Robert Rauschenberg in Venice: Critical Debate and Cultural Diplomacy[1]

Paloma Alarcó

fig. 1
Ugo Mulas, *Transportation of works by Robert Rauschenberg at the 32nd Venice Biennale*, Venice, 1964, silver gelatin print. Courtesy Archivio Ugo Mulas, Milan

On June 19, 1964 Robert Rauschenberg was officially announced as the winner of the International Grand Prize in Painting at the 32nd Venice Biennale, and the Italian education minister Luigi Gui presented him with the accolade on the same day [figs. 2 and 3].[2] He was the first young artist in his thirties to be awarded it instead of the usual accomplished master. In previous decades, the winners of the competition had mostly been French artists of the School of Paris. This time, however, despite the predominance of abstraction in most of the thirty-four international pavilions, the jury—consisting of representatives from Brazil, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Switzerland, and one from the United States—came down in favor of Rauschenberg's Combines (1954–64) and *Silkscreen Paintings* (1962–64). As expected, the verdict was viewed by many as scandalous. The recognition given to the Combines, which shattered the barriers between painting, collage, and sculpture, and the large paintings incorporating photographic images with references to American culture and history that made up his visual universe immediately caused a huge stir. Even so, a few Italians celebrated the award as a victory over longstanding French dominance. The Venetian abstract painter Giuseppe Santomaso threw a big party [figs. 4 and 5], where Rauschenberg ended up being cheered and carried on people's shoulders.

1
Much of the documentation quoted in this text stems from a visit to the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archive in March 2025.

2
The prize consisted of 25 million lire (which today would amount to approximately 685,000 US dollars).

figs. 2 and 3
Ugo Mulas, *Robert Rauschenberg at the 32nd Venice Biennale*, Venice, 1964, gelatin silver print. Courtesy Archivio Ugo Mulas, Milan

figs. 4 and 5
Party thrown by Giuseppe Santomaso to celebrate the Grand Prize. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, New York

fig. 6
Poster for the performance by the Merce Cunningham Dance Company with John Cage, Robert Rauschenberg, David Tudor, Carolyn Brown, Viola Farber, and others in Teatro La Fenice, Venice, June 18, 1964

Detractors of the jury's decision cannot have considered it at all irrelevant that on June 18, the day before the award ceremony, Merce Cunningham's dance company performed at the Teatro La Fenice before the jury and numerous attendees of the Biennale [fig. 6]. Not originally scheduled as part of the troupe's six-month international tour,[3] the Venice performance was included at the last minute as one of the exhibition's opening events. The moves made by Alan Solomon, the curator of the U.S. representation, suggest that this change of plans was not coincidental but a carefully calculated ploy.[4] Rauschenberg's significant role in charge of the sets, costumes, and lighting elevated him to the status of a multidisciplinary artist who also devoted part of his creativity to performance, dance, and stage design.[5]

Seeking to promote Rauschenberg's work, in February 1964, a few months before the Biennale, the International Council of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York presented a touring exhibition of his drawings responding to Dante Alighieri's *Inferno*—one for each of Dante's thirty-four cantos. It began at the Whitechapel Gallery in London and subsequently traveled to several European cities with enormous success. As a result, by the time his work was shown in Venice, the European art world—or at least the more specialized sectors—was already well acquainted with Rauschenberg.

It is also worth noting that before being selected by Alan Solomon, Rauschenberg enjoyed a certain prestige on the American art scene too. The artist's career had been going from strength to strength ever since Betty Parsons, the owner of the gallery that represented Jackson Pollock, displayed his work in a solo exhibition in May 1951. From 1958 onwards the

3
In early June the Merce Cunningham Dance Company together with John Cage and Robert Rauschenberg had set off on a six-month world tour that established its fame.

4
See Louis Menand, *The Free World: Art and Thought in the Cold War*, New York, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2021, p. 285, note 231.

