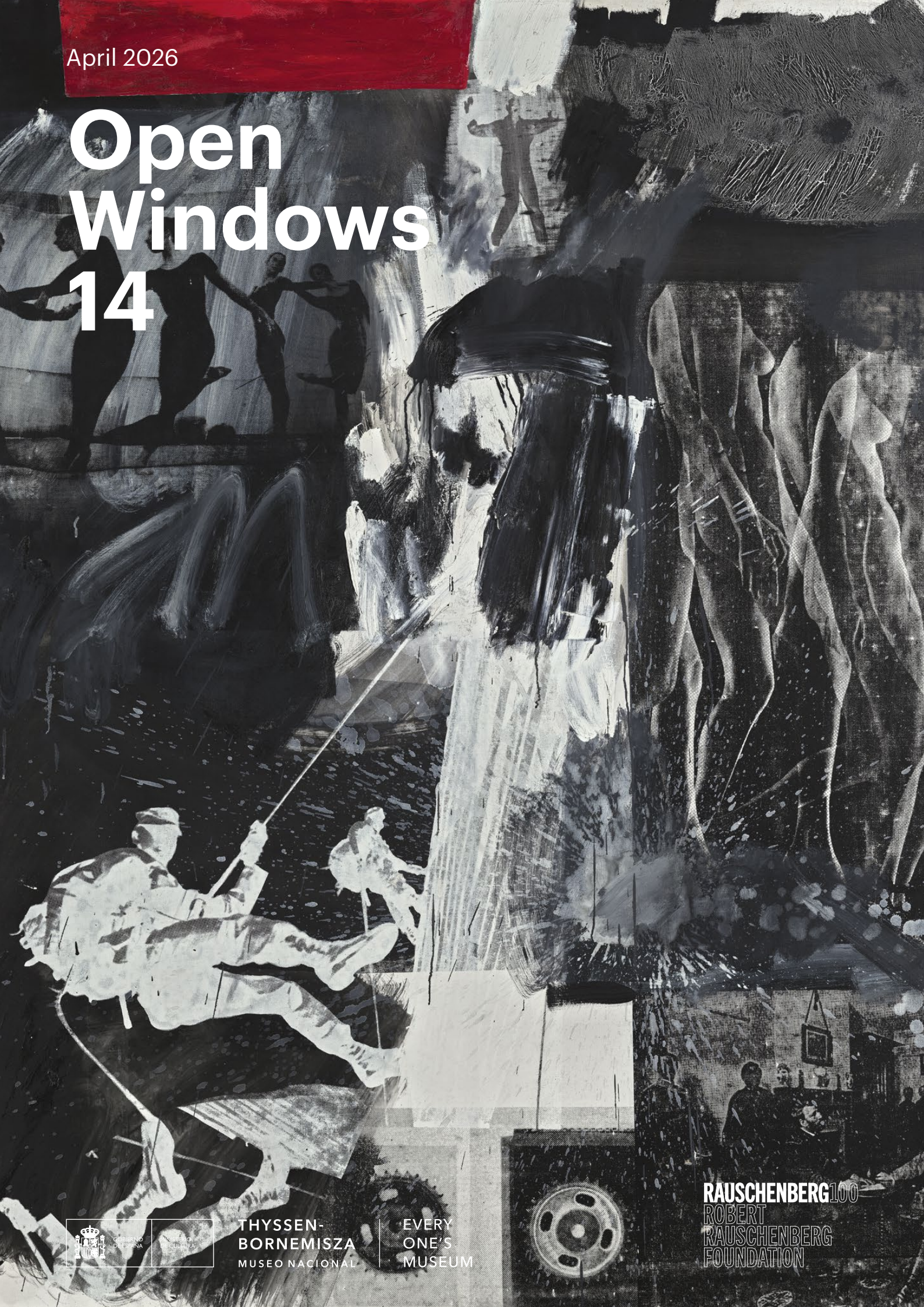
April 2026

Open Windows 14



THYSSEN-BORNEMISZA MUSEO NACIONAL

EVERY ONE'S MUSEUM

RAUSCHENBERG100
ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG FOUNDATION

