

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG



Ed Chappell, *Robert Rauschenberg in his Captiva Drive studio, Florida, 2000*. Courtesy Robert Rauschenberg Foundation. All images ©Robert Rauschenberg Foundation.

by Charlotte Kent

Rauschenberg's photography is far too little known. Looking at his oeuvre, photography is everywhere present and yet rarely acknowledged. It gets dismissed as handmaiden to the paintings, the combines, the sculptures, the prints, the magazine covers, set designs, posters, films, or the global rights campaigns that he championed. If people knew that he studied photography at Black Mountain College, that gets dismissed for a supposed preference for painting. The early works—the travel photos with Cy Twombly or the blueprints and abstractions—may inspire some recognition, but too few know about his not-quite-documentary project *In + Out of Cities* (1979-81) or realize how he pushed the medium, as evident in works like the 100-foot long seamless photo collage *Chinese Summerhall* (1983). As many critics have argued, Rauschenberg's practice was forever flattening the hierarchies among media and refusing the primacy of content or form. Photography was not only a means to some end, but also an opportunity for continuous creative exploration.

Rauschenberg not only mixed media, but also collaborated with others across his career, and it was the invitation from Trisha Brown in 1979 to produce the set design (and costumes) for her first performance on a proscenium stage, *Glacial Decoy*, that sent him back to photography. The eighteen-minute dance showcased 620 of his photographs. Each image was projected for four seconds across four panels, and so he may have remembered how early in his career, imbued perhaps with a Borgesian spirit, he had wanted to photograph America foot by foot.

Decades later, he traveled across the country, by car and with an assistant, to document six major cities: Baltimore, MD; Boston, MA; Charleston, SC; Fort Myers, FL; Los Angeles, CA; and New York City, which he had left in 1970 for Captiva Island, FL. Some see this work in line with Robert Frank, but as Clifford Ackey wrote in the introductory essay for *Photos In + Out of City Limits Boston*, many of the most successful images among the hundreds of photos that Rauschenberg took are not clearly identifiable sites.¹ Rauschenberg himself said:

"The photos in 'In + Out City Limits' make no attempt to totally document, moralize or editorialize the specific locations. They are a collection of selected provocative facts (at least to me) that are the results of my happening to be there."

There is nothing stereotyping in these photographs. They seem less like a summary of each metropolis and more about encouraging attention to its textures, materials, shadows.

There is something wrong about describing the photograph of an upright tire to the right of a loading dock edged with rippling material, bits of detritus scattered like confetti on the ground, as such. The photograph is about texture and shape and pattern. The soft gray tones allow the eye to roam. Such an image could be anywhere, not particular to Boston. But, in the hustle and bustle of the city, who looks? If the notion of urban photography had been to capture its industrial modernity, Rauschenberg cultivates something else. His 1952 photographs of the markets in Rome and Marrakesh sought out the unusual, playing with the tourist gaze; his

¹Clifford Ackey, introductory essay *Photos In + Out of City Limits Boston*. ULAE, NY 1981

eye across America, nearly three decades later, asks viewers to see the country for themselves.

Rauschenberg may have become an iconic American artist when he won the Grand Prize at the 1964 Venice Biennial, unconditionally confirmed in 1976 when he was heralded the country's Citizen Artist for the bicentennial, but his relationship to the nation was ever in development. A series of lithographs as a part of the NASA Art Program reveal a commitment to trying to understand a nation whose policies he often found objectionable. Given complete access, his final works combined photographs, text, maps, and drawing in a series now known as *Stoned Moon*. It satisfied the NASA program, which invited him to return whenever he wanted, but a more critical eye can interpret uncertainty collaged alongside excitement.

Roger Scruton once claimed that a photographer could have no individual style since the camera merely captured what was there, no matter how abstract the image seems to the viewer. Such a claim rejected photography as an art. The philosopher Nigel Warburton refuted that conclusion, offering another way of understanding the work of the photographer: if style is made apparent within individual paintings, in photography it becomes evident in series. Rauschenberg's combinatorial style is unmistakable, recognized across media. But that essence of collage is there within individual photographs, the layering of objects and shadows, the playing with reflections and depth. His patience with the process reveals the texture of the moment.

