

**ROBERT  
RAUSCHENBERG  
A VISUAL LEXICON**



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October 9 – December 20, 2014

**CASTELLI**



## PLAYING WITH MATCHES

Mimi Thompson

“It takes some nerve to be truly curious and leave evidence.”<sup>1</sup>  
Robert Rauschenberg

**When material** and form exist at cross-purposes it creates an atmosphere that can't be defined in a traditional sense. Robert Rauschenberg understood the power of this kind of mismatch, and looked for imperfect setups and connections to guide the viewer to multiple vantage points. One sight line was rarely enough; he presented his inventory of images gradually, and submitted them for inspection partially concealed, upside down or in multiple. Beckoning the viewer to climb a ladder, sit in a chair or gaze into a mirror's reflection, Rauschenberg revealed how the organizational power of images can be re-routed to provide a question. Unruly ideas and rogue literary devices (such as allegory, anagrams and puns) allow his work to suggest several outcomes and guarantee an indistinct chronicle of space and culture. At times, stray emotions such as melancholy and hope surface alongside formal concerns, joining the multiple cast-offs, scenes and figures whose purpose is indeterminate but whose presence is necessary. We may feel adrift in this contingent world where objects we know refuse to point the way. However Rauschenberg joined memory with imagination for a reason; he wanted to reveal “the luminousness of the thing itself, of things being what they are.”<sup>2</sup> By removing our predictable connection to the everyday, he gives us the freedom to re-imagine it, and look again.

*Untitled*, ca.1959  
Combine: tin can,  
pocket watch and chain  
3<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 2<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 3 inches

1. Robert Rauschenberg, Transcript of “Evening with Robert Rauschenberg,” Israel Museum, May 29, 1974, Tape 19, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives accessed July 2014.
2. Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation,” Elizabeth Hardwick, Intr., *A Susan Sontag Reader* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1982), p.103.



The varied army of images and objects that maneuvers through Robert Rauschenberg's work, such as mirrors, ladders and clocks, creates a visual lexicon that allows a pictorial thread to travel through different bodies of work. Whether it is a three-dimensional chair appearing in the 1965 performance *Linoleum* or a two-dimensional photographic image of a chair in the lithograph *Booster*, 1967, or the polka-dotted fabric which appears in *Yoicks*, 1954, as well as in *Arcadian Survey (Spread)*, 1977, and multiple other works, these visual repetitions create a sense of both familiarity and disorientation. By weaving identical and near twin images throughout many mediums he revealed how an artist's instinct can develop difference in similar things and settings. Rauschenberg also allowed the words and pictures he used to escape their expected roles in order to

*Arcadian Survey (Spread)*, 1977  
Solvent transfer and collage  
on fabric collaged to wood  
with mirrored panels  
84 x 260 x 14½ inches



*Untitled*, 2008  
Patinated and painted bronze  
4 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 11 $\frac{13}{16}$  x 3 $\frac{3}{4}$  inches  
Edition of 5





expose the indistinct line where past and present meet. In a 1951 letter to Betty Parsons discussing the creation of the *White Paintings* he commented that “Today is their creator.”<sup>3</sup> From the *White Paintings* full of light and shadows, to his creations full of images and cast-offs, he aimed to “make a surface which invites a constant change of focus and an examination of detail. Listening happens in time—looking also has to happen in time.”<sup>4</sup>

His concern with the temporal aspects of both looking and making art is reflected in some of his chosen imagery and materials such as wheels, ladders, stop signs and clocks. They place us and move us along, allowing both artist and viewer to feel the backwards and

*Factum I*, 1957

Combine: oil, ink, pencil, crayon, paper, fabric, newspaper, printed reproductions, and printed paper on canvas  
61½ x 35¾ inches