April 2026

Open Windows 14

“On the Move”: Robert Rauschenberg’s *Silkscreen Paintings*

Richard Meyer

Robert Rauschenberg
***Express*, 1963**
(detail)
[+ info]

In June 1964, Robert Rauschenberg (Port Arthur, Texas, 1925–Captiva Island, Florida, 2008) won the International Grand Prize in Painting at the 32nd Venice Biennale. The award set off something of a panic among European critics who took it as proof of the preeminent position and vulgarizing effect of American art on the world stage. The leftist French newspaper *Combat* called the prize "an offense to the dignity of artistic creation"[1] while, from the other side of the political spectrum, *L'Osservatore Romano*, the official Vatican newspaper, ran an editorial denouncing "the total and general defeat of culture"[2] at the Biennale. In similar distress, the French magazine *Arts* bemoaned "the end of the School of Paris" at the hands of American Pop Art as exemplified by Rauschenberg's silkscreen painting *Retroactive II* (1963).[3] Featuring a large, partially striped portrait of John F. Kennedy near the center of the composition, *Retroactive II* also includes a smaller, less prominently placed detail of Peter Paul Rubens's 1608 masterpiece, *The Toilet of Venus*, at top right. In the context of the Venice controversy, Rauschenberg's painting thematized the displacement of European high art by American popular culture and political power.

1
Cited in Alexander Eliot, "All Roads Lead to Where?" *Art in America*, 52, 6 (December 1964), p. 127.

2
Cited in Calvin Tomkins, *Off the Wall: Robert Rauschenberg and the Art World of Our Time*, Garden City, NY, Doubleday, 1980, p. 235 (note).

3
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. 16.

The artist's personal response to the Grand Prize was, in its own way, no less dramatic than the public outcry of his European critics. In *Off the Wall: Robert Rauschenberg and the Art World of Our Time*, Calvin Tomkins writes:

> The day after he won the Biennale, 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. There were about a hundred and fifty screens all told, representing a sizable financial investment as well as a rich bank of images. Destroying them was a form of insurance against the pressure to repeat himself.[4]

Tomkins reports this story coolly and without further comment. Since his account has become definitive in the art-historical literature on Rauschenberg, several questions have remained unanswered about the episode. If the artist wished for the silkscreens to be destroyed, could he not have done so himself upon his return to New York? Rauschenberg's trip to Venice coincided with his participation in a six-month world tour by the Merce Cunnningham Dance Company for which he designed sets, costumes, and lighting and occasionally performed at the time.[5] Since he remained abroad through December of 1964, Rauschenberg obviously had no access to the screens—and thus no chance of making new work from them—for several months. Why the need, then, to have them incinerated immediately? And why have Holder burn the screens rather than, more simply and safely, cut them up and throw them away? It is as though Rauschenberg could not abide the very idea of the silkscreens, as though, if they survived, they would be waiting for him back in New York, calling him to continue in the same creative direction.[6]

The destruction of the silkscreens strikes a decidedly modernist note, a decimation of artistic materials so total that it voids any possibility of their recurrence in future work.[7]

4
Cited in Calvin Tomkins, *Off the Wall*, p. 235.

5
In a bit of serendipitous timing, the company performed in Venice on the day before the Biennale jury awarded the Grand Prize. It has been suggested that Rauschenberg's dealer, Leo Castelli, orchestrated the coincidence to bolster the artist's visibility at the Biennale.

6
According to Dorothy G. Seckler, "It would have been easier to continue with these familiar ways [of silkscreening] and turn out a product that is now in great demand despite its high prices. But since the challenge as Rauschenberg sees it is not to ingratiate the audience but to constantly renew and expand its perception of the present, this was not an alternative that could be considered"; see Dorothy G. Seckler, "The Artist Speaks: Robert Rauschenberg," *Art in America*, 54, 3 (May–June 1966), pp. 73–85, here p. 73.

