

“Committing The Perfect Crime:” Sexuality, Assemblage and the Postmodern Turn in American Art

Should Love Come First?, among Robert Rauschenberg’s earliest collages (Fig.1), is a Rauschenberg image like no other. First, it exists only as a single photograph since the actual work, dating from early in 1951, was over-painted by Rauschenberg into one of his celebrated *Black Paintings*. By that act, we can assume Rauschenberg didn’t like the picture enough to keep as it was. Second, it is unique in the artist’s oeuvre because it is melodramatic, confessional and by and large legible according to a singular thematic—the thematic that gives it its title, ripped from the pages of a magazine: “my problem, should love come first?” Many works by Rauschenberg were broadly expressive, but none would ever again so blatantly, even aggressively trumpet an autobiographical theme. Moreover, I suggest, *Should Love Come First?* can be understood as a textbook example of why, in time, the medium of assemblage would prove vastly preferable, for Rauschenberg, to simple collage.

That *Should Love Come First?* is indeed profoundly autobiographical a cursory examination of Rauschenberg’s life at the time makes clear. In June of 1950, Rauschenberg married an art school classmate, Susan Weil. In February of 1951, he met yet another fellow student, Cy Twombly, at the Art Student’s League in New York and they became lovers.¹ About three months later, beginning May 14th and ending June 2, 1951, *Should Love Come First?* was exhibited for the first time in Rauschenberg’s first one-person show at the Betty Parson’s Gallery. On July 16, 1951, a little more than a month after the Parson show closed, Rauschenberg and Weil’s son, Christopher, was born. That same month, Rauschenberg and Twombly decamped for Black Mountain College--without Susan and without Christopher. When his wife and son rejoined him there a few weeks later, Weil quickly decided to leave and separate from her husband. They divorced the following year.²

Should Love Come First? obliquely references these tumultuous changes in Rauschenberg’s emotional life and the fraught weighing of eros and paternal responsibility the painting’s title signals.³ It prominently featured an imprint of

Rauschenberg's foot contiguous with a collaged dance studio progressive waltz diagram delineating the male position; together they constitute a male/male waltz.⁴ Next to the same-sex waltz is a diagram mapping time changes relative to Washington, DC, a pictorialization of the measurement of difference from a presumed governing standard—a lovely analog of Rauschenberg's increasingly self-conscious straying from the standard of heteronormativity.⁵ The number 8 is repeatedly thematized, both circled on the diagram and written into the maze itself 8 times—perhaps like the 1/1 at the top right corner, a visualization of the conjunction of identical forms, seemingly another oblique pictorialization of the attraction of same to same. Finally, in the lower right, continuing the theme, two postage-like cancellations form a lateral 8, annulling the conjoined pair of identical images, as if by hostile decree.

Obviously, all these materials operate at the level of loose analogy; certainly this picture has never before been interpreted in terms of a same-sex relationship—indeed, it has never been interpreted at all. But it's more than likely that when when Weil visited Black Mountain with Christopher, she discovered Twombly and Rauschenberg living together and the talk of the community. We know this latter because of a remarkable exchange of letters between poet Charles Olson, the director of Black Mountain College and his friend and fellow poet Robert Creeley.⁶ In a dramatic letter dated January 29, 1952, Olson describes seeing Rauschenberg out in the middle of the lake at Black Mountain and Twombly gently trying to call him to shore.⁷ In a second letter two days later, Olson returned to the incident.

'No one still knows know (sic) he came to be out in the lake waters, whether he just ran in (he is such a runner, like, a girl ...) whether he--conceivably-- (...) went for a swim (...); or plain set out to go down (since I wrote you, Con [Olson's wife] picked up that, he is in the black, just now, his marriage smashing, probably over the affair with Twombly, his contract with his gallery not renewed, and--I'd also bet as an added hidden factor--the terrible pressure on him of the clear genius of this lad, Twombly, the success of his year and the total defeat of Bob's.)⁸

Months after it first became a template for that alloy of autobiography and art that has characterized his work ever since, "the problem" stated in *Should Love Come First?*, continued to haunt the artist. Even after electing love and a life with Twombly, Rauschenberg's abandonment of his family continued to trouble him--or so Olson

himself believed.⁹ As Rauschenberg famously wrote in 1959, “Painting relates to both art and life. Neither can be made. (I try to act in the gap between the two.)”¹⁰ In insisting, as I do, on the literalness of this statement, it follows that Rauschenberg’s life will inevitably surface in his art, less as a representation (after all, it cannot be made) than as a profound influence on its material means.