Attempts to construct meaning become quickly irrelevant. The bicycle, for example, as complete image or shadow or wheel or structural object, reappears so frequently in his work that it sheds any symbolic reflection on modernity or postmodern nod to Duchamp. Even if the same photograph of a bicycle returns (often the one taken in Charleston, South Carolina), the image adopts different connotations across works and it becomes silly if not the worst academic single-mindedness to insist on associating them all. The same is true of chairs, sails, umbrellas, wheels, birds, feet... just when the semiotics seem to align, another variation appears and the certainty of meaning dissolves. Imaginative associations offer far greater potential engagement for his art, but then there is his political work that disavows such efforts to decontextualize.

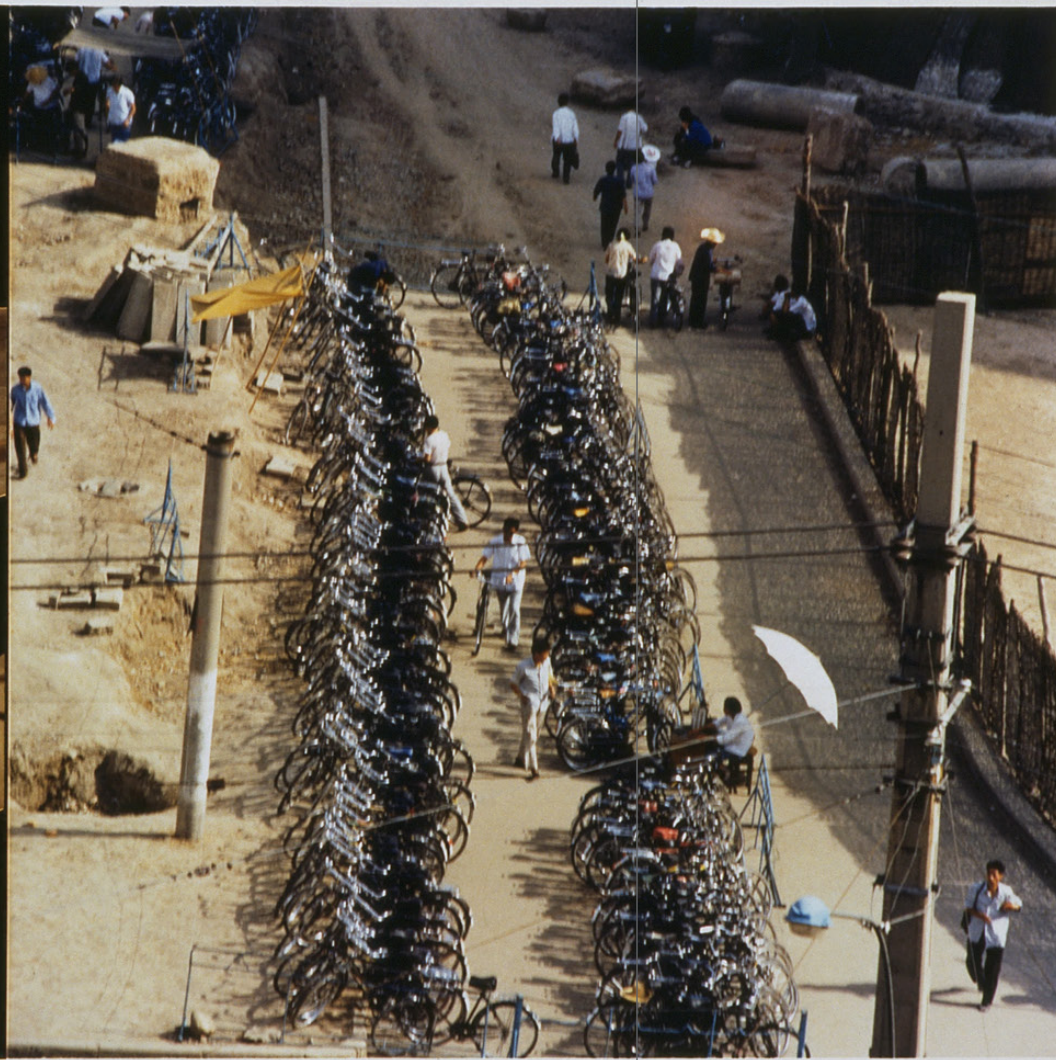
At the end of his time producing *In + Out City Limits*, he wrote a statement on photography. Written in his typical capital letters on ruled paper, he spells out what matters:

"... Mine is the need to be where it will always never be the same again; a kind of archeology in time only forcing one to see what ever [sic] the light or the darkness touches, and care. My concern is to move at a speed within which to act. Photography is the most direct communication in nonviolent contacts." Of course the man whose early self-portrait involved sitting in a chair double exposed with an image of a tree would have cared about the planet and the lives of people on it. His photography contributed to many political posters. In 1970, he created the inaugural Earth Day poster for the American Environment Foundation. In 1983, another poster, *World Artists against Apartheid*, evokes his 1981 *Photem* series, totemic works of black and white photographs. In 1985, he provided a poster for nuclear disarmament, *Disarming Images: Art for Nuclear Disarmament*.