7
According to Rosalind Krauss, "The actual practice of vanguard art tends to reveal that 'originality' is a working assumption that itself emerges from a ground of repetition and recurrence"; see Rosalind E. Krauss, "The Originality of the Avant-Garde," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, MA, The MIT Press, 1986, pp. 151–70, here p. 157.

fig. 1
Ugo Mulas, *Rauschenberg in front of* Express *at the 32nd Venice Biennale*, 1964, gelatin silver print. Courtesy Archivio Ugo Mulas, Milan

The act echoes Rauschenberg's pattern throughout his early career of discontinuing creative approaches once they became, in his view, rote or predictable. In a 1966 interview, the artist noted that "As far as style is concerned, I've run through a good many and it is always a pleasure to give them up [...]. When I reach a stage where working in a certain way is more apt to be successful than unsuccessful—and it's not just a lucky streak—when I definitely see that this is the case, I start something else."[8] By these lights, Rauschenberg's professional triumph at the Biennale may have furnished him with the incentive to find a new creative path. A photograph from the day of the award ceremony shows Rauschenberg posed before *Express* (1963) [fig. 1], one of the paintings displayed at the exhibition. Seeing Rauschenberg in his linen suit and tie, graciously enduring the occasion, one cannot but think of his imminent decision to destroy the screens used in that work, not to mention all the others in his studio at the time.[9] In its exceedingly public (if also highly controversial) recognition of the artist's success, the Prize all but decreed that he move on.

* * *

Between fall 1962 and spring 1964, Rauschenberg created over six dozen photo-silkscreen paintings on canvas. The commercially fabricated screens used for these paintings were imprinted, at the artist's instruction, with imagery drawn either from his own photographs or from mass circulation magazines such as *National Geographic*, *Esquire*, *Look*, and *Life*. Initially working in black and white, the artist started using colored inks in 1963.

8
Cited in Dorothy G. Seckler, "The Artist Speaks," p. 84. On the occasion of the artist's first one-man museum show in 1963, for example, the curator Alan Solomon wrote: "It is extraordinary how seldom Rauschenberg repeats himself... [E]ach picture tends to be a complete statement in itself, rather than a step in a progression... He deplores the compulsive repetition which some artists practice, for Rauschenberg two is a very large number, and he approaches the possibility of using three of anything with more than a little gravity"; see Alan R. Solomon, *Robert Rauschenberg*, New York, The Jewish Museum, 1963 (unpaginated).

9
As his commitment to originality would suggest, Rauschenberg's professional output in the years immediately following Venice departed dramatically from his preceding silkscreen paintings. Following the Cunningham tour (which ended, somewhat acrimoniously, in Rauschenberg's departure from the company), the artist focused on collaborative work in performance, dance, interactive technologies, and mixed media. Even as the prices of his Combines and silkscreens skyrocketed in part as a result of the Venice Prize, Rauschenberg studiously avoided the lure of repetition.

Like his abandonment of the silkscreen works in 1964, Rauschenberg's initial turn to them was motivated by a desire to break with his preceding work to, as he put it, "escape [the] familiarity of objects & collage."[10] The compound phrase "objects & collage" refers in this context to the artist's Combines (1954–64)—combinations of painting, sculpture, collage, and assemblage—which he had produced since 1954. While working on the Combines, Rauschenberg became increasingly drawn to the possibility of translating his hybrid aesthetic onto a flat, two-dimensional surface. In his early "transfer drawings" (1958–60), the artist dipped photo-clippings from newspapers and magazines in lighter fluid, then rubbed them face down onto a piece of paper, thereby producing a glimmering, monochrome afterimage. He combined these photo-based images with free-hand drawing and watercolor painting. While the method yielded visually elegant results, it limited Rauschenberg to a fairly small scale since his source images could only be transferred to the paper at original size. Silk-screening, by contrast, enabled the artist to enlarge and multiply photographic imagery at will.

In certain cases, Rauschenberg worked on several paintings at once, using the same silkscreen to imprint an image—whether of JFK, a glass of water, or Diego Velázquez's *Rokeby Venus* (1647–51)—on different canvases.[11] The advantage of this multi-tasking method, according to the artist, was that he was "not so likely to get hung up" on any one picture. "You keep moving. And when you come back to one, and it hasn't moved automatically while you were away, suggesting something new, you just go on to the next."[12] Rauschenberg's description of a painting having "moved [...] while you were away" is especially intriguing. By working on multiple pictures simultaneously, the artist could circle back to see whether one of them had "moved" since his latest inking or painting of the surface, that is, whether the picture seemed, in the interim, to be advancing toward a more dynamic flow of visual traffic. In a sense, Rauschenberg sought to create compositions that were "on the move" even after they had been completed. The works recall the layered process by which they were made, the flow of time required, and the seemingly endless mobility of images and information in the modern age.

