Robert Rauschenberg: *Express*, Inside + Outside the Studio

Marta Ruiz del Árbol

fig. 1
Robert Rauschenberg
***Express*, 1963**
Oil and silkscreen ink on canvas,
184.2 × 305.2 cm
Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza,
Madrid, 721 (1974.34)
[+ info]

"Art should look more like what is going on outside the studio than inside"[1]

Robert Rauschenberg

Express (1963) [fig. 1] enjoys a central position in the layout of Room 48 of the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, after the Abstract Expressionist pictures and before those of the Pop artists. This large canvas—the only one by Robert Rauschenberg (Port Arthur, Texas, 1925–Captiva Island, Florida, 2008) in the permanent collection—not only reflects the shift that was taking place in American art of the 1960s but also connects with many of the concerns that shaped the artist's career: his relentless urge to experiment, the disappearance of the boundaries between disciplines, and his interest in collaborative work. The Museum is celebrating the centenary of Rauschenberg's birth by staging a special display from February to May 2026 and invites visitors to explore an art which, as the artist himself stated, should look more like what is going on outside the studio than inside.[2]

From the outset, Rauschenberg was notable for his search to connect art and life. His famous Combines (1954–64)—the term he coined to describe a series of works he began creating in the mid-1950s that "combined" painting, sculpture, collage, and assemblage—incorporated objects and images from the world around him. The dialogue these pieces established between what was going on inside and outside his studio became omnipresent in his work thereafter [fig. 2].

1
Robert Rauschenberg in a statement written for the Hudson River Museum exhibition, July 2, 1987. Robert Rauschenberg Papers, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York, quoted in Manuel Fontán del Junco, Inés Vallejo Ulecia, and Lucía Montes Sánchez, eds., *Robert Rauschenberg: El uso de las imágenes* [exh. cat.], Madrid, Fundación Juan March, 2025, p. 234.

2
The project has the inestimable support of the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation in New York, which besides sponsoring the special display, has accompanied us throughout the research carried out on the painting. I am also grateful for the information on the artist's life and work provided by the Foundation's website, which was extremely useful for this essay: see https://www.rauschenbergfoundation.org (last accessed December 16, 2025). Thanks are likewise due to Guillermo Bailén and Carmen Cortizas, whose intense research work has been essential to revealing some of the iconographical sources for the canvas.

fig. 2
Robert Rauschenberg
***Canyon*, 1959**
Combine: oil, pencil, paper, fabric, metal, cardboard box, printed paper, printed reproductions, photograph, wood, paint tube, and mirror on canvas with oil on taxidermied golden eagle, string, and pillow, 207.6 × 177.8 × 61 cm
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of the Family of Ileana Sonnabend

When he discovered the possibilities of commercial screenprinting in 1962, that same spirit of a life-affirming celebration of the urban environment reappeared. With this commercial technique the artist, who had previously been interested in directly transferring photographs and clippings using solvents, succeeded in reproducing large images with great precision. In pieces such as *Express* he created a dizzying and densely layered visual language in which scenes, mainly taken from the media, coexist with expressive pictorial gestures. The result enabled Rauschenberg to further his eternal exploration of the boundaries between appropriation, the handmade, and the mechanical, and also attested to his interest in capturing the frantic pace and media saturation that were beginning to dominate the era.

"I was bombarded with TV sets and magazines, [...] by the excess of the world [...]. I thought that if I could paint or make an honest work, it should incorporate all of these elements, which were and are a reality,"[3] commented the artist. As can be seen in the work in the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, his desire to reflect what was going on outside his window is embodied in a seemingly random selection of scenes: a horse and its rider laid over a photo of Manhattan shortly before the construction of the World Trade Center began; a chronophotographic sequence of a nude woman descending a staircase alongside an 1867 painting by Louis Mathieu Didier Guillaume about the American Civil War; and an image of a group of soldiers abseiling a cliff.