Two circumstances testify to how powerfully life marked the aesthetic choices Rauschenberg made. The first is that Rauschenberg overpainted *Should Love Come First?*, the sole known instance in which one of the paintings shown at Parsons was so modified. Other images from that exhibition were destroyed—not a single painting sold—but this is the only one conserved, albeit through a paradoxical erasure, exactly the kind of *sous rature* gesture of citing through negating that Jasper Johns, Rauschenberg’s subsequent partner, would make his own through the device of a conspicuous crossing out of personal content, including his signature.¹¹

The second piece of evidence is actually not by Rauschenberg at all, but a 1955 Jasper Johns painting called *Tango* (Fig. 2) made shortly after he became involved with Rauschenberg. The blue field contains a hidden assemblage element, a working music box with only its turnkey emerging through the canvas. Though entitled *Tango*, the music box was altered to make simple plinking sounds.¹² Johns’ *Tango* evokes Rauschenberg’s earlier waltz in *Should Love Come First?*, Rauschenberg’s original pictorial evocation of his new love for Twombly now fittingly picked up by Johns in reference to his new love for Rauschenberg.¹³

But, as I suggested, *Should Love Come First?* represents a road not taken, in that it stands as a largely coherent entity in which diverse collage materials all serve the titular thematic. Unlike Rauschenberg’s later combines, the two-dimensional collage materials Rauschenberg selects quickly lose their identity and history outside the picture plane and come to function more or less exclusively pictorially. In this sense, *Should Love Come First?* is much more a traditional collage than the combines Rauschenberg would subsequently pioneer. The key, albeit subtle difference between these two modes is that in collage, initially flat materials are very easily domesticated pictorially, willing to be reengineered to serve new pictorial purposes largely severed from their original functions, their formal utility to the composition as a whole easily trumping their object

nature. This is not to say that the collage materials do not betray an extra-pictorial origin—their autonomous sign quality is rarely so completely circumscribed by the new pictorial context (for example, that timetable from Washington is still clearly a found object)—but they do not insist on their original identity, context or utility. In short, as already flat elements easily married to the support and each other, the collage elements in *Should Love Come First?* barely resist Rauschenberg's pictorial repurposing.

However, in works like *Minutiae* (1954)(Fig. 3), one of Rauschenberg's earliest combines, the assemblage elements seem more self-sufficient, able to resist or at least amend forced pictorialization. The cloth strips, torn newspapers, a fragment of a balustrade, a lace panel and a mirror continue to carry traces of their original function and extra-pictorial existence, rupturing any pure pictoriality. They do so in part because of the untraditional support, which, existing in three dimensions, resists integrating the found objects into the historically elastic space of the picture plane. As well, the scrunched and haphazard placement of the assemblage elements, their seemingly rough handling, reinforces their object quality: a newspaper so manhandled as to be unreadable transforms from information to rubbish and a piece of silk dripped with paint insistently resists its potential two-dimensionality and becomes a thing. That some assemblage elements like the mirror and cloth strips twist and turn in the breeze and that the support becomes transparent in places—revealing the wall or person behind it—further imbues the assemblage with a quality of aleatory possibility, defying authorial control even as we acknowledge the artist who made it. In comparison to *Should Love Come First?*, these assemblage elements are vastly less authorial, in that they exist in ways that exceed or even eclipse any construction of authorial intention.

Rauschenberg's increasing exploitation of the ontological resistance of assemblage throughout the period he was involved with Johns suggests something fundamental about the development and direction of his art away from normative expressions of authorial intent and towards a growing investment in camouflaging or cloaking the author as mediator of meaning. All works by Rauschenberg are of course authored, but that they dissimulate on their point of origin, on the question of their status as expressive objects, is very much to the point. Despite the claim, implicit in the title of one of his published statements, that he is guided by what he has famously called

“random order,” the stress in the contemporary critical literature—Branden Joseph’s eponymous recent book is only the latest example—has repeatedly lain on the random, not the order.¹⁴ It has been theoretically far more enticing, even bracing, to find in Rauschenberg a proto-postmodernist cheerfully abandoning intentionality and openly embracing the free play of signification than imagining a purposeful and deeply intentional self-closeting intent on covering all traces of authoriality lest the query posed in *Should Love Come First?* should indeed emerge as the artist’s problem.¹⁵ My central claim is that Rauschenberg’s work is always and everywhere both intentional and not, authorial and not, and it is the gap between these two incommensurable frames that he references when he says. “Painting relates to both art and life. Neither can be made. (I try to act in the gap between the two.)”

Perfect Crimes

Given his *sous rature* rewording of *Should Love Come First?* in black paint, Rauschenberg may have ultimately recognized--and with some discomfort--that the collage elements in that painting were in the final analysis too pictorial—which is to say too given to meaning only within and through *his* clearly authorial framing of this image. They betray an inescapably controlling hand, and thus--dangerously given the homoerotic subject-matter and the historical context--point back to an author, to Rauschenberg himself. Though coded and complex, *Should Love Come First?* nonetheless invokes its maker, made all the more noticeable by the pointed title with its clear possessive—“my problem.” Even to the uninitiated, it seems evocative of a set of authorial investments. What precisely Rauschenberg means here may not be clear, but that he means something, that the picture is organized around seeding signification, is evident. In short, as in much collage, the image seems expressive, which is to say that its meaning stands mediated by an intending authorial consciousness, even if it does not fully cohere for the viewer.

