Moving with *Express*

Carmen Cortizas

fig. 1
Ugo Mulas, *Transfer of Rauchenberg's* Express *at the Venice Biennale*, 1964, gelatin silver print. Courtesy Archivio Ugo Mulas, Milan

Express in Transit

In a photograph taken by Ugo Mulas in 1964, behind the foliage of the Giardini della Biennale two unidentified men can be seen carrying Robert Rauschenberg's *Express* (1963) [fig. 1], one of the three works hastily transported to the U.S. Pavilion shortly before the announcement of the International Grand Prize in Painting at the 32nd Venice Biennale. The barefoot handler dressed in casual summer clothing supports the left side of the canvas from the centre and bottom, firmly gripping its plastic-wrapped surface. The other man leads the way forward, resting the bottom right corner of the work against his back, steadying its massive weight with surprising ease. This furtive moment of transit is significant, given that this last-minute transportation, via a rented barge, is what allowed for Rauschenberg's controversial win.[1] The quick and inventive mobilization of curators, gallerists, transporters, and art handlers has since been remembered both as a triumph of American soft power during the Cold War and as evidence of New York's importance in shaping postwar artistic development.[2] Mulas's photograph shifts our attention to the often-unnoticed inner workings of the art world by capturing a rare instance of action that makes visible how manual care, material interaction, and collaborative coordination shape our understanding of art.

1
Since the scale of some of the artworks on show at the 32nd Venice Biennale exceeded the capacity of the U.S. Pavilion, several canvases were initially exhibited in the former U.S. Consulate on the other side of the Grand Canal. However, when the Biennale officials ruled that only works that were physically displayed within the Giardini were eligible for prizes, curator Alan Solomon decided to transfer three key works by Rauschenberg to the exterior structures of the U.S. Pavilion in the Giardini. For an in-depth account of this event, see the documentary *Taking Venice* directed by Amei Wallach (2023). See also Paloma Alarcó's essay in this issue of *Windows*.

2
Alan R. Solomon, "Introduction," in *Robert Rauschenberg* [exh. cat.], New York, The Jewish Museum, 1963 (unpaginated).

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Following its success at the Biennale, *Express* continued to move across multiple continents and through many hands. It was exhibited, damaged, restored, sold at auction, and resold privately before returning to auction in 1974, when it was acquired by Baron Hans Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza.[3] The work then launched into a period of extensive touring in the Baron's *Modern Masters* exhibitions, travelling across Oceania, United States, Japan, England, and Spain between 1979 and 1986.[4] Each handover involved packing, transporting, installing, monitoring, and condition reporting, along with the administrative coordination required for insurance and customs clearance. The surviving correspondence of its eventful physical history mentions gallerists, collectors, conservators, auctioneers, museum curators, and their respective assistants, who negotiated loans, sought market advice, and reported damage. Yet the tactile knowledge of those who physically interacted with *Express* is harder to trace, raising the question of how these largely unrecognized practices can be accessed and understood today.

When the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza officially opened in 1992 to house the Baron's private collection, *Express* finally entered a defined custodial ecosystem composed of museum curators, conservators, registrars, administrators, lighting technicians, security professionals, and art handlers, each with their own responsibility for displaying and safeguarding it. Among these actors, the art handling team has maintained the most sustained material contact with *Express*, continuously moving the work mindful of its qualities and particularities, including its painted frame, lack of protective glass, and considerable dimensions. They have installed it within the permanent collection throughout the Museum's multiple renovations. They have deinstalled it, prepared its crates, packed it for temporary exhibitions, and unpacked it again upon each return. They have also handled the work for show in several of the Museum's temporary exhibitions, including *Rauschenberg. Express* in 2006, *Warhol, Pollock and Other American Spaces* in 2025, and the current special display marking the centennial of the artist's birth, *Rauschenberg: Express. On the Move*.[5]

3
A condition report of the painting currently preserved at the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives in New York (Object File RRF 63.006) noted that during the return transit of *Express* from the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, to its owner, Frederick S. Weisman, in Los Angeles, seepage caused staining. On the provenance of the work, see Paloma Alarcó and Alba Campo Rosillo, *American Art from the Thyssen Collection* [exh. cat.], Madrid, Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, 2021, p. 259.