The Museum of Contemporary Art,  
Los Angeles  
The Panza Collection

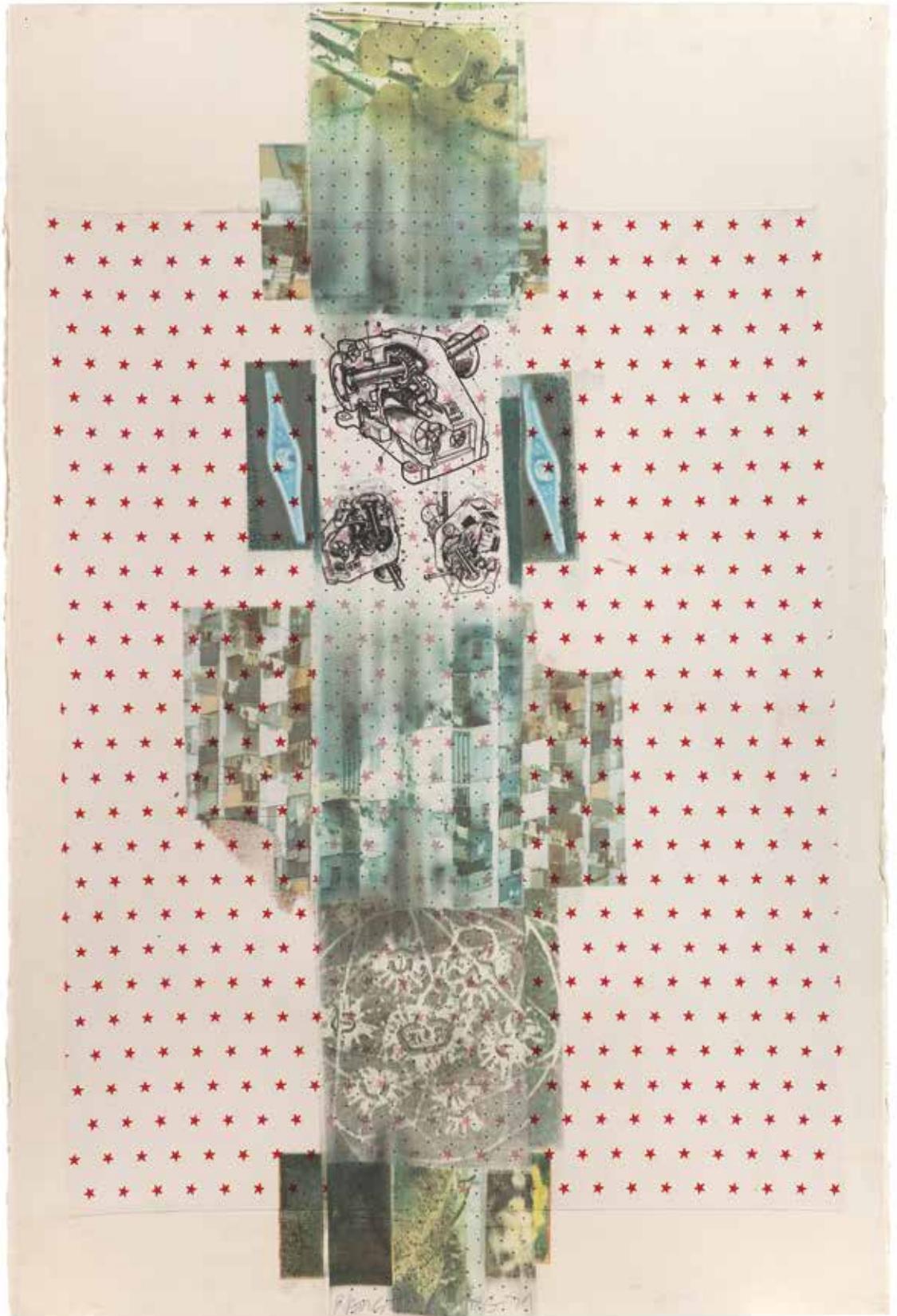
*Factum II*, 1957

Combine: oil, ink, pencil, crayon, paper, fabric, newspaper, printed reproductions, and printed paper on canvas  
61½ x 35¾ inches

The Museum of Modern Art, New York  
Purchase and an anonymous gift and  
Louise Reinhardt Smith Bequest  
(both by exchange)

3. Robert Rauschenberg, letter to Betty Parsons, October 18, 1951, Archives of American Art, Washington, DC, accession no. 97-037.

4. Gene R. Swenson, “Rauschenberg Paints a Picture,” *Art News*, April 1963, p.45.



*Scance (Slide)*, 1979  
Solvent transfer on fabric  
collaged to paper  
60 x 40 inches

forwards of life, as well as its screeching halts. Sometimes these repeated objects lure us into a superficial familiarity with Rauschenberg's aims. Like travelers who go native but can never really be so, those of us determined to create a narrative by connecting the everyday objects in Rauschenberg's work miss the point. Appearances are deceptive,



and even if the object the viewer sees is one they use daily, in this artist's work its presence will lose its reassuring purpose. Lawrence Alloway called Rauschenberg's use of the everyday "an inventory of human traces."<sup>5</sup> These traces often lead the intellect, urged on by the heart, to look for answers and endings. Rauschenberg avoided both, and by repeating photographic images, abstract surfaces and multiple

*Rome Flea Market (III)*, 1952  
Gelatin silver print  
15 x 15 inches

5. Lawrence Alloway, "Rauschenberg's Development," in *Rauschenberg* (Berlin: Staatliche Kunsthalle Berlin, 1980), p.50.

everyday objects again and again in different ways, he sharpened our focus to reveal an alluringly battered parallel universe.

In 1957 Rauschenberg created two very similar paintings, *Factum I*



*Rome Flea Market (VII)*, 1952  
Gelatin silver print  
15 x 15 inches

and *Factum II*. Although they include identical photographic material (including doubled newspaper photographs of President Dwight Eisenhower and a launderette on fire as well as calendar pages) the painting is slightly different in each. The paint strokes alter the edges of the photographic material slightly and drip differently in each painting. Rauschenberg takes an elegant poke at the myth of abstract expressionist spontaneity in these works, but, perhaps more importantly, underlines the strength of instinct and the inevitable fact that the artist's hand always wields some

control. In 1965 he described how his approach differed from the Abstract Expressionists, "There was something about the self assertion of abstract expressionism that personally always put me off, because at that time my focus was as much in the opposite direction as it could be. I was busy trying to find ways where the imagery and the material and the meanings of the painting would not be an illustration of my will but more like an unbi-



ased documentation of my observation..."<sup>6</sup>. These works not only indicate Rauschenberg's interest in what goes on outside his window, but also suggest the faulty wiring that short-circuits memory's connective power.

Variation on a theme, rather than rote duplication, held Rauschenberg's interest from the start. In a series of photographs taken in 1952 at the Rome flea market his interest in objects and scenes viewed in multiple (in this case shoes, wheels, glasses and mannequin legs) is evident. These works reveal the seeds of thematic obsessions, one of which is repetition itself. He also showed a loyalty to his chosen images; once they entered his work they were continually welcome. In this way he created his own personal encyclopedia of pictures,<sup>7</sup> and by mastering the process of

Francisco de Zurbarán  
*Saint Serapion*, 1628  
Oil on canvas  
47<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 40<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches  
Wadsworth Atheneum  
Hartford, Connecticut

Barbara Lloyd Dilley, Carolyn Brown, Merce Cunningham, Shareen Blair, and Viola Farber performing Merce Cunningham Dance Company's *Antic Meet*, 1958. Costume design by Rauschenberg.

6. Robert Rauschenberg, interview with Dorothy Seckler, December 21, 1965, transcript, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, <http://www.aaa.si.edu/>.