Rauschenberg’s new understanding of the risk of authorial self-exposure may help to clarify the logic of his choices in the series of works that immediately follow *Should Love Come First?*. The *White Paintings* (1951) and then *Black Paintings* (1951) make crystal clear that Rauschenberg’s investment in any markedly authorial art making was short-lived. In a letter to his dealer Betty Parson urging a showing of the *White Paintings*,

Rauschenberg specifically disclaimed his authorial voice—saying, “They are not mine: Today is their creator.”¹⁶ Even his titles became flatly, blandly descriptive, emptied of any referentiality beyond the merely formal. When these paintings were finally exhibited, they were interpreted by critics as nihilistic, as a joke, as a Dada gesture, as, in Cage's words, “airports for light and shadow.”¹⁷ What wasn't often noticed was that the paintings were also the absolute inverse of Abstract Expressionism in terms of mood, surface and color; a pure anti-expressionism, about the size of Abstract Expressionist canvases, but so without autographic or gestural content of any kind that Rauschenberg decreed they could be painted by others, using a roller and house paint. So difficult was it to conceive of a non-authorial art at the time that it was a fellow artist, Alan Kaprow, who really understood them, writing later in *Art News*: “In the context of Abstract Expressionist noise and gesture, they suddenly brought one face to face with a numbing, devastating silence... It threw the responsibility of art onto the spectator.”¹⁸ In these works, Rauschenberg finally approached an absolute fleeing of expressivity.

And yet, almost immediately after Rauschenberg met Jasper Johns, he discarded this hard-won goal, abandoning the negating procedures (erasure, emptiness, absence), the aleatory technique, even the flatly banal titling of works like *Erased De Kooning, White, Black, Tissue Paper, Gold and Dirt* paintings--all of which had followed in quick succession once the decision to leave behind the expressivity of *Should Love Come First?* was made. Throughout exactly the span of his relationship with Johns, the winter of 1953/54 through the winter of 1961/62, Rauschenberg turned to the combines, richly colored and evocatively painted assemblages that seemed to celebrate a range of formal cognates for emotion, such as drips, splashes, and gestural brushwork—precisely those pictorial aspects the earlier black and white works so rigorously eschewed. Tellingly, even Rauschenberg's titles became much more expressive and emotive, from the vague suggestiveness of *Red Import* (1954) or *Yoicks* (1954) to the explicit evocation of pictorial messaging in *Decoder, Allegory* and of course his famous *Rebus* (1955). Still, importantly, this ostensible return to a more traditionally expressive, authorial art results in assemblages so seemingly without coherent pictorial statements that the titles have instead been taken as mocking our desire to read Rauschenberg expressively.¹⁹

Despite their expressive handling, the combines do *seem* mere aggregations of materials, lacking the clearly controlling and selecting sensibility of *Should Love Come First?* Materials pile on top of other materials, their legibility interrupted through cutting, dripped and brushed paint, or other materials collaged on top of them—in a way seemingly more aleatory than intentional.²⁰ There appears no particular necessity for the choice of this or that object or image, which is of course to say that they evince no particularly authorial consciousness at all. In short, combines like *Minutiae* do seem random, but let there be no doubt that this *pretence* of the absence of authorial intention—for, as we will see, it was nothing more than that—is very much itself authorial. At the symposium accompanying the *Art of Assemblage* show at the MOMA in 1961, Rauschenberg said to William Seitz, the exhibition’s organizer:

“Also, being a good artist is like committing the perfect crime--you don't get caught.

William Seitz: I'm talking about crimes you get caught for.

Rauschenberg: That's not art.”²¹

My point is that assemblage is the perfect medium for committing the perfect crime, the one where you do not get caught—caught in authoriality, intentionality, or worse still, self revelation, not least when the subject in question includes desires actively persecuted under conventional social codes. It was in fact the need not to get caught that animated Rauschenberg’s development of the combines in the first place, as he explicitly told a collector who was buying his first combine, mentioning that it was painted at a time of passion for a friend--exactly the same time, in short, he was becoming involved with Johns.²² It’s important to remember that this relationship was then a literal crime in every state of the union, and indeed, the necessity of not getting caught, of avoiding being charged with a crime, governed the creation of a number of coded sign systems—linguistic, sartorial, even literal.²³ Importantly, this “not getting caught” equally describes his evasion of epistemological systems, and that the two are conjoined for Rauschenberg is very much to the point.

In order to commit the perfect crime, the inherent instability of assemblage and its epistemological multivalence was highly useful, especially towards counterbalancing the

authorial hand, for it could mean so many things at once. But this same plurality of meanings also enabled different of lines of communication to be sent out to different audiences, including the self-conscious secreting of some highly privatized meanings directed to a very narrow audience, an audience sometimes no larger than one individual. Here is one example, a case of an almost perfect crime:

It is a single collaged comic strip frame, no more than four inches square, lost in a field of other collage elements in the bottom right corner of *Minutiae*. There's no question it is hard to spot, and Rauschenberg must have felt fairly secure it would not be seen, or if seen, not understood. Created as a part of a traveling stage set for Merce Cunningham's dance company, *Minutiae* was more prop than art object in any case, at least in 1954--something designed to be seen from the audience, or moved past at dance speed. But as Rauschenberg was completing *Minutiae* he was also becoming romantically involved with Johns, and he nods a tiny bit to Johns in the selection of the comic, which illustrates two male figures scrunched together, hiding beneath a stage as the panel sets the scene with the headline, "And under the stage". One of the male figures whispers to the other, "Hey suppose they spot us under here?" And the other reassures him, saying, "They won't, they'll all be looking at the zebra." It's a deliciously self-conscious assessment in this, one of the earliest combines Rauschenberg made. And in titling it *Minutiae*, Rauschenberg clearly underscores how such small fragments are keyed to his objectives for the piece as a whole.