4
The work first toured internationally with *America & Europe: A Century of Modern Masters from the Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection* in Oceania (1979–80), followed by *20th Century Masters: The Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection* in the United States (1982–84) and *Modern Masters from the Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection* in Japan, London, and Spain (1984–86). For more on the Baron's collecting, see "Hans Heinrich (1921–2002): a passion for art," at https://www.museothyssen.org/coleccion/historia-coleccion-I/II (last accessed February 20, 2026).

5
For further information on these exhibitions, see Barbara Rose, *Rauschenberg. Express* [exh. cat.], Madrid, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, 2006, Contextos de la Colección Permanente; Estrella de Diego, *Warhol, Pollock and Other American Spaces* [exh. cat.], Madrid, Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, 2025, and this special number of *Windows* published on the occasion of the centenary of the birth of the artist.

fig. 2
Jonás Bel, *The Tool Cart*, 2025

Express in Labor

The physical handling of any artwork at the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza inevitably requires the involvement of the team formed by Miguel Ángel Pérez, Roberto García, and Óscar González, who work in dialogue with internal and external curators, physical and virtual couriers, registrars, and conservation specialists, not only to hang works like *Express*, but also to mount labels and wall-texts, install safety anchoring systems for small works and sleepers for large ones, lay adhesive floor barriers, and calibrate lighting and alarm systems.[6] They must read spatial plans thoroughly, measure distances accurately, and balance on ladders and aerial lifts safely, all while clamping, drilling, and fastening rigorously. In their workspace on the Museum's lower floors, a seemingly interminable range of tools, from mitre, band, and panel saws to wrenches, pliers, hammers, and chisels, is meticulously arranged like a display of the gallery's physical history. This is perhaps best encapsulated in their custom wooden tool cart [fig. 2], which has been present in the Museum since its inception and has evolved over the past three decades to meet the demands of its daily use. The placement of the most readily accessible tools in the upper compartments and the cleaning materials and dust-extraction system in the lower section creates a simultaneous relationship between operational and maintenance work.[7]

6
Santiago Romero formed part of the team responsible for the installation of the Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in 1986 and joined the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza in May 1992, on the occasion of its opening. Miguel Ángel Pérez joined the General Services Department of the Museum in January 1993 and five years later, in September 1998, moved to the Installation Department. Roberto García began working as an art handler in 1998, collaborating with the Museum's Installation Department from 2007, before becoming a permanent staff member in 2025. Óscar González, who had previous experience in art transportation and electrical installations, joined the Museum in June 2024. Despite coming from different backgrounds and maintaining different relationships with the Museum, they work together diligently and respectfully in the care of the Museum's holdings and are a staple of its daily operations.

7
For more on the tool cart and the art-handling team, see Jonás Bel, "Artefactos. Entre bastidores: Mirar, tocar, mover," at https://www.educathyssen.org/historia/artefactos (last accessed February 20, 2026).


New York's Changing Scene

The Singer Building, the highest structure in this foto, had been open three years when this picture was made in 1911. Central Railroad of New Jersey ferry slips, facing Liberty St. are in foreground. Construction at slips' left is for West Shore Railroad's ferry to Weehawken, N.J.

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Woolworth Building at left in recent foto, was world's tallest building when it opened in 1913. C.R.R. of N.J. still operates ferries to Jersey City. West Shore R.R. ferries quit in 1959. Pyramid-capped edifices, in both fotos, top Hudson Terminal Buildings. They're scheduled to be razed in 1964 by the Port of N.Y. Authority which plans to build a World Trade Center on site.