5
Rauschenberg's growing prominence led to a gradual distancing from Cunningham and Cage.

all-powerful Leo Castelli regularly showed his pictures at his New York gallery,[6] as did Castelli's ex-wife Ileana Sonnabend at her Paris gallery from 1963. Both gallerists, convinced that abstract painting had run its course, had decided to promote the post-gestural and anti-illusionist figurative output of artists such as Jasper Johns and Rauschenberg, who were soon to be joined by Andy Warhol's Pop Art. But above all it was the retrospective Solomon staged at the Jewish Museum in New York in 1963 that catapulted Rauschenberg to fame. Writing in *The New York Times*, Brian O'Doherty described him as "one of the most fascinating artists around."[7]

Even so, it was not long before protests were voiced and, in some cases, serious accusations made that the award had been rigged by the U.S. government.[8] Marziano Bernardi, a critic for the prestigious Turin newspaper *La Stampa*, bemoaned the decision in an article titled 'The Venice exhibition on a dangerous and misguided path': 'The top prize went to Robert Rauschenberg for his paintings made from broken fragments, junk, and pieces of scrap (and he was paid twenty-five million). His works and those of his colleagues are presented as the most authentic expression of art from across the ocean: this is a lie and an insult to living American culture" [fig. 7].[9] Others—a minority—such as writer and editor Gualtieri di San Lazzaro, defended the decision: "no one can deny his real talent as a painter, and it is to this that the jury wanted to pay homage."[10]

French critics, who immediately viewed the rise of Rauschenberg's new art as a fresh threat on top of the increasing artistic influence New York was gaining at the expense of Paris, launched the fiercest accusations. George Boudaille, always opposed to any kind of figurative art, dared to decry the pressure of the artistic propaganda effort of the United States Information Agency (USIA).[11] And in a scathing article *Le Figaro* contributor Pierre Mazars denounced the "*grandes manœuvres*" (large-scale maneuvers) to promote a new form of art, which he defined as "nationalist realism" and regarded as a cultural offensive designed to bring about the decline of Paris's influence to the benefit of New York.[12]

6
Leo Castelli, a Jewish dealer born in Trieste and exiled in the United States in 1940, opened his first gallery in New York in 1957.

7
Brian O'Doherty, "Robert Rauschenberg," *The New York Times*, April 28, 1963.

8
In 2023 art critic and filmmaker Amei Wallach directed *Taking Venice*, a documentary on the 32nd Venice Biennale. It unearths archival reports and footage and includes interviews with key figures in an attempt to unravel the possible machinations behind Rauschenberg's win.

9
Marziano Bernardi, "La mostra di Venezia su una strada pericolosa e sbagliata. Vecchia di 80 anni l'arte 'moderna' degli americani trionfanti alla Biennale," *La Stampa*, June 23, 1964, p. 3.

10
Gualtieri di San Lazzaro, "La XXXIIe Biennale de Venise," *XXe Siècle*, XXVI, 24 (December 1964), unpaginated.

11
George Boudaille, "Le faux dadaïste Rauschenberg couronné au pays du Titien," *Lettres Françaises*, 1035 (June 25–July 1, 1964), p. 1.

12
Pierre Mazars, "Venise: les grandes manœuvres du 'Pop'Art'," *Le Figaro Littéraire*, 948 (June 18–24, 1964), p. 29.

LA STAMPA Giovedì 25 Giugno 1964 3

PSICOANALISI

LA MOSTRA DI VENEZIA SU UNA STRADA PERICOLOSA E SBAGLIATA

Vecchia di 80 anni l'arte «moderna» degli americani trionfanti alla Biennale

Il maggior premio è andato a Robert Rauschenberg per i suoi «quadri» fatti di cocci rotti, rifiuti, pezzi da rigattiere (e pagati fino a venticinque milioni) - Le opere sue e dei suoi colleghi sono presentate come la più autentica espressione dell'arte d'oltre Oceano: è una menzogna, ed un'ingiuria alla viva cultura americana - Ma i critici dedicano pagine e pagine di analisi sottili a queste manifestazioni di infantilismo mentale, scoprendovi «nuovi canoni di bellezza» e un «ponte gettato fra l'arte e la vita»

Ha vinto il primo premio

«Il dono ad Apollo», opera dell'americano Rauschenberg, che dalla giuria internazionale di cui facevano parte due critici italiani ha ottenuto il gran premio per la pittura della XXXII Biennale di Venezia. La composizione è valutata parecchi milioni

fig. 7
Marziano Bernardi, "La mostra di Venezia su una strada pericolosa e sbagliata. Vecchia di 80 anni l'arte 'moderna' degli americani trionfanti alla Biennale," ***La Stampa*****, Thursday, June 23, 1964, p. 3**

13
Alan Solomon, *Report on the American Participation in the XXXII Venice Biennale 1964*, in Box 7, Folder 35 | Alan R. Solomon papers, 1907–1970, bulk 1944–1970 | Digitized Collection | Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution | Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (last accessed January 15, 2026).