3
Robert Rauschenberg's own words quoted in Barbara Rose (curator), *Rauschenberg. Express* [exh. cat.], Madrid, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, 2006, p. 56.

fig. 3
Robert Rauschenberg
***Steve Paxton, Carolyn Brown, Judith Dunn, Marilyn Wood, Viola Farber, and Shareen Blair (on the floor) in* Aeon*, by Merce Cunningham*, 1961**
Photograph Collection, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York

However, not everything in *Express* refers to things happening beyond the confines of the studio. At the center of this composition, beneath the only strip of red running across the work, is a photograph taken by Rauschenberg himself [fig. 3]. The artist, who had started out as a photographer, always felt a strong connection with this medium: "I've never stopped being a photographer," he once stated.[4] By including this image, he was incorporating into the canvas a reflection on his close relationship with his camera in the 1960s, as well as on his artistic creation in general.[5] The slender bodies of the dancers, members of Merce Cunningham's company, immortalized during a rehearsal, draw us into Rauschenberg's life and work, offering a mirror reflection of one of the many adventures in which he was involved and the collaborative spirit that dominated his way of creating. They are an element that refers to his studio, a place where everything seemed possible.

Between 1961 and 1965 Rauschenberg lived in a spacious loft at 809 Broadway, New York, where his bed shared the same space as a television that was always on and several *Silkscreen Paintings* (1962–64) in progress coexisted with his experiments for a sound sculpture.[6] That large space also witnessed

4
Robert Rauschenberg's own words cited in Barbara Rose, *Rauschenberg*, New York, Vintage Books, 1987, p. 75. On the importance of photography in Rauschenberg's oeuvre, see the catalogue of the recent exhibition *Robert Rauschenberg: el uso de las imágenes* (see note 1 above).

5
This relationship was broken off around 1967, when his Rolleicord camera was stolen, and was not resumed until he acquired a Rolleiflex in 1979.

6
Between 1962 and 1965 Rauschenberg, together with engineers Billy Klüver and Harold Hodges, also explored the possibilities of applying the technology to monumental works such as *Oracle*, an installation made from scavenged metal parts. The piece was embedded with wireless transistors capable of playing fragments of sound from radio waves.

encounters between some of the most revolutionary dance companies of the time.[7] Carolyn Brown—one of the dancers included in *Express*—recalled the "irresistible, magnetic pull" the apartment had for the New York art community. In her memoirs she reminisced on how "Pied Piper Bob's 'Let's make stuff! It's fun!' ideology revved up the creative engines of everyone beating a path to his door. His wildly gregarious, democratic spirit encouraged everyone to unleash their imaginations and participate. There was no barrier he wasn't willing to crash through, no boundary he refused to step over, no artistic discipline he was afraid to tackle."[8] This transdisciplinary impulse found a fertile ground in dance, and during the 1950s and 1960s it played a central role in Rauschenberg's creative world, becoming deeply intertwined with his evolution in the visual arts.

It had all started during his student days at the Black Mountain College in North Carolina. At this multidisciplinary college dedicated to the visual, literary, musical, and performing arts, where he spent stints between 1948 and 1952, he cemented friendships with John Cage and Merce Cunningham, which would develop throughout their lives. In 1953, after returning to New York from a trip to Europe and North Africa, he began collaborating with Cunningham's newly founded dance company, for which Cage composed the music. At the time he had limited contact with the world of visual arts, and this small group of dancers became his trusted circle. Rauschenberg, whose interest in photography had arisen, he argued, from a personal conflict between curiosity and shyness, which led him to use the lens as a defense mechanism,[9] joined their rehearsals armed with his camera. It was during these sessions, in which he immortalized his new friends' supple bodies, that, according to Carolyn Brown, "he fell in love with the company."[10]

Rauschenberg acknowledged his connection with dance on several occasions and even stated that he felt "more at home with the discipline and the dedication of those dancers than [he] did in painting."[11] He was particularly fascinated by the

7
Although this essay focuses on his relationship with Cunningham's company, Rauschenberg also collaborated with the Paul Taylor Dance Company, among others, beginning in the mid-1950s.