That same year he launched the Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Exchange (ROCI). He committed his lens and travelled widely over the next five years: Mexico, Chile, Venezuela, China, Tibet, Japan, Cuba, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), Malaysia, and Germany. For ROCI USA, he transferred many of the photographs taken for *In + Out City Limits* into the overlapping colorful collage silkscreens

Robert Rauschenberg, *From the Bleacher Series: Chinese Tree*, 1988.





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Robert Rauschenberg, *Studies for Chinese Summerhall #II*, 1984.



of the ROCI series. A show at the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. in 1991 presented many of the works, but Rauschenberg ensured that exhibits also occurred in the country where the photographs originated. As he stated during the presentation in Tibet:

"I feel strong in my beliefs, based on my varied and widely traveled collaborations, that a one-to-one contact through art contains potent peaceful powers and is the most non-elitist way to share exotic and common information, seducing us into creative mutual understandings for the benefit of all."

At the same time, he was still experimenting. The *Bleachers* series (1988-90) used bleach on Polaroid prints, a twist on the method of his infamous *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953). In many of his works, negative and positive images are interchangeable, dark and light, black and white in play rather than tension. The somberness of the 1991 *Night Shade* series takes photography across multiple material instantiations: "Photograph images are silkscreened with clear varnish and acrylic ink onto brushed or mirrored aluminum panels that have been treated with the corrosive tarnish Aluma Black."² They vary in size, but *Heroes/Sheroes* is more than seven by fourteen feet and engulfing. The sweeping erasure marks across all the images in the series have none of the humor of *Erased deKooning*, but feel like post-apocalyptic memories. The ghostly *Phantom* series, of the same year, include recognizable motifs and designs, suggesting that the process was the significant effort in these works. And, as if that were not sufficiently prolific, in 1991 he also designed three lithographs to raise awareness for environmental issues that were displayed on city buses across the United States.

As the art critic Calvin Tompkins wrote, Rauschenberg always wanted to work with materials, "rather than to have them work for him."³ Rauschenberg's later work reveal the kind of visual ease that only comes from a constant practice. Since 1992, he had been producing digital color prints, but in 2002 (the same year he had a stroke and lost the ability to work with his right hand) his process included transferring the pigment ink onto polylaminate, the images in grid formations. White space frequently remains, permitting breathing room. They are witty, sensitive, fascinating compositions. How to interpret *Rehab* (2005)? *Tzar* (2006) is a celebration of flamingo pink and dirty white that defies meaning, unless you happen to love your dog above all else. *Historic Detour* (2006) is a horizontal cross of six photographs on a white background; it starts on the far left with an image of a garage branded with parking signs, leads via a sphinx whose paw almost drops the horizontal line, into a vertical expansion of three photographs and culminates in a weather vane. One is inclined to read into it the fullness of childhood, the critical rejection of his photography show in Italy and subsequent poverty living in New York, followed by the explosion of his success a dozen years later. If it plays with biography, there is humility and humor here.

Arne Glimcher of Pace Gallery described Rauschenberg as "pollinating everything."⁴ His layering technique surpassed the surrealist experimentation and made it normal, a common ploy for anyone who regularly uses Photoshop. His use of text— a standard in postmodern graphic design. His application of color— a feature of many Instagram filters. His early visualizations have become the iconography of the digital age. That makes the simplicity of his later works all the more interesting. The curator Charles Stuckey described the second half of the twentieth century as the "Rauschenberg Era" [sic], and though