Rauschenberg counted on our ignoring those two men hiding together in favor of that zebra, and by and large he was right, for it's never been noticed before, just like the vast majority of the other fragments that litter the surface of this combine, and so many others of the period. Close to this comic is another, further evidence of Rauschenberg's careful search for multivalence. This one reads, "I think it's just awful to have a wife"—this but a little more than a year after Rauschenberg was divorced. Of course, the vast majority of the fragments seem to evince no such relevance, the better to secret that rare pointed reference, and the less likely the collage as a whole will come to seem in any way meaningful or directed.

Another even earlier work, arguably not yet fully a combine, which explicitly references Johns is the 1954 canvas *Yoicks* (Fig. 4). Titled by an exclamation of

discovery taken from a comic strip, *Yoicks* is not only much lighter and more celebratory than Rauschenberg's previous painting, it also inaugurates what would turn out to be a long-term inter pictorial dialog between the two men. One of the green dots at the bottom of *Yoicks* is surrounded by a series of concentric pencil lines, evoking both Johns' *Green Target*, then under completion in a studio one floor below Rauschenberg's, as well as the postage-like cancellation in *Should Love Come First?* The alternating red stripes of *Yoicks* evoke Johns' now famous *Flag* painting—also then under construction—especially as the canvas is divided into two flag-shaped sections, the lower one with a collage of comics precisely where the dense field of blue stars would be on an American flag. Among these comics is a *Terry and the Pirates* strip reading in part: "In view of the circumstances, I imagine your request to delay en route at Hawaii for a honeymoon will be granted, Capt. and Lt. Charles." Note how the address to "Capt. and Lt. Charles" in the context of a honeymoon seems to signify the beginning of a male/male relationship. Generally, the comic strips in *Yoicks* are so completely overpainted that their speech balloons are illegible, but emerging out of the murkiness one phrase is striking clear. It reads, "five foot ten, hair sandy, eyes blue, 160 lbs. You're not as guilty as you think." - a fair description, physical and psychological, of Jasper Johns at the time.

The largest combine completed shortly after Rauschenberg became romantically involved with Johns—*Collection* (fig 5) of 1954—was originally divided into sections flatly painted red, yellow and blue, now faded but still visible in the area below the collage. Those same primary colors (and names) of course emerge as a governing thematic in John's subsequent work such as his 1959 *Out the Window*. But perhaps an even more direct connection concerns the emergence of a theme in *Collection* that would animate a great number of subsequent works by both men, the theme of a diver. While *Collection* features numerous comic strip fragments on its cluttered surface—including a fragment reading "How depressing life would be, if our lucky stars hadn't introduced you to me"—as in *Minutiae*, only a small percentage of the comics seem to carry any directed or particular significance, a further example of Rauschenberg's remarkable naturalizing of authorial intention within a sea of aleatory possibility. Among these many disparate collage fragments, a *Moon Mullins* comic proves notable. Not because it is visible—indeed, it's so obscured with over-painting as to be almost completely illegible—but

because, curiously, that same *Moon Mullins* comic is also in evidence in the very next picture Rauschenberg completed, *Charlene* (1954). Indeed at least three copies of the newspaper with the comic had to be purchased, evidence of some degree of clear intention. In *Charlene*, the comic is largely free of over-painting such that the narrative is revealed. The comic begins with the title character, Moon, reporting that he read that most accidents at the beach occur because of “boys showing off to pretty girls.” With the logic of 1950s comics, as soon as they arrive at the beach, Moon’s brother jumps into the water to show off to the girls. Moon, incensed, climbs a high diving platform in an effort to keep up with his show-off brother, and then ups the ante with a daring dive while shouting “Alley.”

Curiously Rauschenberg sharply cuts the frame here, leaving the strip unfinished. He repeats this same diver scene from yet another copy of the comic strip on a different section of the canvas, again cutting off the final frame, and then finally concludes it with still another rendition on the leftmost panel—this time including the missing conclusion. In the last panel, Moon not only dives off the platform yelling “Alley,” he brings the narrative to an end by yelling “Oop” as he painfully crash lands with his chin on the diving board. In 1958, Jasper Johns painted *Alley Oop* (Fig. 6), which moreover consists of a Sunday comic called *Alley Oop*, overpainted in thick blocky strokes that at once trace and obscure the underlying narrative. Until recently, *Alley Oop* was in Rauschenberg’s collection—a gift from Johns—just as the origin of the shared theme lay embedded in Rauschenberg’s painting entitled *Collection*.²⁴

