up imagery from newspapers, television, everyday consumer culture and art history—in notable contrast with the hermetic-feeling works of angst-ridden Abstract Expressionist painters.

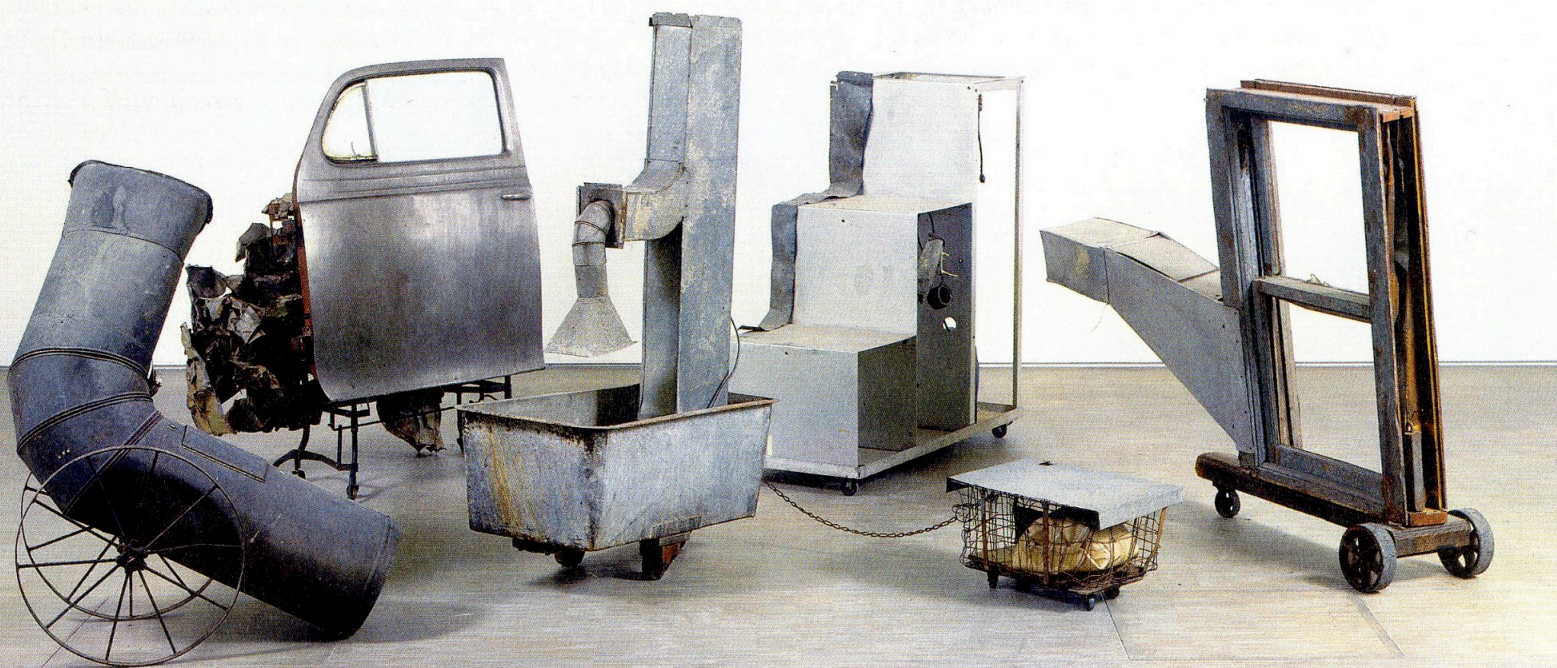


Meanwhile, Johns' paintings of American flags and his painted-bronze Ballantine Ale cans felt cool and cerebral, and curiously more matter-of-fact than ironic, as they both depicted familiar objects and effectively made the nature of such depictions their compelling, quizzical subject.

"Robert Rauschenberg: Among Friends" makes clear that, as Rauschenberg's career progressed, his ideas evolved and his fame grew internationally—by 1964, he had won the grand prize at the Venice Biennale—there was no material or art-making technique he encountered that he did not rush to explore. Rauschenberg became well known for using the silkscreen printing method to bring photographic images into his mixed-media "paintings" on canvas, ceramic tiles or fabric; he also made lithographs, photographs, and all sorts of small and large assemblage sculptures. He designed dance-stage sets and choreographed and performed in his own dance works, too. Then

there was Rauschenberg's *The ¼ Mile or 2 Furlong Piece* (1981–98), a 190-element work the artist hoped would become the world's longest painting. (It is, in fact, nearly 1,000 feet long.) "There is no reason not to consider the world as one gigantic painting,"

From top: Robert Rauschenberg and Susan Weil, *Untitled (Double Rauschenberg)*, circa 1950, Exposed blueprint paper; Robert Rauschenberg with Toby Fitch, Harold Hodges, Billy Klüver, and Robert K. Moore, *Oracle*, 1962–65, Five-part found-metal assemblage with five concealed remote-controlled radios; exhaust pipe on metal axle and pushcart wheels; automobile door on wheeled typewriter table, with crushed metal; ventilation duct, water, and concealed showerhead in washtub on wheels, with chain, wire basket, and metal lid on wheels; constructed staircase control unit housing automobile tire and batteries and other electronic components on wheels; and wooden window frame with ventilation duct on wood support with wheels, dimensions variable.