10
This text is included in the large spiral of words in the central section of Rauschenberg's 1968 lithograph *Autobiography*. The text, while dizzying to read as one follows its circular form around the composition, charts the artist's life and career dispassionately and in chronological order.

11
According to Roni Feinstein, Rauschenberg worked on as many as eight silkscreen paintings simultaneously; see 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. 42.

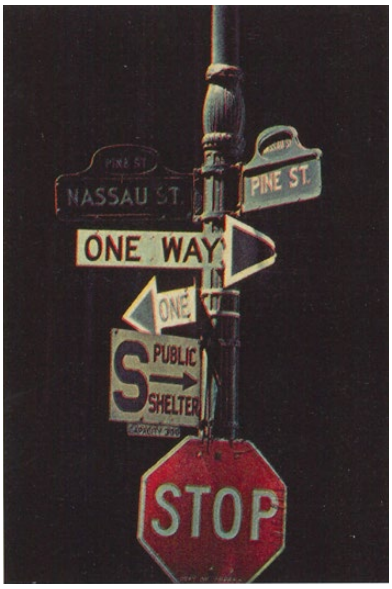
12
Calvin Tomkins, unpublished notes, June 25, 1963, p. 8; as cited in Roni Feinstein, *Robert Rauschenberg: The Silkscreen Paintings*, p. 42.

fig. 2
Hans Namuth, *Rauschenberg in his studio with* Retroactive II *and* Buffalo II, 1964

A marvelous Hans Namuth photograph from 1964 catches Rauschenberg on the floor of his studio as he pulls a squeegee across a screen so as to ink a portion of the canvas unfurled beneath [fig. 2]. The painting on the floor has been identified as *Skyway* (1964), a mural-sized picture first displayed on the façade of the New York State Pavilion at the 1964 World's Fair. Behind *Skyway*, two finished pictures, *Retroactive II* (1963) and *Buffalo II* (1964), are shown propped against the studio wall. While versions of the same, larger-than-life-sized portrait of JFK appear in both works, those portraits diverge wildly in terms of compositional placement, cropping, color blocking, overpainting, and pictorial surround. As captured in Namuth's photograph, the two works enact a visual dialogue between repetition and difference such that, for example, the President's pointing hand becomes all the more declarative as it appears, in almost perfect diagonal alignment, twice in the left-hand painting and once again in the right. The photograph suggests not only a potentially endless recurrence of the Kennedy image but also an infinite set of compositional variations within which that image might be set. In doing so, it echoes Rauschenberg's method of working the same silkscreen across different paintings in quick succession. The artist would, for example, screen the same Kennedy portrait twice more in *Skyway*.

fig. 3
Robert Rauschenberg
***Overdrive*, 1963**
Oil and silkscreen ink on canvas, 213.4 × 152.4 cm
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Promised gift of Eva and Glenn Dubin, PG740.2013

fig. 4
Philip Harrington, photograph of the post on the corner of Nassau and Pine streets in "The New New York," *Look* magazine, March 26, 1963



As JFK's double appearance in both *Buffalo II* and *Skyway* attests, Rauschenberg exploited the intrinsic reproducibility of the silkscreen method within as well as across individual paintings. Even as he pursued the possibilities and pleasures of repetition, Rauschenberg also disrupted them. The lower section of his work *Overdrive* (1963) [fig. 3], for example, is largely given over to repeated views of a group of street signs appended to an iron post. Reading from top down, we see a pair of old fashioned "humpback" signs marking the intersection of "Nassau" and "Pine" Streets in lower Manhattan; two one way signs, each slightly dented, pointing in nearly opposite direction; a public shelter sign punctuated by a large "S" and a slender arrow, pointing in yet a third direction; and finally, the familiar red octagonal of a "Stop" sign. As is evident from the original photograph in *Look* magazine [fig. 4], Rauschenberg has exaggerated the oblique angle of the post and blacked out the part of it that continues beneath the partially defaced Stop sign. The result is that the iron post seems to be in mid swing, like the pendulum of a grandfather clock. What is more, the "One Way," "Shelter," and "Stop" signs resurface in various colors and positions