SUNDAY NEWS, NOVEMBER 18, 1962

fig. 3
David McLane, *The Hudson Terminal Buildings in New York*, in "New York's Changing Scene," *Sunday News*, November 18, 1962, p. 30

The breadth of knowledge of the art-handling team seems to find parallels with that of builders, carpenters, joiners, mechanics, and repairers. These were forms of labor that particularly fascinated Rauschenberg as an artist living in New York from the 1950s to the 1970s.[8] Notably, the concentration of local workshops devoted to electrical motor repair, plumbing, and construction around his 128 Front Street studio (1958–61) drew his attention to discarded industrial hardware, wood planks, wheels, ropes, gloves, and wire-mesh left out on the street.[9] In addition to being physically used in his Combines (1954–64), his *Silkscreen Paintings* (1962–64), such as *Express*, which he began in his new 809 Broadway studio (1961–65), photographically incorporated many of these materials from previous years. For example, the image on the lower left of *Express* depicts the Hudson Terminal Buildings on the western side of Lower Manhattan, near several of Rauschenberg's former studios in the 1950s.[10] Rauschenberg clipped this image from a 1962 *New York Sunday News* magazine [fig. 3], whose caption announced the building's scheduled demolition in 1964 to make way for the World Trade Center. The paint smears around this seemingly informative image seem to foreshadow its eventual erasure within the cityscape. On the lower right of the silkscreen, the positive and negative images of a cog perhaps can be read as evoking the transition from hand-crafted labor to the automated systems that became increasingly dominant in the 1960s.[11]

8
For Rauschenberg's general engagement with labor, see the article on Robert Rauschenberg's *Untitled (Labor's Centennial)* (1981) in the webpage of the Buffalo AKG Art Museum, at https://buffaloakg.org/artworks/p198234-untitled-labors-centennial (last accessed February 20, 2026).

9
Robert S. Mattison, "Urban Experiences," in *Robert Rauschenberg: Breaking Boundaries*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2003, pp. 41–104. His interest in industrially derived materials persisted throughout his career, as evidenced by his *Glut* sculptures (1986–95), made from discarded automotive parts and scrap metal, and by his *Borealis* series (1989–92), which involved tarnishing and untarnishing brass, copper, and bronze surfaces.

10
Although nearest to his former studio at 61 Fulton Street (1953–55), it was almost equally close to his earlier studios at 278 Pearl Street (1955–58) and 128 Front Street (1958–61).

11
This preference for automation can be traced to the artistic methods themselves, as art increasingly mirrors contemporary society's logic of commodification and managerialism, marking a shift from the artist as maker to the artist as executive, as epitomized by Andy Warhol. For more on this, see Helen Molesworth, "Work Ethic," in *Work Ethic*, Baltimore, Baltimore Museum of Art; University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003, pp. 25–51. It should be noted that while Rauschenberg frequently worked with assistants, artisans, and printers from the late 1950s onward, he retained a strong sense of physicality and involvement in his works.

Express in Confrontation

Such visual references not only reflect a city undergoing rapid development, but also engage with the growing disconnection from materials that bear the marks of use and process in favor of new, clean, and polished products. Rauschenberg's interest in materials, by contrast, endowed them with value. He regarded them as integral to the social fabric in their constant interaction with human practices of construction, craftsmanship, and repurposing. His distrust of ideas, "especially good ones,"[12] led him to reject the concept-to-execution model and instead to understand art as a collaboration with the uncertainty and unpredictability of experimental materials that he could not fully control. Insisting that "the material is never wrong. It's only me that can be wrong,"[13] he saw the resistance of found objects, metals, textiles, and silkscreens as offering endless possibilities.

We can draw a parallel between Rauschenberg's egalitarian approach to materials and the working methods of the Museum's art handlers, who, as a result of the intergenerational collecting of the Thyssen-Bornemisza family, operate across diverse periods, scales, and art forms. Whether they are manipulating Duccio di Buoninsegna's miniature tempera-and-gold-on-panel *Christ and the Samaritan Woman* (1310–11), Tintoretto's monumental oil-on-canvas *Paradise* (c. 1588), Vincent van Gogh's lithograph *The Potato Eaters* (1885), Joseph Cornell's constructed box *Blue Soap Bubble* (1949–50), or Roberto Matta's five canvases making up *The Dazzling Outcast* (1966), their central philosophy consists in treating every artwork that passes through their hands with equal care by paying close attention to each work's particularities and vulnerabilities.[14] In the hands of the art handler, an artwork's aura, conceptual status, and monetary value all momentarily recede, returning to the condition of pure matter. This reflects Rauschenberg's idea that, when confronting a difficult material, "the only course is to disappear and continue."[15]