14
Pierre Cabanne, "À Venise, L'Amérique proclame la fin de l'École de Paris et lance le Pop Art pour coloniser l'Europe," *Arts*, 968 (June 24–30, 1964), p. 1.

15
Alan R. Solomon Papers (see note 13 above).

In an internal report on the Biennale, Alan Solomon blamed himself for this reaction and confessed that "it was triggered by a public statement I made to the effect that [...] it is acknowledged on every hand that New York has replaced Paris as the world art capital."[13] Actually, his statement was not entirely true, as this issue had been a recurring topic in art criticism since the early 1960s.

It was furthermore evident that there was a great deal of confusion among critics between Pop Art and the new Neo-Dadaist style embodied by Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. For example, the prestigious historian Pierre Cabanne declared the prize to be a tool for the cultural "colonization" of Europe which put an end to the hegemony of the abstraction of the School of Paris in favor of American Pop Art.[14] Even Alan Solomon referred to this in the abovementioned report on the Biennale: "For the most part, the exhibition, while it generated all this excitement, was misunderstood by the press, which described the Biennale as a take-over of Europe by American Pop Art, despite the fact that neither I nor any of the artists participating consider their work to be pop art (I had made a point of this in the selection of the exhibition)."[15]

In stark contrast to these invectives, Pierre Restany, one of the founders of the French Nouveau Réalisme group, proposed a theoretical and historical analysis in a string of articles on the Biennale[16] praising the decision to award the well-deserved prize to such a talented artist as Rauschenberg.[17] In a letter to Leo Castelli dated December 27, 1964, besides commenting on the reactions sparked by the award, he aptly spoke of a third genre to which he considered Rauschenberg's Combines belonged, consisting of a compromise between Abstract Expressionism and Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades.[18] The theorist of French New Realism also rightly stated that Rauschenberg's victory was the culmination of efforts made since the late 1950s by Leo Castelli, museums, and the U.S. authorities to spread the good word on American art in Europe and that at the Biennale the United States simply "seized the opportunity, had the foresight to seize the moment."[19] And it certainly did. It is undeniable that this recognition was the result of a lengthy cultural diplomacy operation staged by the U.S. government to promote its artists in European countries.

In the early decades of the twentieth century the Eurocentrism of the Old Continent—whose culture was seen to contribute classical tradition and history to the world[20]—had led to American art and culture being treated as a lesser branch. It was not until the 1950s that the reception of American art in the Western bloc countries began to change. The new international order of two rival blocs fostered the moral leadership of the United States as the great economic and military power. The American government not only helped rebuild Europe but also decided to spread its image of freedom and prosperity versus the rigid Soviet bloc with an active program of support and propaganda for American culture, especially the new American abstract painting.[21]

The USIA, a diplomatic U.S. government organization established in 1953 by President Eisenhower, as well as the International Council of the MoMA, set up in 1952 with the support of the New York museum's president, Nelson Rockefeller, wised up to the potential of international traveling exhibitions of modern art. That is how Abstract Expressionism,

16
Pierre Restany, "La XXXII Biennale o il trionfo del terzo genere," *D'Ars Agency*, 5 (June 20–October 20, 1964), p. 12; "Les Biennales contre l'École de Paris," *La Galerie des Arts*, 18 (July–August–September 1964), pp. 12–21; "La XXXII Biennale de Venezia: Biennale della irregolarità," *Domus*, 417 (August 1964); "Paris n'est plus roi," *Planète*, 19 (November–December 1964), pp. 152–54; "L'Axe Rome–New York," *L'Europa Letteraria*, 30–32 (June–September 1964), pp. 156–58.