8
Carolyn Brown, *Chance and Circumstance: Twenty Years with Cage and Cunningham*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2007, p. 367.

9
See "My preoccupation with photography...", January 1981, manuscript draft. Robert Rauschenberg Papers, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York, A5, p. 1. Cited in Manuel Fontán del Junco, Inés Vallejo Ulecia, and Lucía Montes Sánchez, eds., *Robert Rauschenberg: El uso de las imágenes*, p. 301.

10
Carolyn Brown, *Chance and Circumstance*, p. 83.

11
Calvin Tomkins, *Off the Wall: A Portrait of Robert Rauschenberg*, New York, Picador, 2005, p. 93.

fig. 4
Robert Rauschenberg
***Minutiae*, 1954**
Combine: oil, paper, fabric, newsprint, wood, metal, and plastic with mirror on braided wire on wood structure, 214.6 × 205.7 × 77.5 cm
Private collection, Courtesy Hauser & Wirth

fact that, unlike painting, which is static and relies on external materials, the only tools dance requires are the body and its movements. "I even took some classes with Merce, but his mirrors were too big. So I just stayed close by giving them all the help I could," he confessed.[12] Photography was soon joined by other forms of collaboration, and in 1954 he produced one of his first stage designs. In the performances Cunningham's choreography and Cage's music coexisted side by side, neither being subordinate to the other. They were parallel phenomena, related only by their duration and the space in which they occurred, and generated fortuitous associations when they teamed up during the performance. Encouraged by this way of exploring the coexistence of independent elements and the desire for them to be united by chance, Rauschenberg created a mobile wooden structure with fabric appliqués, paint, and collage [fig. 4] for *Minutiae* (1954). It was not merely a backdrop but an element with which the performers could interact. The premiere, held on December 8, 1954 at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, was the first of more than twenty occasions on which he worked with the company. *Minutiae* was also one of his first Combines and the first to be conceived as a freestanding element. This shows how these dynamics of working together profoundly transformed the rest of his practice.

12
Calvin Tomkins, *Off the Wall: A Portrait of Robert Rauschenberg*, p. 93.

True to an artistic practice based on collaboration, the artist incorporated this new performing arts dimension into his body of work, integrating it with the rest of his creations in an almost symbiotic relationship. From then until 1964 his designs for sets, costumes and lighting were as varied as his experiments in the visual arts. The originality and innovation of his painting was also the dominant feature of his work for Cunningham, which was likewise characterized by constant change, spontaneity, and improvisation.[13] When he took over as artistic director of the company in 1961, he went on all its tours and repeated the same modus operandi each time. After arriving at a location, he would explore the surroundings in search of materials, with three criteria in mind: they had to be accessible, free, and easy to transport. In *Story*, for instance, a piece that was part of Cunningham's repertoire between 1963 and 1964, the stage scenery varied with each performance: in Les Baux-de-Provence it consisted of three cars, whereas in the English village of Dartington, Rauschenberg and his assistant became the set themselves, ironing shirts on stage throughout the performance.[14]

His involvement with dance was so intense that Steve Paxton, the only male dancer who appears in *Express*, recalled that Rauschenberg created the *Silkscreen Paintings* in between tours.[15] His partner at the time confirmed that it was precisely during those years, when he was busy working behind the scenes for various dance companies, that he gradually became a famous painter.[16] The photo of the opening of the retrospective staged in his honor by the Jewish Museum in New York from March to May 1963 demonstrates the pivotal position he enjoyed in American art at the time [fig. 5]. Curated by Alan Solomon, who was later in charge of the U.S. pavilion at the 1964 Venice Biennale, it was his first solo show in a museum. Although it mainly featured Combines, it also presented some of his early *Silkscreen Paintings*, including *Barge* (1962–63), in front of which the guests posed in the abovementioned photo.