Clearly, these were highly privatized missives—and there are many, many more I could point to—and as such were intended to be invisible in plain sight. In short what mediates between “noise” and “meaning” here is familiarity and friendship, and in this respect Johns’ and Rauschenberg’s work achieves what the poet and essayist Paul Goodman had argued in 1951 was the best palliative for the avant-garde in a “shell shocked” Cold War society: to concentrate on a community of like-minded friends, create specifically for them, and through this safe-guard art. Goodman defined this so-called personal style thus:

In literary terms, this means: to write for them about them personally. But such personal writing about the audience itself can occur only in a small community of acquaintances....As soon as the intimate community does exist--whether geographically or not is relevant but not essential--and the artist writes about it for its members, the advance-guard at once becomes a genre of the highest integrated art, namely occasional poetry.²⁵

The friendship network of Rauschenberg, Twombly, Johns and some close others like John Cage and Cunningham was precisely, in Goodman's terms, an intimate community—and in his use of this modifier “intimate,” Goodman was engaging an example of precisely the kind of occasional poetry he elevates, for his proper audience knew very well what he, as an intimate of these gay men, meant.

The Art of Assemblage

It is, as Judith Butler reminds us, “a specific form of suffering to be deprived of the capacity to universalize one's experience.”²⁶ But whereas the recognition of different audiences was once necessarily the preserve of the social margins: the poor, immigrants, people of color, and of course, queers—in short those for whom visibility was inherently disciplinary—by the Cold War era, following Goodman, it had become an increasingly articulated and widely valorized non-minority model of cultural negotiation as well. A raft of new sociological texts such as David Riesman's *Individualism Reconsidered* and Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* sought to analyze what they took to be the now-ubiquitous crafting of audience specific selves in response to the conformist pressures of Cold War life. Perhaps the most influential sociological treatise of the period, Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd*, sought to map a shift in the American character from “inner directed” to “other directed,” which is to say from utterly autonomous to fundamentally concerned with, and designed in response to, what other people thought.²⁷ Whether this shift was in fact historical or more likely only became so as a discursive response to shifting social codes, the fact remains that at this Cold War moment, social life was perhaps more concerned with thematizing audience than ever before. So despite the particularities of their own policed subjectivity, same sex inclined artists found themselves, rather fortuitously, replicating a larger cultural dynamic itself increasingly concerned with “The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life,” albeit for very

different reasons.²⁸ My point is that the watershed 1961 exhibition *The Art of Assemblage* at MoMA—at the Cold War’s literal height—corresponds to an unprecedented efflorescence of assemblage in contemporary American art, in part because of assemblage’s new social utility, not just to Rauschenberg, but to a range of other authors with other social positions. For as we’ve seen, assemblage, as a medium, was superbly suited to authorial dissimulation.

Thus for artists living in an administered postwar social world that increasingly circumscribed the prospects of resistance, the appeal of assemblage lay precisely in its ability to speak out of both sides of its mouth at the same time. And towards this, assemblage’s greatest quality was perhaps its inescapable de facto-ness: if by chance something sensitive emerged out of the art and into harsh political daylight, it was perfectly simple for the artist to assert that the thing was just the thing and nothing more. Exploiting the possibilities of assemblage’s necessarily variable, audience-centered or readerly syntax, artists mobilized divergent readings, some inconsequential and others quite actively dissident, under the very nose of dominant culture. That these multiple meanings coexisted within the same image served to cancel out any clear statement of intention. And because assemblage neutrally registered all its variant meanings with the same tone, no single reading could claim priority over any other. It is no coincidence to find the peak development of assemblage in the US at exactly the same moment as the height of the Cold War: this highly policed, enforced consensual culture thus nourished modes of authorial disguise.²⁹

Of course, not unexpectedly, MoMA did not signal the Cold War social utility of assemblage: instead, it saw *The Art of Assemblage* exhibition as a spirited revival meeting for an art form not long before associated with historical forms of European Modernism. In insisting on seeing assemblage according to this very different historicist imperative, the exhibition’s organizer, William Seitz, repeatedly evoked assemblage’s storied history of oppositionality and forthright dissent. As Seitz put it, “collage has always been a threat to the approved media of oil painting, carving, and casting.”³⁰ Again and again, Seitz’ version of assemblage is animated by an earnest investment in a rhetoric of resistance, with, as he writes, “a lethal effect on (old) systems of hierarchy and classification.”³¹ Of then contemporary assemblagists like Rauschenberg, Seitz affirmed,

“Yet the need of certain artists to defy and obliterate accepted categories, to fabricate aggressive objects, to present subjects tabooed by accepted standards, to undermine the striving for permanency by using soiled, valueless and fragile materials...these manifestations are signs of vitality.”³²

In short, Seitz is tied to what by 1961 would appear as an antiquated rhetoric of direct authorial dissidence, and he understood contemporary assemblage in its terms: words like ‘rebellion’, ‘smashing’, and ‘overturning’ litter his text. But years of Cold War had chilled such enthusiasms. Five years before, William Whyte began his influential book *The Organization Man*, with the following words:

This book is not a plea for non-conformity. Such pleas have an occasional therapeutic value, but as an abstraction, nonconformity is an empty goal... We have quite enough problems today without muddying the issue with misplaced nostalgia...I speak of individualism *within* organization life. The organization people who are best able to control their environment rather than be controlled by it are well aware that they are not too easily distinguishable from the others in the outward obeisances paid to the good opinions of others. And that is one of the reasons they do control. They disarm society.³³