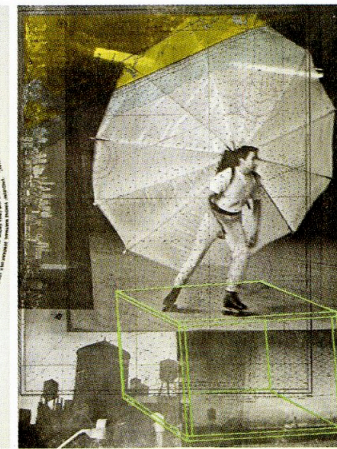
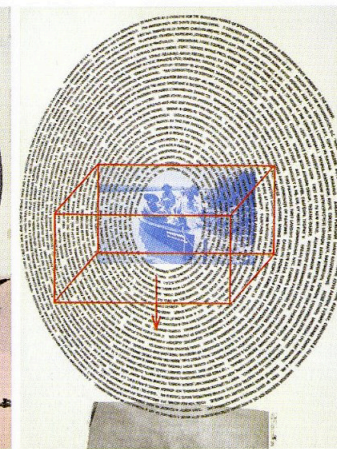
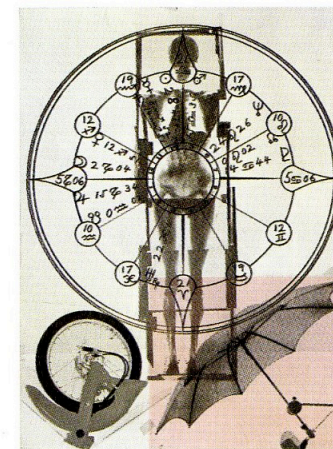
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THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK, GIFT OF ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG FOUNDATION; AND GIFT OF VIRGINIA C. FIELD, MR. AND MRS. WALTER NELSON PHARR, ANONYMOUS, AND RUTH VOLLMER (ALL BY EXCHANGE); PHOTO: JONATHAN MUZIKAR, © 2016 ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG FOUNDATION; FROM AN EDITION OF 2000, PUBLISHED BY BROADSIDE ART, INC., NEW YORK © ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG FOUNDATION; THE SONNABEND COLLECTION FOUNDATION AND ANTONIO HOMEM, PHOTO: LIGHT BLUE STUDIO, COURTESY CRAIG F. STARR GALLERY, © 2016 ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG FOUNDATION

Rauschenberg had said in 1961. Similarly, two years earlier, in one of his most often cited statements, he observed, "Painting relates to both art and life. Neither can be made. (I try to act in that gap between the two.)"

In 1984, the artist launched his Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange (or ROCI, pronounced "Rocky," after the name of his pet turtle), an ambitious program of travel and extended working stays in various countries, including China and Japan. During these sojourns outside the U.S., Rauschenberg worked with local artists and craftspeople to learn about their indigenous art-making traditions and techniques; in turn, he shared with them the spirit of his open-minded, collaborative approach. At the end of each residency period abroad, Rauschenberg presented an exhibition of the works he and his collaborators had created in a particular host country in what became another way of encouraging cross-cultural creative dialogue among artists and their audiences.

"Rauschenberg's work expresses a very democratic ethos," Dickerman says. "It proposes that art should be open to everything that can be found in the world; that spirit could also be felt in his dance performances. He believed that a brushstroke in a painting was no more important than, say, an old shoe. His ROCI collaborations resonated deeply with artists in those parts of the world where freedom of expression was limited. To this day, for example, artists in China who were involved in or influenced by Rauschenberg's visit there in the 1980s still regard him as a role model."



Clockwise from top: Robert Rauschenberg, *Gull (Jammer)*, 1976, Sewn silk, rattan poles, and twine; *Autobiography*, 1968, Offset lithograph on three sheets of paper; *Untitled (Scatole personali [Personal boxes])*, circa 1952, Stained, lidded wood box containing dirt, pins, photograph of the artist, plastic lens, and mica

## Rauschenberg's Revolution



In the current exhibition's catalogue, Borchardt-Hume writes that in his time, Rauschenberg "played a pivotal role in the creation of an original American avant-garde," and that, as the MoMA show illustrates, the artist's achievements can and should "be seen against the backdrop of the dramatic changes in the material, visual, and political culture of the United States and beyond" that were evident from the 1950s through the 1980s. Those developments took

place during a period that encompassed "the Cold War, a newly flourishing consumerism, the rise and fall of the Kennedys, and the moon landings," as well as "the fall of Communism and the dawn of the digital age." Rauschenberg, Borchardt-Hume notes, "was an artist with a promiscuous curiosity and a ravenous appetite for life."

Rauschenberg expressed that *joie de vivre* himself when he remarked, looking back at his earliest forays into painting, "At the time, I found it too distant to even use a brush. I needed the immediate contact. If I could have been the canvas, too, that wouldn't have been close enough for me." That feeling of excitement and urgency is as much a subject of "Robert Rauschenberg: Among Friends" as the wide diversity and inventiveness of the remarkable works on view. In these times of fear and uncertainty, it offers an affirmation of a creative spirit that remains unsinkably, unmistakably, irresistibly inspiring and fresh. ■