13
On his experience in the performing arts, see Nancy Spector, "Rauschenberg and Performance, 1963–1967: A 'Poetry of Infinite Possibilities'," in Walter Hopps and Susan Davidson, *Robert Rauschenberg. A Retrospective* [exh. cat.], New York, Guggenheim Museum, 1997, pp. 226–45.

14
Ibid., p. 232.

15
Steve Paxton, "Rauschenberg for Cunningham and the Three of His Own," ibid., pp. 260–67, here p. 262.

16
Ibid., p. 267.

fig. 5
Artists and guests in front of Robert Rauschenberg's *Barge* (1962–63) during the opening of the artist's retrospective at the Jewish Museum in New York, March 31, 1963, published in *Glamour*, June 1963. Standing, from left to right: Sherman Drexler, Claes Oldenburg, Richard Lippold, Merce Cunningham, Robert Murray, Peter Agostini, Edward Higgins, Barnett Newman, Robert Rauschenberg, Perle Fine, Alfred Jensen, Ray Parker, Friedel Dzubas, Ernst Van Leyden, Andy Warhol, Marisol, James Rosenquist, John Chamberlain, and George Segal. Kneeling, from left to right: Jon Schueler, Arman, David Slivka, Alfred Leslie, Tania, Frederick Kiesler, Lee Bontecou, Isamu Noguchi, Salvatore Scarpitta, and Allan Kaprow. Jewish Museum, New York

The canvas in the Museo Thyssen-Bornemizsa was not included in that landmark exhibition, even though there is evidence that he had already finished it by the spring of 1963.[17] However, shortly afterwards *Express* travelled to take part in the group exhibition *The Popular Image* at the Washington Gallery of Modern Art, where it was shown alongside works by Claes Oldenburg, Jasper Johns, Tom Wesselmann, and Andy Warhol, among others. Besides making an early contribution to the reception of the burgeoning Pop movement, this exhibition was especially significant for Rauschenberg as it was a springboard for the presentation of his first choreography at the Pop Festival organized by Alice Denney, curator and assistant director of the museum. After nearly a decade of close collaboration in the field of dance, the artist premiered *Pelican* (1963) [fig. 6], the first of eleven choreographies he devised and directed between 1963 and 1967.

Calvin Tomkins recounts that originally Rauschenberg's role in this festival was, as usual, that of stage director. However, a misprint in the program led to him being billed as a choreographer, and when he read it he simply decided to rise to the challenge.[18] Similarly, when he found out that the venue for the performance was a skating rink, he thought, "why not use rollerskates? I favor a physical encounter of materials with ideas on a very literal, almost simple-minded plane."[19] True to his typical approach, he embraced chance and used what was at hand as the basis for his work. The result was a piece featuring a dancer accompanied by two skaters equipped with a sort of parachute who served as the stage set. The soundtrack, also composed by the artist, was a collage of sounds taken from radio, television, and the street, thrown in with a few fragments of classical music.

With *Pelican*, Rauschenberg paid tribute to the Wright brothers, pioneers of American aviation, and once again expressed his fascination with speed and humankind's ability to fly and reach space. Basically, he was bringing to the theater an iconography that he had already been using since 1962 in his *Silkscreen Paintings*, which attest to a keen interest in conveying the dizzying pace of contemporary society through references to astronauts, birds, parachutes, and figures in motion.[20] When the piece premiered on May 9, 1963, the audience saw Rauschenberg appear alongside Swedish artist Per Olof

17
In February 1963 *Express* was included in the *Paintings by Robert Rauschenberg* exhibition, Beaumont-May Gallery, Hopkins Center, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire.