12
"I have various tricks to actually reach that solitary point of creativity. One of them is pretending I have an idea. But that trick doesn't survive very long because I don't really trust ideas—especially good ones. Rather, I put the trust in the materials that confront me, because they put me in touch with the unknown. It is then that I begin to work… when I don't have the comfort of sureness and certainty"; see Robert Rauschenberg, "Robert Rauschenberg: An Audience of One," interview with John Gruen, *Art News*, 76, 2 (February 1977), pp. 44–48, here p. 48.

13
Calvin Tomkins, unpublished notes, June 25, 1963, p. 8; as cited in Roni Feinstein, *Robert Rauschenberg: The Silkscreen Paintings, 1962–64* [exh. cat. New York, Whitney Museum of American Art], New York, Whitney Museum; Boston/Toronto/London, Bulfinch Press, 1990, p. 51.

14
For more on the works discussed, see the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza collection pages: *Christ and the Samaritan Woman; Paradise; The Potato Eaters; The Dazzling Outcast;* and *Blue Soap Bubble*.

15
According to Robert Rauschenberg, "Materials have a reserve of possibilities built into them. Some of the possibilities are resistant. When working, confronting an obstacle—usually invisible—the only course is to disappear and continue"; as cited in Francine Snyder, ed., "Mostly About Rauschenberg, ca. 1975," in *I Don't Think About Being Great: Select Statements and Writings*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2025, p. 49.

fig. 4
Jonás Bel, *Miguel Ángel Pérez, Roberto García, and Óscar González moving artworks*, 2025

Not only does this signal a withdrawal of authorial dominance, but a respect for the material and its environment. The art-handling team, in their calmness, organization, and consideration when packing, unpacking, arranging, and handling, embody this ethic of care that is essential to the sustainability of an artwork and subsequently of a museum. Whether in the early morning before the museum opens, late at night before a vernissage, or throughout the day, shielded by folding screens through which visitors attempt to peek, whether two or ten people are present, expressing their opinions or in silence waiting for the wall paint to dry, they must equally disappear into the material to ensure the highest standard of treatment. Working in a problem-oriented way, they find solutions within the limitations of each wall, mediate the multiple voices that can coexist, and root themselves fully in the presentness of the work in front of them [fig. 4].[16]

16
This daily maintenance work at the Museum recalls Mierle Laderman Ukeles's performance *Hartford Wash: Washing / Tracks / Maintenance: Inside* (1973) at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum, to which *Express* would travel ten years later as part of the *20th Century Masters: The Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection* exhibition. By performing an array of maintenance jobs for four hours within the Atheneum in broad-daylight, the artist was highlighting the perception of valuable labor in post-industrial America generally and in museums in particular. See Miwon Kwon, "In Appreciation of Invisible Work: Mierle Laderman Ukeles and the Maintenance of the 'White Cube'," *Documents*, 10 (Fall 1990), pp. 31–37.

Beyond *Express*

The critic Brian O'Doherty likened the layering of images in Rauschenberg's silkscreens to the condition of the "city dweller's rapid scan," in which the amalgamation of signs, information, moving bodies, and physical structures, accompanied by a constant cacophony encountered while walking down the street, allows sensations to come alive just briefly before one moves on to the next preoccupation. However, this "vernacular glance," which has also been likened to the experience of watching television, though seemingly enthralling, ultimately produces a disinterested gaze toward one's surroundings, in which nothing seems to garner attention or appreciation for more than a few seconds.[17] The speed that *Express* embodies, both in its title and its composition, is the fast pace of the changing city, the flux of urban life with its simultaneous excitement and confusion. It also reflects Rauschenberg's anxious urgency to capture his surroundings, perhaps in response to their imminent disappearance or to the fear of his own disintegration if he didn't. Yet this pathos of panic, experienced by the artist in 1960s New York, remains strikingly relevant across the world today. The added dimension of mobile technology often produces the sensation that the surrounding infrastructures simply appear out of thin air, causing our ability to understand what the concrete and the tangible are composed of to slip from our grasp.[18] Thus, in an era defined by rapid pace, accustomed to immediacy, disposability, and hyper-saturated worlds both on the street and on one's phones, museums can become necessary and generative spaces that do not compel consumption, but instead offer the possibility to stop, observe, and reflect without unwanted mediation.