7. Charles Stuckey, "Rauschenberg's Everything Everywhere," in *Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective*, ed. Walter Hopps and Susan Davidson, exh. Cat. (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1997), p.32.

photographic silkscreen Rauschenberg would extend his reach to gain reproductive ease and flexibility while replicating images.

Images from art history occasionally join Rauschenberg's visual line-up as inspiration, subject or both. In 1958 he mentioned a reproduction of de Zurbarán's *Saint Serapion* that used to hang over his bed, "It was like the relation of a man to a sheet. He really looked as though he should be in bed—he may be dead but he looks as though he should be asleep."<sup>8</sup> Around the time this reproduction hung on his wall, Rauschenberg examined his own relationship to a sheet, pillow and quilt in *Bed*, 1955, a work which some viewers thought looked like "a bloody axe murder", although Rauschenberg was concerned someone might find it inviting and climb under the covers.<sup>9</sup> Fabric, which can make us think of domesticity, intimacy or fashion became a staple for him, as well as a means to merge color and form with movement. He designed many costumes for performance, such as the ruched white silk parachutes created for Merce Cunningham's *Antic Meet*, 1958; in Rauschenberg's hands the white cloth suggests aerial maneuvers. He also used hanging material in several set designs; and sheets or fabric have appeared in series such as the *Combines*, *Hoarfrosts*, *Spreads* and *Jammers*. The poet Frank O'Hara, who reviewed Rauschenberg's work in *Art News* and visited his studio,<sup>10</sup> was attracted to the same de Zurbarán painting. His poem *Meditations in an Emergency* includes the line, "St. Serapion, I wrap myself in the robes of your whiteness which is like midnight in Dostoevsky." The poet conflated the absence and presence of light, and suggested that a bright midnight can be as illegible as a dark one. O'Hara and Rauschenberg might flirt with the academic but preferred the everyday, and this poem seems to relate to, if not refer to, the competing and complementary relationship of Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* and *Black Paintings*.<sup>11</sup> Both men made work full of unexpected collisions between the playful and the serious, and this irreverent approach occasionally caused their creations to be met with "the friendly silence reserved for the thoroughly unacceptable guest."<sup>12</sup> A shared sensibility, as well as each artist's random viewing of a specific artwork, was a doubling of attraction and perception that feels natural in Rauschenberg's world.

8. "Artists with or against the past", *Art News*, Summer 1958, p.46.

9. Calvin Tomkins, *Off the Wall: A Portrait of Robert Rauschenberg* (1980: repr; New York: Picador, 2005), p.125-126.

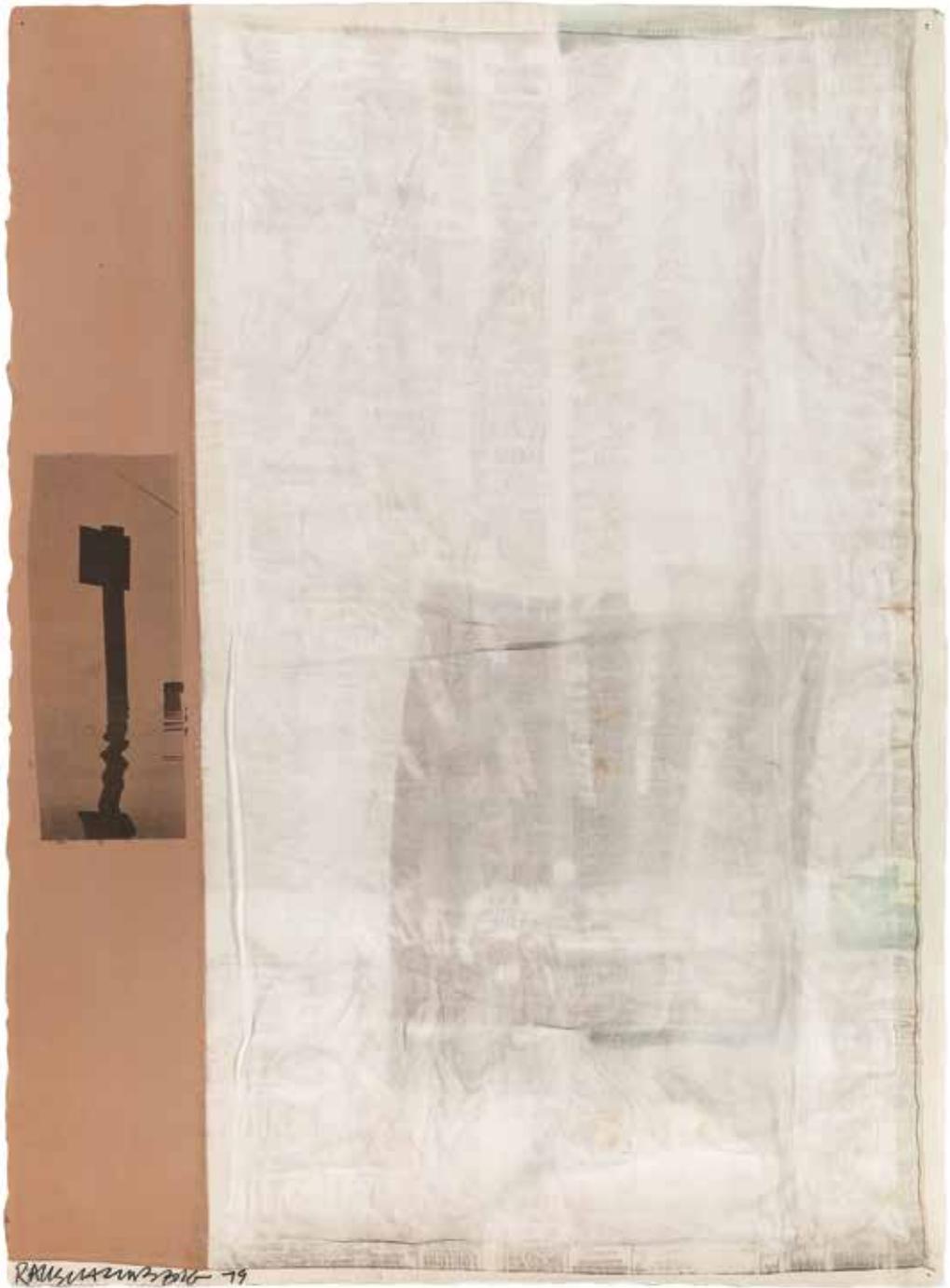
10. Joe LeSueur, *Digressions on Some Poems by Frank O'Hara* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2003), p.47. The author discusses visiting Rauschenberg's studio with Frank O'Hara in January 1955.