In his remarks at the symposium for *The Art of Assemblage* exhibition, Rauschenberg repeatedly sought to dissociate himself from any vestiges of “nostalgic” dissent. “I mean the idea of art, being for it or against it,” he claimed, “I find ridiculous.”³⁴ Despite attempts by critics on the panel to get Rauschenberg to admit to his “Dadaist” desire to shock the public, he was actually far more in synch with official American culture of the time than they. Indeed, as far back as 1952, the eminent literary critic and scholar Leslie Fiedler wrote a poisonous dismissal in the *Partisan Review* of just this kind of artistic oppositional romance:

I think we are in the position now to understand that the concept of the "alienated artist" itself was as much a creation of the popular mind as of the artist...The image of the drunken, dope-ridden, sexually impotent, poverty-oppressed Poe is as native to the American mind as the image of the worker driving his new Ford into the garage beside the Cape Cod cottage; together they are the American's image of himself.³⁵

Substitute Pollock for Poe in this quote, and Abstract Expressionism is made as tame and predictable as a suburban lawn. As Fiedler here argues—and as Herbert Marcuse made

clear in his 1956 *Eros and Civilization*—rebellious opposition is but the other face of cooptation and rampant consumerism, not only not a challenge to, but a reinforcement of, the extant social order—for spirited opposition is precisely the steam valve that gives us the illusion of our freedom, all within a system of utter constraint.

Leo Steinberg, in the very first published account of the art of Johns and Rauschenberg, too, cast a skeptical eye on the kind of oppositional fervor Seitz was espousing:

The legacy is a century-long record of rebellions against the canons of painting, rebellions which have been the condition, almost the guarantee of artistic success, culminating [in America] in the first post-war generation of Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Kline. By these men, the last upstanding remnants of the Western painterly tradition, were laid flat; so this second generation [of Johns and Rauschenberg] is deprived even of the tradition of revolt, for there is at the moment nothing in view to be overthrown.³⁶

If indeed there was “at the moment nothing to be overthrown,” if rebellion and alienation were but steam valves, not the coup de grace, but the very guarantor of bourgeois capitalism, what was painting to do, to look like? Assemblage represented a very different kind of avant-garde authoriality, one not associated with resistance, but with dissimulation, not with opposition, but with camouflage. In these assemblages, multiplicity and a seemingly aleatory compositional method gave the appearance of disinterestedness, even as they also carried some very particular meanings to some very particular people. Here Goodman’s praise of occasional poetry meets Rauschenberg’s elevation of art as the “perfect crime.” As the sociologist David Riesman wrote in 1954, in words that could very well be a coda for Rauschenberg’s method in his contemporaneous combines, “Lack of clarity may sometimes be the result of confused ideas. But it may also be the result of an attempt to speak to some audiences to the exclusion of others.”³⁷

Rauschenberg’s assemblages thus reveal a social historicity even when they seem most random and readerly, for the vision of selfhood they offer is profoundly Cold War, which is to say, bifurcated, split between public and private. The Cold War had generalized the mobilization of bifurcated social identities, such that what was historically a specifically queer mode was increasingly writ large across culture. Indeed, in a best-selling British novel published in the US the same year as Rauschenberg made

his first combine, Nigel Dennis' *Cards of Identity*, one character, a Mrs. Mallet criticizes another in terms Johns and Rauschenberg would surely understand "Now it's like this. All our lives are divided into two parts...The first one is personal feeling we would hate to be without. The second one is public duty we perform so as to keep ourselves and the rest of the world well-fed and properly dressed. But think how much more difficult it becomes if we start muddling it up with the first part of ourselves. And that's what you've done! Instead of having two separate selves like a normal person, you've tried to squash them into one." 38

Artists like Johns and Rauschenberg well understood the social utility in not squashing these separate selves into one. In seeking to historicizing the "perfect crime" of hiding their authorial voice, I hope, then, to reclaim sexuality not as a mode of essential difference, but its obverse, as foundational within American Cold War culture of a set of aesthetic strategies that would soon cohere as a generalized postmodern shift. 39

Epilogue

Forty-four years ago, in his catalog essay for Robert Rauschenberg's very first museum exhibition, curator Alan Solomon had this to say about meaning in Rauschenberg's works:

[I]t is not true that the combines are intended to be anagrammatic statements of ideas...which we are expected to puzzle out and which will reveal their meanings to us if we succeed in fitting the pieces properly. There are no secret messages in Rauschenberg, no program of social or political discontent transmitted in code, no hidden rhetorical commentary...no private symbolism available only to the initiate. 40

That was in 1963. Exactly 40 years later, in his 2003 Rauschenberg book *Random Order*, Branden Joseph sounds almost exactly the same note, albeit more up to date, now bolstered through the ventriloquized voice of Rosalind Krauss:

The status of Rauschenberg's work as high art has brought forth increasingly intense attempts to read it through the most traditional paradigms of signification, including that of iconography. Such readings have recently gained in prominence as the artist's work has come to be seen as expressing coded messages about his sexual orientation. Although, as Rosalind Krauss has observed, 'the convinced

iconographer is almost impossible to dissuade,' nearly three decades of such analyses...have yielded only partial and unsatisfactory results.⁴¹

In the four decades between these two texts much as changed, but much, as the quotations reveal, has not. Both denounce the prospect of traditionally conceived meanings encoded or otherwise secreted in Rauschenberg's work. As Joseph understands it, "Rauschenberg pursued forms of aesthetic signification and spectatorial reception that challenge traditional signifying means."⁴² Yes, of course he did. But we have failed to put this new approach to meaning in its historical context, failed to ask about the resonance between such a renewed attention to the problem of meaning and the advent of the Cold War, perhaps America's most heavily policed cultural moment.⁴³ Instead of analyzing how queer authorship came to be nervously frontloaded with an array of doubts, dissimulations and anxieties at the very height of the Red Scare, McCarthyism and the House Un-American Activities Committee—the last 40 years of Rauschenberg/Johns scholarship have instead witnessed a near continuous critical re-engagement with the terms of a proposition figures like John Cage, Rauschenberg and Johns first promoted in the middle of the last century. And when generally disputatious scholars cooperatively circle the wagons against a specter dubbed "traditional signifying means," it is clear how powerfully critical intelligence has become allied, and stayed allied, with this postmodern critical project.—in large measure because it ventriloquizes a foreclosure of any discussion of same-sex sexuality through recourse to the artists themselves.⁴⁴

The naive opposition in Rauschenberg/Johns scholarship between a putatively post-modernist denigration of intentionality on the one hand and what gets called iconography on the other is itself a highly instrumentalized distinction. Joseph's dismissal of, in his words, iconography's new "prominence as the artist's work has come to be seen as expressing coded messages about his sexual orientation" alludes to what is at stake here and why. The new homophobia no longer flatly denies, as it once did, the same-sex relationships among Johns, Rauschenberg, Twombly, Cage, Cunningham and so many others in their circle. Instead, it denies that biographical fact any critical purchase, casting it aside as a relic of what Joseph has dismissed as "the most traditional paradigms of signification." But, as I have shown, it was precisely Johns' and Rauschenberg's

sexuality that informed their development of a critique of traditional forms of meaning making. In short, the postmodern turn in American art had authors; these authors had relationships with one another; these relationships not only informed their thinking about audience and meaning-making in a context of grave constraint, but moreover is written on the surfaces of their work—not only as iconography but as a far less codified, but no less intentional, pressure on the process of signification as well.

It is, at best, an unwarranted assumption to extrapolate from the position that because an audience cannot reconstruct an artist's meanings, the artist therefore intended none. To articulate an audience-centered art does not require eliminating the prospect of authorial intention. A fully audience-centered art open to the free play of signification, and quite specific and traditional authorial meanings, can in fact happily co-exist; the author's meanings do not have to be the audience's, but that doesn't entail that authors not have meanings of their own.⁴⁵ In short, works that "challenge traditional signifying means" may also—partially and discontinuously—signify in traditional ways, which is to say intentionally, expressively, not least when extant social codes necessitate differentiated forms of address for different audiences in the context of illicit desire. In short, there are multiple audiences for the work of Johns and Rauschenberg—a general audience, an audience among a circle of friends, an audience of each other. These different levels of audience at various points in the work engaged different reading strategies. It is no denigration of postmodernist practice to also and at the same time insist that works that are utterly decentered from the perspective of a general audience can, and often did, have very particular meaning for their makers, or for friends of their makers. In ordinary discourse, we readily accept that couples maintain private codes and meanings; why is it so hard to accept that in artwork? Indeed, Johns and Rauschenberg's breakthrough towards a critical stance of anti-authoriality was, as I have argued, itself a deliberate authorial strategy, an alluring invitation proffered to deflect attention away from other more personal meanings. As code makers know, there is nothing as effective as a superfluity of signification to camouflage the generation and receipt of particular messages. To historicize postmodernism—to explore the conditions of its genesis—underscores the rootedness of these insights in a particular Cold War cultural matrix. Now, over a half-century later, such a historicization of postmodernism is well overdue.

¹ The romantic relationship between Rauschenberg and Twombly is matter of factly referenced in two letters in the remarkable exchange of correspondence between the poet and then director of Black Mountain College Charles Olson and his friend and fellow poet Robert Creeley. The letters are dated January 29, 1952, and January 31, 1952. See *Charles Olson and Robert Creeley: The Complete Correspondence*, Volume 9, ed. Richard Blevins, Vol. 9 (Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1990). 60-65. This correspondence, published over 15 years ago, has never before been cited in the voluminous Rauschenberg literature. My thanks to John Yau for calling it to my attention.

² For an excellent chronology of Rauschenberg's early career, see Walter Hopps and Susan Davidson's *Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective*. New York: Guggenheim, 1997.

³ Notably, the question of love is couched here in terms of priority, and Rauschenberg's subsequent decision to abandon his wife and son in favor of Twombly so soon after the child's birth testifies to his endorsement, albeit a troubled one, of romantic love above all.