18
Calvin Tomkins, *Off the Wall: A Portrait of Robert Rauschenberg*, p. 206.

19
Cited in Richard Kostelanetz, "The Artist as Playwright and Engineer," *The New York Times Magazine*, October 9, 1966, p. 109, quoted from Nancy Spector, "Rauschenberg and Performance, 1963–1967," p. 234.

20
Nancy Spector, "Rauschenberg and Performance, 1963–1967," p. 235.

fig. 6
Elisabeth Novick, *Rauschenberg performing* Pelican *(1963) with Carolyn Brown and Alex Hay*, May 1965. Photograph Collection, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York

Ultvedt, speeding around on wheels and accompanying dancer Carolyn Brown, whose image they had already had the opportunity to see in *Express* in the Washington exhibition.

But the transfer did not take place only in one direction—from the visual arts to the performing arts. As *Express* shows, it also happened the other way round when the world of dance found its way onto the canvas. The bodies of his dancer friends, frozen in the snapshot he had taken during rehearsals, were accorded pride of place in the Thyssen-Bornemisza picture, and their movement became the origin of the centrifugal force that articulates the other elements of the work. For instance, the horse, repeated four times, is galloping toward the left, the soldiers are hurriedly descending, and the naked female body is exiting the scene on the far right. Dance was therefore much more than a collaborative field. It was one of the many laboratories in which the artist tested his ideas, and in the early 1960s it became a cornerstone of his vision of art as an open, changeable, and permeable practice in which all forms of expression could be incorporated and valued.

This conception of art as a living process in which dance served as an expanded canvas where bodies in motion were compositional elements undergoing constant transformation achieved an unprecedented visibility in 1964. For a six-month period from June to November, Rauschenberg joined the Merce Cunningham Dance Company on a world tour that took them to thirty cities in Europe and Asia. Once again with the artist as stage designer—responsible for the set, costumes, and lighting—early in the tour the company arrived in Venice, where the artist was taking part in the American pavilion at the Biennale. In the Italian city—where *Express* and other works were on display—the company performed at the Teatro La Fenice on June 18, the day before Rauschenberg received the International Grand Prize in Painting at the Venice Biennale. The performance, marked by the controversy surrounding the possibility of his being awarded the prize, added a certain amount of tension to the event.[21] According to Tomkins, Rauschenberg went so far as to tell a British journalist that he regarded the theater space as the largest canvas he had ever worked with,[22] a statement that eloquently sums up the centrality that motion and temporariness had acquired in his conception of art.

21
See Paloma Alarcó's essay in this issue of *Windows*.

22
Calvin Tomkins, *Off the Wall: A Portrait of Robert Rauschenberg*, p. 208.

That moment of maximum visibility shaped a way of understanding art as a territory with no clear boundaries between disciplines, spaces, and life experiences, but it also signaled the end of a cycle. As Carolyn Brown recalled, at what was the height of Rauschenberg's fame when he began to be thrust into the media spotlight, overshadowing Cunningham and Cage, the seeds were sown for the rift that sometimes comes with success.[23] The coincidence in Venice of the exhibition of his paintings, Merce Cunningham's company's world tour, and the awarding of the painting prize at the Biennale was a turning point in Rauschenberg's career. His return to New York marked not only the end of his intense collaboration with the company but also the deliberate end of the cycle of *Silkscreen Paintings*, a decision that demonstrated his aversion to repetition and his constant need for change.

Express, conceived in between rehearsals, tours, and shared living, is a testament to that period of unstable equilibrium between the outside and the inside. In this work, the world bursts onto the canvas through media or historical images, while the studio—understood as a physical, emotional, and creative space—is filtered through the bodies of the dancers and the imprint of a deeply collaborative practice. When this period came to an end, Rauschenberg did not return to an isolated studio but took with him everything that had happened outside: speed, chance, motion, and shared experiences. That is why *Express* not only looks out through the window: it also confirms that, for Rauschenberg, the studio was no longer a place separate from the world but had become one of his many stages. ●

23
Carolyn Brown, *Chance and Circumstance*, p. 383.