11. David White in conversation with the author, July 2014.

12. John Ashbery, introduction to *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, ed. Donald Allen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), vii.



*Ekto (Waterworks)*, 1995  
Inkjet dye transfer  
on paper  
31½ x 23¾ inches



*Night-road, 1979*  
Solvent transfer on fabric  
collaged to paper  
31<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 22<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> inches



Reflecting surfaces such as mirrors and mylar expand spatial ambiguities and possibilities exponentially. However, when using these materials, Rauschenberg didn't always present their reflective qualities directly. In *Minutiae*, 1954, he hangs a mirror on a string,

*Untitled*, 1987  
Shoeshine stand with mirror and  
mirrored Plexiglas  
24½ x 26 x 15 inches

*Untitled*, 1978  
Solvent transfer and  
collage on paper  
28 1/8 x 40 inches

creating an elusive shimmer moved by air currents, and in other works, such as *Charlene*, 1954, the mirror is splashed with paint, presenting a reflection that is organized by the painted drips. Even in the later *Borealis* series on bronze and copper made in 1990 and the *Night Shade* series on aluminum created in 1991, the facing world inhabits the surfaces only as indistinct, ghost-like and temporary shapes. A direct reflection would quickly reveal all, exchanging intimacy and wonder for a clarification of details; image would then become mere information. In the small sculpture *Untitled*, 1987, Rauschenberg transforms mirror,





mirrored Plexiglas and a shoeshine stand into an abstract comment on grooming and the labor that provides it. This work points out the many dimensions we inhabit and move through, as well as the varied roles we play, and also acknowledges small moments of vanity caught by the mirror as we glance at our shoes in its reflection. Rauschenberg

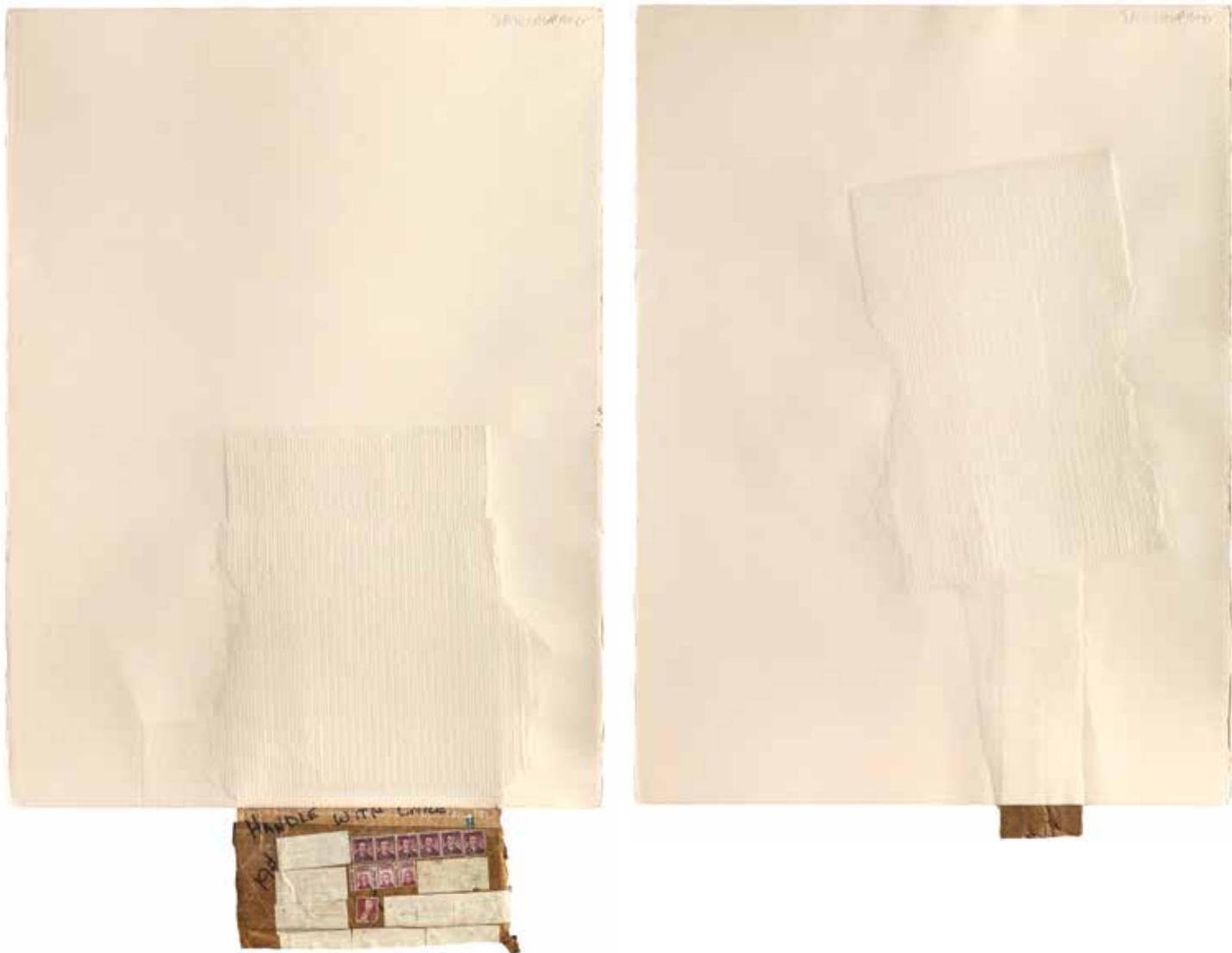
*Untitled, 1978*  
Solvent transfer, acrylic and  
collage on paper  
30 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 22 $\frac{3}{4}$  inches