(upside-down, at right angles, skewed off-center) beneath the swinging post. Thanks to overpainting, inconsistent screening, and unpredictable spatial orientation, these signs break free of their supporting post, as if spinning away in multiple directions. “One way” now points every which way. The quadrupled “Stop” sign now instigates us to move and rotate around the composition. Rauschenberg stages a visual and conceptual “overdrive” such that signs lose their moorings as language loses meaning.

* * *

The relatively short time during which Rauschenberg made the *Silkscreen Paintings* is all the more striking when contrasted to the duration of the same pictorial method in the work of Andy Warhol. Warhol always saved his silkscreens for potential future use—whether to expand a prior series or launch a new one. First applying the technique to commercial photographs of movie stars, consumer goods, and news events in the early 1960s, the Pop artist subsequently silkscreened commissioned portraits based on Polaroids in the 1970s and 80s.

Although certain details of chronology remain murky, Warhol’s earliest silkscreen paintings just predate Rauschenberg’s and the former artist is widely credited with sparking the latter’s turn to the technique. We know that Rauschenberg visited Warhol’s studio on September 18, 1962, at which time he was shown silkscreen paintings of Marilyn Monroe as well as slightly earlier pictures in which hand-colored stencils and rubber stamps were used to create grids of imperfectly repeated images. Rauschenberg asked Warhol for the name of his commercial screen-maker (Aetna Silk Screen Products), from whom he ordered his first batch of silkscreens.

At virtually the same moment Rauschenberg started to make silkscreen paintings, the artist became Warhol’s pictorial subject. Warhol’s portraits of his fellow artist followed from Rauschenberg’s studio visit. The art critic David Bourdon, in attendance that evening, recalls the following exchange:

> Warhol attempted to ingratiate himself with Rauschenberg by offering to make silkscreened portraits of him. All Rauschenberg had to do, Andy said, was to provide him with some photographs. Rauschenberg was enthusiastic about the project and immediately began to discuss what kinds of photographs would be suitable.[13]

Rauschenberg provided Warhol with five photographs ranging in date and format from a recent image of the artist alone to a childhood photograph of his family in Port Arthur, Texas. The latter image, repeated more than fifty times in a sepia-toned grid, served as the source for Warhol's painting *Let us Now Praise Famous Men* (1962). Warhol's title cites that of a 1941 book by James Agee and Walker Evans documenting the experience of Alabama sharecroppers during the Great Depression. Rauschenberg's photograph of his family grimly posed against the backdrop of a clapboard house under a cloudless sky recalls Evans's sober images of tenant farmers and their families from the same period.

Warhol produced ten silkscreen paintings based on Rauschenberg's photographs, including several featuring the face and torso of the artist, repeated and color-saturated in the manner of one of Warhol's movie star portraits. The Rauschenberg series marked Warhol's first silkscreened portrait of a fellow artist or, indeed, of anyone he knew first-hand. Might his striking, electric blue *Triple Rauschenberg* (1962) be taken as an emblem of the shared artistic technique in which the two artists were now engaged?

Rauschenberg would never use the silkscreen method to produce an individual or family portrait nor would he confine any of his paintings to a single theme or iconographic source. Rather than following Warhol's approach of serializing the same picture within a gridded format, Rauschenberg scattered multiple images of varying scale, color, and legibility across the canvas, which he further overlaid with oil paint. By contrast to Warhol's insistence on a single image repeated in the same orientation throughout the composition, Rauschenberg disorients his imagery by flipping, obscuring, overlaying, or otherwise distressing it.

13
Cited in George Frei and Neil Printz, eds., *The Andy Warhol Catalogue Raisonné*, vol. 1, *Paintings and Sculpture 1961–1963*, London, Phaidon, 2001, no. 300, p. 267 (illustrated on p. 265).