In this stillness, when sitting in front of *Express*, we can consider what happens when the artwork ceases its relentless movement around the world and retreats to a wall dedicated to its visual power and historical significance. Rauschenberg's multivalent *Silkscreen Paintings* demand that we examine closely each of their details, yet they also invite us to look beyond the works, questioning how they were made, moved,

17
Brian O'Doherty, "Rauschenberg and the Vernacular Glance," *Art in America*, 61, 5 (September–October 1973), pp. 82–87, here p. 85.

18
Laura Helena Wurth, "Handle with Care," König Galerie, 2021, at https://www.koeniggalerie.com/blogs/online-magazine/handle-with-care (last accessed February 20, 2026).

fig. 5
Peppe Avallone, *Robert Rauschenberg working on a replacement stage set for Trisha Brown Dance Company's* Lateral Pass *(1985) performed in December 1986 at Villa Volpicelli, Naples*. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York, P5200

and maintained. Just as *Express* was not created in isolation, requiring the help of assistants and printers, and did not travel the world by itself, relying on transporters and administrators, so too it does not exist in a vacuum, magically installed before us at the Museum, but rather depends on the everyday operations of the Museum staff.[19] The physical history of *Express* reveals how artworks are shaped by successive layers of politics, collaboration, accidents, and the multiple perspectives they bring. Thus, the physical engagement of those who have interacted with *Express* since its execution, often remaining in the margins, may offer alternative insights to those of art historians, critics, or curators. Like Miguel Ángel, Óscar, and Roberto, who rarely work in isolation in their daily tasks around the Museum, Rauschenberg challenged the myth of the solitary and introspective creator through his holistic, interdependent approach to art.[20] His collaborative spirit, commitment to dialogue, and openness to the world make him a touchstone in an era of increasing disconnection from the process. Movement can be identified not only in its gestural facture or dancing bodies, or in the changing city, but also in the physicality of its journey, of those who have moved with it to those who move around it.[21] Their care and inventiveness allow the spirit of *Express* to endure more than sixty years after its creation, and Rauschenberg's legacy to live on a century after his birth [fig. 5].[22] ●

19
See Jonás Bel, "Artefactos. Entre bastidores: Mirar, tocar, mover," at https://www.educathyssen.org/historia/artefactos (last accessed February 20, 2026); see Roni Feinstein, *Robert Rauschenberg: The Silkscreen Paintings, 1962–64*, p. 25.

20
Rauschenberg's *Silkscreen Paintings* were the result of sustained collaboration with Aetna Silk Screen Products in New York. Rauschenberg sent detailed instructions specifying image dimensions and the number of screens required, while skilled printers were responsible for the photographic transfer of images. See Alan R. Solomon, "Introduction," in *Robert Rauschenberg* (unpaginated), note 2.

21
Although this essay has focused on the particular work of the Museum's art handlers, it seeks to extend this recognition and appreciation to all those who contribute to the Museum's ecosystem, including curators, conservators, registrars, archivists and librarians, exhibition designers, educators, photographers, technicians, invigilators, facilities and maintenance managers, art transporters, administrators, development, communications, publications, marketing, retail and cloakroom staff, legal and compliance teams, as well as freelancers.

22
This essay resulted from two distinct sources of admiration from my time as an intern at the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, one for Robert Rauschenberg's creative capacity to bridge art and life, and the other for the work of Miguel Ángel Pérez, Roberto García, and Óscar González, who were extremely generous in teaching me about the processes of working with art. I am incredibly grateful to Marta Ruiz del Árbol for helping me realize the wonderful connections that exist between the two.