*Untitled*, 1978  
Solvent transfer, acrylic,  
and collage on paper  
36½ x 30 inches

stripped conventional meaning from imagery, and allowed space and time to join concepts like form, color and size as “forms of intuition”.<sup>13</sup> By including space and time on his material list Rauschenberg could send out messages about the logistical possibilities of perception and sensory experience.

13. Paul Virilio, *The Vision Machine* (London: British Film Institute; and Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p.22.



During the first half of the 1970s Rauschenberg seemed equally absorbed with two different kinds of work. On the one hand he continued to employ his use of repeated imagery in the form of solvent transfer technique on paper and fabric, and on the other he was eager to examine the possibilities available in the naked materiality of cardboard and paper which led him to sandwich paper and cardboard together in multiple ways after



opposite page:  
*Untitled (Tablet Series)*, 1974  
Embossed paper, tape, and  
cardboard with stamps  
35<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 22<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches

*Untitled (Tablet Series)*, 1974  
Embossed paper and  
cardboard  
31<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 22<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches

above:  
*Untitled (Tablet Series)*, 1974  
Embossed paper and  
cardboard  
30 x 22<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches

he had experimented with them singly. The *Cardboard* series was made from cardboard boxes collected near his new Captiva studio as well as boxes gathered in New York City,<sup>14</sup> and shows him rising to the challenges of a pared down vocabulary. He explored cardboard's properties, such as their surfaces textured by human activity, and also created *Cardbirds* and *Tampa Clay Pieces*, two publishing projects that allowed him to explore cardboard's qualities as printed objects and clay sculpture multiples. While Rauschenberg continued his investigation

of "authentic" material in *Cardboards*, he also managed to explore the properties of trompe l'oeil, illusionistic sculpture and process with its emphasis on a material's changing physical state in the editioned *Cardbirds* and the deceptively "real" *Tampa Clay Pieces*. The late Walter Hopps pointed out Rauschenberg's relation to "the conceits and visual paradoxes"<sup>15</sup> of certain artists such as Charles Willson Peale, who was a naturalist, inveterate collector and dabbler in trompe l'oeil. Rauschenberg enjoyed visual highjinks, and the *Cardbirds* and the *Tampa Clay Pieces* allowed him to present one thing as another; the casual, cast off cardboard boxes became elaborately printed visuals, as well as fragile jokes. Kim Levin, writing in *Arts Magazine* in 1974, included the *Tampa Clay Pieces* as examples of how

14. Debbie Taylor and David White in conversation with the author, August 2014.

15. Walter Hopps, "Introduction: Rauschenberg's Art of Fusion" in *Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective*, ed. Walter Hopps and Susan Davidson, exh. Cat. (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1997), p.22.

the replication of readymade forms results in a “synthetic counterfeit of reality”.<sup>16</sup> However, although the *Tampa Clay Pieces* were a fitting illustration of that particular idea, slick replication was not Rauschenberg’s goal. By making an object that looks like cardboard but feels like clay, he allows the object to become an illusion, and gives his sculpture two roles. And by creating a nearly identical copy he seemed to want us to see the original more fully. It was a question of doing everything he could think of with cardboard as both subject and material.

Rauschenberg was eager to travel to the Middle East, and in the late 1960s he met Israel’s Foreign Minister Abba Eban, as well as Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan of Egypt. Both men invited him to visit their countries, however the Yom Kippur War broke out in October 1973 and he was not able to visit either. In the meantime he began his *Early Egyptian Series* made of cardboard boxes coated with glue and covered with sand or fabric. One sculpture, *Untitled (Early Egyptian)*, 1973, is a vertical stack of cardboard boxes of varied sizes covered in fabric. A pink pillow with pink polka dots reclines on top of this vertical sculpture, and day glo green reflects on the wall behind, emanating from the painted back of the boxes. The fabric wrapped sculpture may be reminiscent of Boris Karloff’s mummy or a side tower of an Egyptian temple pylon, but these are abstract works, a continuation of Rauschenberg’s intense focus on materials spurred on by making his own paper at Moulin à Papier Richard de Bas, a paper mill in France, which resulted in the editions *Pages* and *Fuses*, 1973-74.

In May 1974, six months after the Yom Kippur war ended, Rauschenberg was invited to visit the Israel Museum, and he travelled there to create his *Made In Israel* series consisting of six three-dimensional constructions named after the places where he collected desert sand. He also made five mixed-media drawings titled *Scriptures*. Returning to Captiva Island in June 1974 he produced the *Tablet Series* and *Pyramid Series*. His work done at this time reflected a continuing interest in process and a reliance on “the properties inherent to a specific material to compose the work, as though what was being tapped was nature as a readymade, instead of some aspect of culture.”<sup>17</sup> Except for the titles of the *Tablets Series* and *Pyramid Series* Rauschenberg studiously avoided the cultural and historical markers of the Middle East and focused on materials that can be found anywhere.