Warhol's counterexample helps clarify the special interpretive challenge posed by Rauschenberg's silkscreens. In the lines above, I have focused on the most prominent visual motifs in various paintings, whether a three-quarter-length view of JFK or a congregation of street signs. Such motifs carry a piece of the recognizable world but they do not stand as a coherent narrative or puzzle to be deciphered. Rauschenberg asks us to attend to subject matter, to the specificity of reference, without construing it as the master key through which his work may be unlocked or fully explained. The blank spots, moments of inscrutability, overlap, abstraction, and inversion are the meaning of Rauschenberg's silkscreens no less than the external references and recognizable people, places, and things captured on their surface.

Express [fig. 5], one of the works Rauschenberg displayed at the Venice Biennale to prizewinning effect, provides a vivid example. The composition is replete with human figures including dancers from the Merce Cunningham troupe in rehearsal, mountain climbers scaling a cliff, a horse and rider jumping over a hurdle, a stop motion photograph of a nude woman in motion that strongly evokes Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* (1912), and, at lower right and slightly more difficult to discern, a U.S. Civil War photograph of Generals Grant and Lee shaking hands at Appomattox as the South formally surrendered. While Rauschenberg himself took the picture of the dancers, the other photographic imagery in the work is appropriated—the nude from *Life* magazine, for example, and the mountain climbers from a U.S. army recruiting advertisement. These figurative images are variously overlaid, partially obscured, and adjacent to painted brushstrokes. The painting is entirely black and white save for a slender, red rectangle of paint at the top of the canvas, just right of center. The rectangle provides a punch of color that simultaneously interrupts and highlights the black and white expanse of the rest of the work.

fig. 5
Robert Rauschenberg
***Express*, 1963**
Oil and silkscreen ink on canvas,
184.2 × 305.2 cm
Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza,
Madrid, 721 (1974.34)
[+ info]

Rauschenberg's earliest silkscreen paintings were entirely black and white, his later ones featured multiple, vibrant colors. *Express*, with its lone red rectangle, marks a pivot point between the two. Beyond posing color against black and white, *Express* sparks a series of dialogues that remain in flux rather than fixed. These include dialogues between abstraction and figuration, photography and painting, movement and stillness, singularity and uniformity, the past (e.g. the U.S. Civil War) and the present (e.g. the Cunningham dance troupe).

Express requires us to move close to the work to take in its detailed, multiform imagery, then step back to consider its whirling composition as a whole. The large size of the work in combination with its intricate variations of imagery and abstraction make it difficult to capture in reproduction.

fig. 6
Ugo Mulas, *Transfer of Rauchenberg's* Express *at the Venice Biennale*, 1964, gelatin silver print. Courtesy Archivio Ugo Mulas, Milan

This raises a compelling paradox: a silkscreen painting that showcases photo-based imagery largely eludes the power of the camera to reproduce it.

Largely but not entirely. Consider a photograph of art handlers moving *Express* to the Giardini, the primary space of exhibition, at the 1964 Venice Biennale [fig. 6]. Off the wall, on the move, and seen in relation to the scale of the human body, the painting's grandeur and dynamism become more palpable. The horse and rider seem ready to gallop off the left side of the composition while the nude woman, should she continue her journey, would step right out of the painting. The vertical mountain climbers reorient the picture so that our gaze ascends vertically. One of the climbers is cut off by the lower margin of the work and therefore seems to be entering the composition from outside. When we see the painting in a way that captures full scale against its imagery, *Express* all but jumps, dances, and climbs before our eyes.

The majesty and dynamism of *Express* make it all the more startling that Rauschenberg had his silkscreens burned shortly after the Biennale. The over six dozen screen paintings he made between 1962 and 1964 stand as an intensive, though severely limited, artistic experiment. That experiment animated but was never duplicated in the artist's future work.

In works like *Express*, Rauschenberg combined everyday photographs, brushstrokes of paint, and a commercial method of visual reproduction to create something spectacular. The dynamism and grandeur of the silkscreen paintings belong not only to the artist. When we see one of his pictures, we break free of received meanings and visual restrictions. We are invited to join a pictorial world that is on the move. Our destination is, marvelously, unknown. ●

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.

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.

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).

Moving with *Express*
Carmen Cortizas

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).

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.