17
In 1961 Pierre Restany had included Rauschenberg's work in the exhibition *Le Nouveau Réalisme à Paris et à New York* at the Galerie Rive Droite in Paris.

18
See Richard Leeman, "Pierre Restany, Venise et les 'cocus de l'histoire'," *Critique d'Art*, 22 (fall 2003), at http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/1880 (last accessed March 2, 2026).

19
Pierre Restany, "La XXXII Biennale de Venezia: Biennale della irregolarità," pp. 27–40.

20
A significant example was the exhibition *American Painting: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present Day* held at the Tate Gallery in London in 1946, soon after World War II ended, which had a lukewarm reception. See Paloma Alarcó, "America from Europe," in Paloma Alarcó and Alba Campo Rosillo, *American Art from the Thyssen Collection* [exh. cat.], Madrid, Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, 2021, pp. 18–27.

21
This issue has given rise to a long list of publications: Max Kozloff, "American Painting during the Cold War," *Artforum*, 11 (May 1973), pp. 43–54; Thomas Crow, *The Rise of the Sixties: American and European Art in the Era of Dissent*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1996; Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters*, New York, The New Press, 2001; Catherine Dossin, "Mapping the Reception of American Art in Postwar Western Europe," *Artl@s Bulletin*, 1 (2012), article 3; and the above-mentioned Louis Menand, *The Free World: Art and Thought in the Cold War.*

which was presented as genuinely American, captivated a whole generation of Europeans then steeped in post-war pessimism and anxiety. It was precisely by breaking free from the traditions of the Old Continent and intensifying the "Americanness" of their art that artists managed to transform previous indifference into acceptance and even into a progressive Americanization of European art.[22] In a recent essay on this subject, American professor Louis Menand interweaves post-1945 art history, literary history, and intellectual history in an extensive chapter on the shift in the center of modern art from Paris to New York and links this cultural triumph with an aggressive foreign policy.[23]

It is therefore no coincidence that the American government first sponsored the country's pavilion at the Venice Biennale, one of the world's most prestigious and longest-standing international competitions, through the USIA in 1964. In previous years, from 1948 to 1962, the pavilion had been organized by MoMA's International Council in New York.[24] This time, however, art and politics teamed up, and the award helped to consolidate the federal government's goal of strengthening the influence of American art. To achieve this, the director of the USIA's fine arts section, Lois Bingham, contacted Alice Denney,[25] a well-known figure in the art world, who in turn chose as curator Alan Solomon, famous for his recent work as director of the Jewish Museum in New York.[26]

From the outset, Solomon aimed to showcase the most genuinely American new artistic trends in Venice and in April 1964 he announced the eight artists who had been selected: Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, both belonging to the Neo-Dada movement close to Pop Art; Kenneth Noland and the late Morris Louis, representatives of post-pictorial abstraction; two then lesser-known painters, Jim Dine and Frank Stella; and two young sculptors, John Chamberlain and Claes Oldenburg. It was a group of artists, Solomon explained, whose "force has been the absence of tradition."[27] But, in addition, no one failed to notice that Solomon had chosen artists linked to the influential Leo Castelli as well as painters favored by the still all-powerful Clement Greenberg. In fact, during the preparations for the Biennale, Castelli acted largely as his advisor.

22
Irving Sandler spoke somewhat chauvinistically of the "triumph of American painting"; see Irving Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism*, New York, Praeger, 1970. See also Jeremy Lewison, "Jackson Pollock and the Americanization of Europe," in Kirk Varnedoe and Pepe Karmel, eds., *Jackson Pollock: New Approaches* [exh. cat.], New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1999, pp. 201–31. Shortly afterwards Serge Guilbaut acknowledged that New York had stolen the artistic limelight from Paris in an essay providing a political interpretation of Abstract Expressionism; see Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom and the Cold War*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1983.

23
"The Emancipation of Dissonance," in Louis Menand, *The Free World: Art and Thought in the Cold War*.

24
Philip Rylands and Enzo di Martino, *Flying the Flag for Art: The United States and the Venice Biennale, 1895–1991*, Richmond, VA, Wyldbore and Wolferstan, 1993.