16. Kim Levin, “The Ersatz Object,” *Arts Magazine*, February 1974, p.55.

17. Rosalind E. Krauss, *Passages in Modern Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The MIT Press, 1988), p.272.



*Pyramid Series, 1974*  
Embossed paper and fabric  
Dimensions variable  
San Francisco Museum of  
Modern Art, San Francisco  
Purchase through a gift of  
Phyllis Wattis

One stimulus for work Rauschenberg created in the first half of the 1970s was his 1968 recreation of the *White Paintings* that were exhibited at the Castelli Gallery as a way to “establish the precedence of this body of work”.<sup>18</sup> Minimalism had gained recognition by the late 1960s and those who weren’t aware of these paintings were surprised by how prescient he had been to create the featureless surfaces in the 1950s. From the moment he began his first *White Paintings* in 1951, the series was seen as a conceptual act with no specific author needed; the execution of the work was secondary to the idea itself. Different artists, including Cy Twombly, had worked on the first series and Brice Marden prepared the 1968 series and remade the missing panels. When discussing the original *White Paintings*, curator Susan Davidson suggests that “No single interpretation of these works suffices”,<sup>19</sup> and whether the paintings are precursors of Minimalism or interactive “receptor” surfaces, Rauschenberg’s re-making of this group indicates that he still had something to learn from its surfaces and geometry. Therefore it’s not surprising that he used a flat, blank cream-colored surface in the *Tablet Series* and *Pyramid Series* that

18. Sarah Roberts, “White Painting (three panel)”, *Rauschenberg Research Project*, July 2013. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, [http://www.sfmoma.org/explore/collection/artwork/25855/essay/white\\_painting](http://www.sfmoma.org/explore/collection/artwork/25855/essay/white_painting).

19. Susan Davidson, “Early Work 1949-1954,” in *Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective*, ed. Walter Hopps and Susan Davidson, exh. Cat. (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1997), p.44.



seemed to refer to the “perceptual interdependency”<sup>20</sup> he had aimed for in the *White Paintings*. Even the paper bags he used in this time period, for instance in *Untitled*, 1973, with its red bag almost center stage and its small brown bag slid between the paper, have few identifying markers. At this moment Rauschenberg’s use of commercial material skewed toward the generic and anonymous, with the form and surface of the material or object taking precedence.

The printing press played an important role in the creation of work made during the 1970s, not only by transferring images, but also by pressing materials together and embossing. In the *Tablet Series* corrugated cardboard was sandwiched between sheets of paper

Installation view,  
Robert Rauschenberg studio,  
New York, February 1991.  
Works pictured:  
*White Painting* [two panel],  
*White Painting*, and *White  
Painting* [four panel], all 1951.

20. Ibid



*Untitled, 1973*  
Red and brown paper  
bags, glue, pencil, and  
paper collaged to paper  
33<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 26<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches

and then run through a press with sections of cardboard sometimes emerging from between the sheets. The *Pyramid Series* revealed its titular shape by the placement of a corner of a cheesecloth rag (salvaged from the print studio) between the smooth paper surfaces. These materials were then run through the press as well, with the ink stained rags hanging from the paper like elongated ghosts. Rauschenberg was concerned with the volatile political situation in the Mid-East, and while in Israel he visited Arab settlements and also met with Abba Eban and other Israeli officials such as Teddy Kollek and Shimon Peres.<sup>21</sup> But when he returned home he created work with an abstract vocabulary that is all light and texture. During a conversation in Israel, he remarked that the brilliant sunlight there eliminates perspective, and perhaps it was the blinding quality of the landscape, paired with his renewed interest in featureless surfaces, that guided the fabrication of these two series.<sup>22</sup> The imperfect and tattered materials add a flexibility and vulnerability to the smooth paper surfaces, and suggest the ancient culture of their subjects. Both the *Tablet Series* and *Pyramid Series*, with their focus on process and temporality, bring to mind Eva Hesse's forms made of fiberglass, polyester resin, latex and cheesecloth which she hung from the wall, ceiling

21. Robert S. Mattison, "Pyramid Series," *Rauschenberg Research Project*, July 2013. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, [http://www.sfmoma.org/explore/collection/artwork/25849/essay/pyramid\\_series](http://www.sfmoma.org/explore/collection/artwork/25849/essay/pyramid_series).  
22. Yona Fischer, *Ariel: A Quarterly Review of Arts and Letters in Israel*, Number 37, 1974, p.47.

or leaned on the wall, such as *Expanded Expansion* made by Hesse in 1969. A connection to Hesse is also visible in Rauschenberg's *Olympic (Lady Borden) Cardboard*, 1971, which shares a fragile geometry with Hesse's *Sans II*, 1968. His *Jammer* series created in 1975 and 1976 shares qualities with Hesse's work as well, in particular *Contingent* and *Aught* and *Augment*, all created in 1968.

During this time Rauschenberg continued to compare and contrast the nearly identical in works such as *Double Exposure*, 1973. Two similar compositions sit side by side with both identical and dissimilar images on top of paper bags (a favored material of his in the 1970s).

