

# Interview with Robert Rauschenberg: Commemorating the artist

We reprint extracts from an interview with one of the most important artists of the post-war era

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Robert Rauschenberg died on 12 May aged 82 at his home in Captiva Island, Florida, from heart failure. Born in 1925 in Port Arthur, Texas, he served in the Navy during World War II before deciding to become an artist, studying at the Kansas City Art Institute, the Académie Julian in Paris, and Black Mountain College in North Carolina. Moving to New York in the early 1950s, Rauschenberg soon became one of the leading artists to emerge at the end of the abstract expressionist era, and was the first American to win the grand prize at the Venice Biennale in 1964. Here we reprint extracts from an interview with Rauschenberg published in *The Art Newspaper* in 1997, when a career retrospective of the artist's work opened at the Guggenheim Museum in New York.

*The Art Newspaper:* According to some accounts, as an adolescent you wanted to be a minister. Are you still a religious person?

*Robert Rauschenberg:* I gave that up because of the assumption that the world was evil, and I didn't think that it was a good investment to give up your life on the earth for something quite as vague as Paradise. Also, I don't like the idea of any spiritual activity being controlled by fear.

*TAN:* Collage has played an important part in your art, why?

*RR:* Well, I have done just as many things without it. But I think collage itself, and the activity of making collage, is the most direct way that you can relate diverse elements rather than their going through the transition of a translation. That is what I like about using real objects, as opposed to reproductions, like a painted image or a photograph. I like the directness, and the fact that it is not being soiled or diluted by my interpretation of it.

*TAN:* Found objects are very much associated with Dada and with Duchamp, whom you came to know.

*RR:* I was in an exhibition of “Art and the Found Object” organised by the American Federation of Arts in New York in 1960 and he was in the same show. He had the Bottle Rack there. His sister had thrown the original out, so he called his friend Man Ray to get another. Man Ray couldn’t remember which bottle rack was the original so he sent him six or eight, and they figured out which one it was because it was well recorded. I was having dinner with the guy who was putting the show together and he just happened to remark that all the pieces in the exhibition were for sale. So I jumped to it and said, “What about the Bottle Rack?” And he said, “Yeah, that’s for sale for three dollars.” So I bought it of course.

In 1960 Marcel and his wife Teeny came to deliver a Green Box-in-a-Valise to Jasper Johns, who was living in the same building as I was. Jasper and I were the first artists he came out to see when he was semi-retired.

When he gave the box to Jasper, he said, “Don’t you want me to autograph it?” And Jasper said, “Well, of course, if you would.” I understood the influence of the readymade on art history probably more than Duchamp, so I had been confused about whether to ask about the Bottle Rack. So I turned to Teeny and I said, “I have the Bottle Rack, and I have been staying up at night knowing that you were coming and trying to decide whether it would be ethical or an insult to ask him to sign it.” And Teeny said, “Oh, don’t be silly Bob. He’ll sign anything.” And he signed it, in French. So I have the most original Bottle Rack—the one next to the one that was thrown out by his sister.

*TAN:* What do you mean when you say you understood the influence of the

readymade better than Duchamp?

*RR:* He didn't have to understand all the repercussions. It is only with a historical evaluation that one measures what the repercussions were after the event has taken place. But his job was a lot purer than that. He just did it.

*TAN:* What was the art world like back then?

*RR:* Most of my best friends were American painters. Franz [Kline] and Barney Newman were my favourite ones. And Bill [de Kooning] I always loved. I knew [Jack] Tworokov very well. And I knew [Ad] Reinhardt, and I met [Jackson] Pollock. It was an amazing time, a kind of education and possibility that doesn't exist anymore. There were only five galleries in those days, and the artists really depended on each other socially, psychologically and even critically. It is impossible now. Business sure screwed up the art world universally, didn't it? It made paying the rent easier, but the rent was cheaper then too.

*TAN:* Do you watch much television?

*RR:* I keep it on all the time. TV is just another window with an unknown subject. I think of it as a piece of nature. I don't think it has an impact on society any more detrimental than life itself. Any window you look out can. It depends on the view. It's your attitude about it.

*TAN:* Some critics say that your collage effect suggests overabundance. Do you wish to convey the idea that there is an overwhelming amount of information out there?

*RR:* I like to give the idea that the world is a lot richer than we can comprehend—and a lot more varied and surprising than could be believed.

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