25
Alice Denney, linked to the Washington D.C. art scene, was friends with the Kennedys.

26
He was director of the Jewish Museum from July 1962 to July 1964, shortly after the opening of the 32nd Venice Biennale.

27
In "Carnival in Venice," *Newsweek* (July 6, 1964), pp. 74–75.

fig. 8
Ugo Mulas, *Room with works by Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns at the 32nd Venice Biennale*, Venice, 1964, gelatin silver print. Courtesy Archivio Ugo Mulas, Milan

The first time he visited Venice, Solomon realized that the small Neoclassical building that housed the American pavilion in the Giardini grounds was too small and, as is well known, decided to look for an additional venue, which was initially approved by the jury. The former U.S. consulate building—then vacant—by the Grand Canal proved to be the ideal venue for displaying the pieces by Rauschenberg, Johns, Stella, Chamberlain, Oldenburg, and Dine [fig. 8], while he decided to show Louis and Noland in the Giardini pavilion. However, as Solomon himself recounted, this decision could have cost Rauschenberg the prize: "The first ballot gave the American painter Robert Rauschenberg a majority, but the jury hesitated at establishing a precedent by giving the prize to an artist whose work was outside the Giardini (except for one picture, as explained earlier). The jury went to the Biennale President for a mandate in the matter, but he refused to accept the responsibility. After three days of puzzlement, they finally asked me to move more of Rauschenberg's work to the gardens, and then they voted him the prize."[28] Ugo Mulas's photographs showing three of Rauschenberg's works—including the Thyssen *Express* (1963) [see fig. 1]— being haphazardly transported by barge from the American consulate to the Biennale's official venue have become legendary and sparked a fresh controversy when they were made public.

28
Solomon *Report* 1964 (see note 13 above). Until that moment, only one of Rauschenberg's paintings was in the Giardini.

All this fuss did not seem to affect Rauschenberg in the slightest. He simply turned around and continued his tour with Cunningham's company. Ileana Sonnabend confirmed this a month later, on July 20, in a letter to Alan Solomon, who was still in Venice: "Bob passed through Paris on his way to England and came to see us on Saturday, he's in great shape, amused but not affected by the deluge of the press."[29]

It is still surprising to learn from Calvin Tomkins that the artist was up to his old tricks again before leaving the city: "Rauschenberg telephoned from Venice to a friend in New York, a Judson dancer named Tony Holder who occasionally helped out in his studio. He asked Holder to go to the Broadway loft, cut all the old silk screens out of their wooden frames, and burn them."[30] Tomkins tells the story with no further comment, simply concluding that "destroying them was a form of insurance against the pressure to repeat himself."[31] Perhaps he really did want to avoid the repetition that had been creeping into his latest work, but might this Neo-Dadaist gesture of self-destruction not also have been a mockery of the new values promoted by the modern art market? What is more, was it not part of a pattern in the artist's career, the ultimate goal of his art? He had tested it out previously in 1953 when he painstakingly erased a drawing by Willem de Kooning, the New York School artist he most admired, in order to turn it into his own work. As he explained years later in an interview with Barbara Rose, "I was trying to make art and so therefore I had to erase art."[32] Rauschenberg regarded destruction not as a loss but as a new beginning.

Leo Steinberg, one of the theorists of the time who best understood what Rauschenberg signified for the future, said years later: "I once heard Jasper Johns say that Rauschenberg was the man who in this century had invented the most since Picasso."[33] There is no doubt that the prize awarded to Rauschenberg's Combines and *Silkscreen Paintings* changed the course of the Venice Biennale, but the artist's subsequent elimination and erasure of all his silkscreens, a deliberate rather than impulsive act, laid the foundations for contemporary conceptual art. Abstract Expressionism was now history. ●

29
Solomon *Report* 1964 (see note 13 above).

30
Calvin Tomkins, *Off the Wall: Robert Rauschenberg and the Art World of Our Time*, New York, Penguin Books, 1981, p. 235.

31
Ibid.

32
Barbara Rose, "An interview with Robert Rauschenberg," in *Rauschenberg*, New York, Vintage Books, 1987, p. 51.

33
Leo Steinberg, "Reflections on the State of Criticism," *Artforum*, 10 (March 10, 1972), pp. 37–49.