This work mimics the moment when the camera shutter clicks and clicks once more, as well as updates the concerns evident in *Factum I* and *II* with a less painterly, more photographic presence. In a time when speed trumps stability as our desired state, Rauschenberg may have felt compelled to point out that what we see is often accidental. And by repeating the same image time and again, perhaps he was noting the role of our past random sightings in the present and future. Time is a malleable concept in his work, and Rauschenberg's eagerness to reveal its dictates and then escape them suggests that he was also aiming to break free from "the confinement of individual subjectivity itself."<sup>23</sup>

Calvin Tomkins mentions "an unapologetic surface beauty"<sup>24</sup> which enters Rauschenberg's work in the 1970s; this is partially due to Rauschenberg's revelatory trip to India where he realized "that everything



Eva Hesse  
*Contingent*, November 1969  
Fiberglass, polyester resin,  
latex, cheesecloth  
138 x 248 x 43 inches  
(variable), 8 units  
National Gallery of Australia,  
Canberra

23. Branden Joseph, "Media Player," *Art Forum*, September 2008, XLVII, No. 1, p.440.

24. Tomkins, *Off the Wall: A Portrait of Robert Rauschenberg*, p.269.

is relative, that everything is acceptable, and that you don't have to be afraid of beauty, either."<sup>25</sup> But Tomkins also notes that "traces of the same fragile loveliness"<sup>26</sup> exist in earlier work. For instance, the combine *Pantomime*, 1961, with its tilted fans and expressionist paint job, has an unexpected tenderness and grace that emerges slowly and awkwardly. Perhaps since the early combines often included industrial objects and tough surfaces, their rough-hewn presence didn't always allow view-



*Pantomime*, 1961  
Combine: oil, enamel,  
paper, fabric, wood, metal,  
and rubber wheel on  
canvas with electric fans  
84 x 60 x 20 inches

ers to see past the materials into the atmosphere and idea. In the 1970s Rauschenberg assigned himself a difficult task, and used fabric whose beauty was evident to create the *Hoarfrost* series, titled with a word he read years earlier when illustrating *Dante's Inferno*. Rauschenberg transferred the everyday onto the silky or translucent fabric, and by giving prosaic images an ethereal or glamorous backdrop, made us look at them again. In *Sulphur Bank (Hoarfrost)*, 1975, Rauschenberg joins Kodak logos printed on cardboard with transfer images of the prosaic (a stove, a mailbox), the exotic (Egyptian reliefs and men in dugout canoes), the literary (*Hi and Lois* cartoons), and gears which add an elegant toughness. The Kodak box also announces its previous content, 8 millimeter movie film, suggesting that these visual combinations aren't meant to be still. The combination of a printing press with chiffon, satin and silk may suggest a struggle between hard and soft, but in this series it is the machine that allows imagery to float as well as achieve transparency. The images rarely emerge fully, and sometimes are not still, reflecting

25. Mary Lynn Kotz, *Rauschenberg/Art and Life* (New York: Abrams, 2004), p.206.

26. Tomkins, *Off the Wall: A Portrait of Robert Rauschenberg*, p.270.



*Sulphur Bank (Hoarfrost)*, 1975  
Solvent transfer on fabric, with  
cardboard and paper bag  
65 x 35 inches



*Stacks (Hoarfrost)*, 1975  
Solvent transfer and  
collage on cloth  
49<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 24 inches

the temporary state of nature Dante writes of in Canto 24 in his *Inferno*, "In that part of the young year...when hoarfrost mimes the image of his white sister upon the ground."

For Rauschenberg poetry and myth became vehicles for examining "the aesthetic instant where the past and present meet."<sup>27</sup> His illustrations of *Dante's Inferno* in 1959 were not only a bid to be taken seriously as an artist, but more importantly a structure and subject to keep him going.<sup>28</sup> Arcadia, the unspoiled wilderness that has allowed artists since ancient times to imagine what advice an idealized past can give the imperfect present, became another way for Rauschenberg to examine a landscape which exists in reality as well as the imagination. In his *Spread* series he gave himself a chance to revisit the combine form and his personal lexicon. And in *Arcadian Survey (Spread)*, familiar objects, such as a sheet, reflective surfaces, a light, and polka-dotted material, appear in a neat geometric layout. An image of two athletes, a role Rauschenberg gave his heroes in *Dante's Inferno*, as well as pictures of unidentifiable urban and rural scenes and advertisements, suggest our chaotic present may be the only idyll available for both the amateur thinker and the philosopher. In this *Spread* Rauschenberg once again decides two is better than one, and presents nude women as well as athletes in tandem. Other works in this series, such as *Sea Cow Treaty (Spread)* also display doubled objects, such as twin faucets and buckets.

Rauschenberg combined mediums and media "into amalgams that would exist simultaneously within all the media they straddled—and at the same time none."<sup>29</sup> His multi-dimensional approach, paired with his penchant for multiplying images, allows his work to sidestep any attempt to put it in its place. Perhaps his vocabulary of the everyday exists for him like a circle or a rectangle would for another artist; however his forms have something extra—a utilitarian history. To take these objects, which we use daily, repeat them, and allow them to lose their meaning, creates a conceptual dislocation but also releases us. We are freed from the pressures of conventional linear narrative, aesthetic gerrymandering and "the grammar of the cliché."<sup>30</sup> Rauschenberg organized the ultimate jailbreak, pushing the door open so we could run out after him. ■