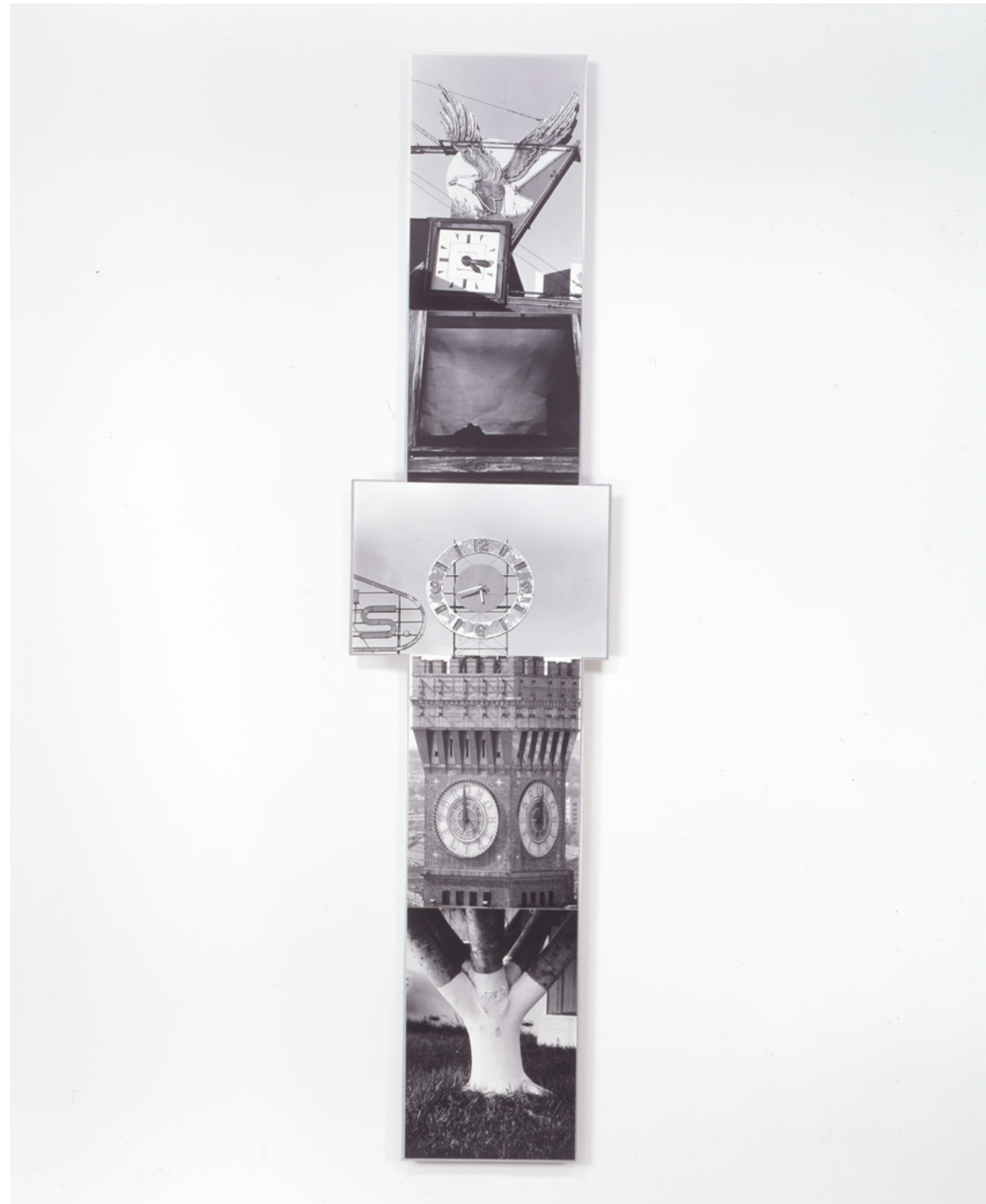
Robert Rauschenberg, Top: *Catydid Express (Scenario)*, 2002; Bottom: *Historic Detour (Scenario)*, 2006.

²Rauschenberg Foundation. <https://www.rauschenbergfoundation.org/art/series/night-shade>

³Calvin Tompkins "Off The Wall" 79

⁴Arne Glimcher in the BBC documentary, Robert Rauschenberg: Pop Art Pioneer.

there are many artists influenced by Rauschenberg, so has his eye impacted how many others see. Hans Namuth photographed numerous artists at work and Rauschenberg is no exception. A 1971 black and white snapshot shows Rauschenberg at work with a scraper, an infant in a seat on the table watching the artist who is looking back at him. Art and life are fluid for Rauschenberg and his photography spans from traditional portraiture to remarkable innovation. When the glut of photography makes many forget its potent, Rauschenberg's work reminds us both to look at the world with greater care and to lighten up a little, to always keep working on what matters but never forget to stop and admire what is already there.



Robert Rauschenberg, Above: Photem Series I #9, 1981; Opposite: Poster for World Artists Against Apartheid, 1983.