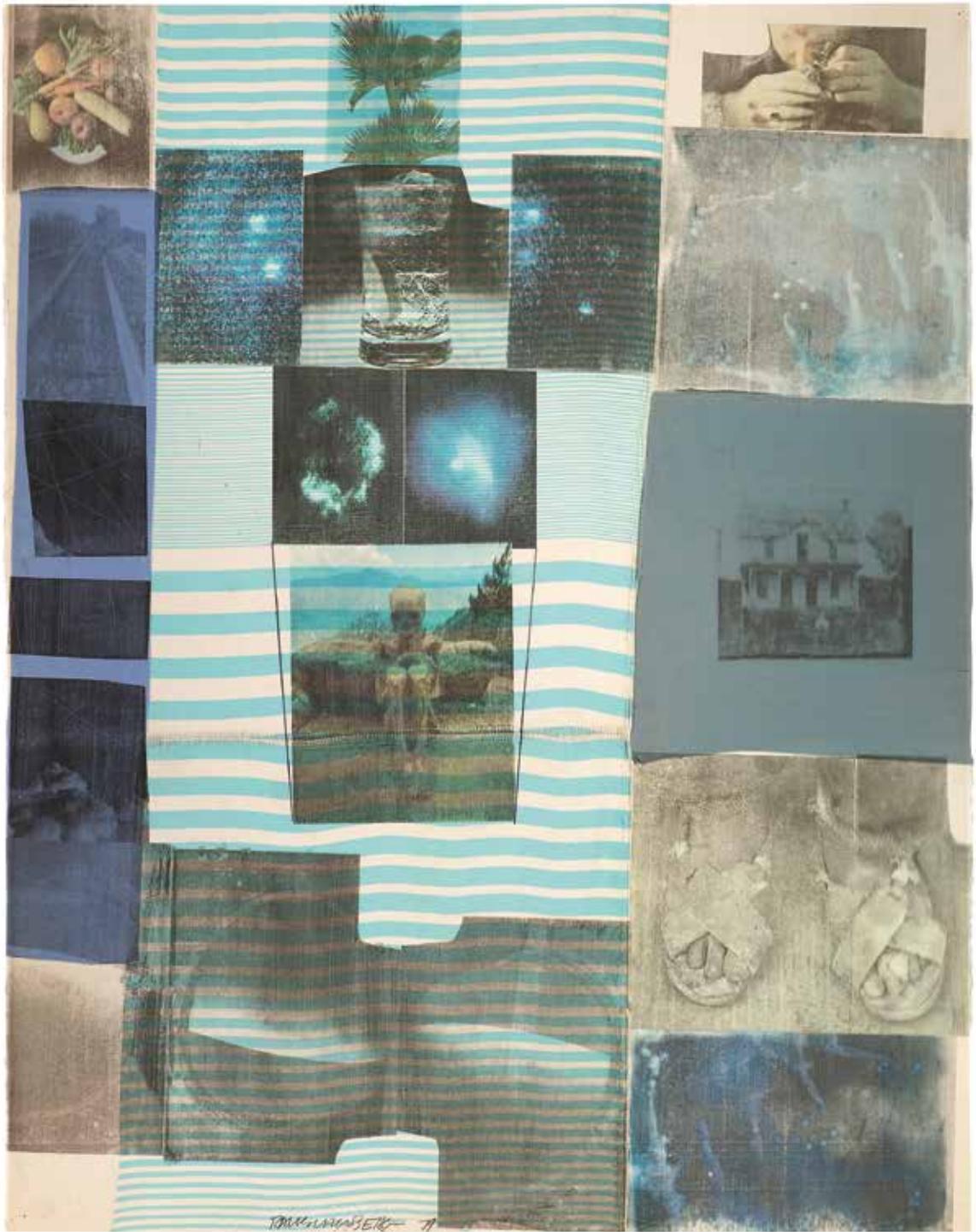
opposite page:  
*Coven*, 1979  
Solvent transfer on fabric  
collaged to paper  
47 x 36½ inches

27. Bernice Rose, *Arcadian Retreats* (New York: PaceWildenstein, 1997), n.p.

28. Tomkins, *Off the Wall: A Portrait of Robert Rauschenberg*, p.144.

29. Joseph, "Media Player," p.440.

30. Rosalind Krauss, "Perpetual Inventory," in *Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective*, ed. Walter Hopps and Susan Davidson, exh. Cat. (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1997), p.220.





## Exhibition Checklist

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*Untitled*, ca.1959

Combine: tin can, pocket watch  
and chain  
3<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 2<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 3 inches  
Thomas H. Lee and Ann Tenenbaum

*Untitled*, 1973

Red and brown paper bags, glue, pencil,  
and paper collaged to paper  
33<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 26<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches

*Untitled (Tablet Series)*, 1974

Embossed paper and cardboard  
31<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 22<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches

*Untitled (Tablet Series)*, 1974

Embossed paper, tape, and cardboard  
with stamps  
35<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 22<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches

*Untitled (Tablet Series)*, 1974

Embossed paper and cardboard  
30 x 22<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches

*Stacks (Hoarfrost)*, 1975

Solvent transfer and collage on cloth  
49<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 24 inches

*Sulphur Bank (Hoarfrost)*, 1975

Solvent transfer on fabric, with  
cardboard and paper bag  
65 x 35 inches

*Arcadian Survey (Spread)*, 1977

Solvent transfer and collage on fabric  
collaged to wood with mirrored panels  
84 x 260 x 14<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> inches  
Private collection

*Untitled*, 1978

Solvent transfer and collage on paper  
28<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 40 inches

*Untitled*, 1978

Solvent transfer, acrylic, and collage  
on paper  
36<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 30 inches

*Untitled*, 1978

Solvent transfer, acrylic, and collage  
on paper  
30<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 22<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches

*Coven*, 1979

Solvent transfer on fabric collaged  
to paper  
47 x 36<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> inches

*Night-road*, 1979

Solvent transfer on fabric collaged  
to paper  
31<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 22<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> inches

*Scance (Slide)*, 1979

Solvent transfer on fabric collaged  
to paper  
60 x 40 inches

*Untitled*, 1987

Shoeshine stand with mirror and  
mirrored Plexiglas  
24<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 26 x 15 inches

*Ekto (Waterworks)*, 1995

Inkjet dye transfer on paper  
31<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 23<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches  
Robert Jakob

*Untitled*, 2008

Patinated and painted bronze  
4<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 11<sup>13</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 3<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches  
Edition of 5; 0/5

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BBC

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