⁴ Earlier that year, required to make a drawing for submission to a school-wide competition, Rauschenberg placed butcher paper on the floor of the entrance to the Art Student's League and captured the imprint of foot traffic. In so doing, he both successfully ironized the Abstract Expressionist emphasis on the hand and gesture and found a way to "author" a drawing that nonetheless was made by others, an early inkling of the anti-expressive thought processes that would eventually lead to the much purer statement in the *White Paintings*. See Walter Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg: The Early 1950s*, (Houston: The Menil Collection, 1991), 36. Also reported by Robert Creeley, who taught at Black Mountain. Robert Creeley, "On the Road: Notes on Artists and Poets 1950-1965" in *Poets of the Cities: New York and San Francisco 1950-65*, (Dallas: Dallas Museum of Art, 1974), 63.

⁵ On the autobiographical impulse in Rauschenberg's work, see my "The Art of Code" in *Significant Others*. ed. Whitney Chadwick and Isabelle de Courtivron, New York: Thames and Hudson, 1993 and Ken Silver, "Modes of Disclosure: The Construction of Gay Identity and the Rise of Pop Art" in *Hand-Painted POP: American Art in Transition 1955-62*, ed. Russel Ferguson, exh. cat. The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1993. It should be noted that these accounts of autobiographical themes in Rauschenberg's work are not so much *discoveries* as *recoveries*, for as early as 1961 Jack Kroll wrote, in indulgently homophobic prose: "But Rauschenberg sometimes snags his sweater between the sanctum of private reference and the littered tundra of commemorative decay. A poof of incense disperses the bracing pungency of the urban miasma; the sharp punning weapons of the inscrutable ironist corrode gracefully with a lavender rust; a Firbankian *frisson* ripples the confident, humanly demoniac Baron Corvo incognito; we get too close to the artist in the wrong sense." J.K.(Jack Kroll) "Reviews and Previews" *Artnews* 60 (December 1961): 12.

⁶ see footnote 1.

⁷ Olson and Creeley: 60.

⁸ Letter to Creeley January 31, 1952, in Olson and Creeley: 64-65.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Rauschenberg, quoted in Dorothy Miller, *Sixteen Americans*, (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1959), 58.

¹¹ See Fred Orton, "On Being Bent 'Blue' (Second State) : An Introduction to Jacques Derrida/ A Footnote on Jasper Johns*." *Oxford Art Journal* 12:1 (1989): 35-46.

¹² "His Heart Belongs to Dada," *Time*, 73 (May 4, 1959): 58. I think it fair to say that finding a music box playing a tango would represent an uphill struggle.

¹³ Of course, a waltz transformed into a tango is not a neutral change, and it carries a rich associative heritage generally keyed to an intensified erotic charge. For an illustration of the Johns drawing entitled *Tango*, please see David Shapiro, *Jasper Johns Drawings: 1954-1984*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1984), plate 18

¹⁴ Branden Joseph, *Random Order: Robert Rauschenberg and the Neo-Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).

¹⁵ Of course, that Rauschenberg's art actively supports the claim of randomness and anti-expressivity ahead of the forms of authorial intention I will shortly excavate is testament to his particular genius at covering his tracks.

¹⁶ For a facsimile of the original Rauschenberg letter, see Walter Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg: The Early 1950s*, (Houston: The Menil Collection, 1991), 230.

¹⁷ John Cage, "On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and his Work," *Metro* (May 1961) reprinted in *Silence: Lectures and Writings by John Cage*, 98.

¹⁸ Allan Kaprow, "Experimental Art," *Art News* 65 (March 1966) : 60-63.

¹⁹ See Rosalind Krauss, "Perpetual Inventory," *October*, Vol. 88. (Spring, 1999), pp. 86-116, especially 103.

²⁰ See Branden Joseph. *Random Order: Robert Rauschenberg and the Neo Avant Garde*. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2003), especially chapter 1.

²¹ Rauschenberg in unpublished 1961 transcript of the Symposium on Assemblage organized by William Seitz following the The Art of Assemblage exhibition at MOMA, MOMA archives:22.

²² Roni Feinstein, unpublished Ph.D dissertation, *Random Order: The First Fifteen Years of Robert Rauschenberg's Art, 1949-1964* (Institute of Fine Arts: New York University, 1990), 185.

²³ See George Chauncey, *Gay New York: gender, urban culture, and the making of the gay male world, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

²⁴ Almost immediately after their break up, Johns returned to the diver theme in a number of works that nod to this shared subject matter now some 8 years old, including his painting *Diver*, the largest and most Rauschenbergian canvas Johns had yet attempted, as well as magisterial 8 foot drawing *Diver*, evincing a figure about to take a dive. See my "Lovers and Divers: Picturing a Partnership in Rauschenberg and Johns,"

(*Frauen/Kunst/Wissenschaft*, (Berlin, June, 1998). Available online at:

<http://www.queerculturalcenter.org/Pages/KatzPages/KatzLovers.html>. I have explored the meanings of this diver theme in a range of works as formally distinct as the 1963 *Periscope* (Hart Crane) and Canto 15 from Rauschenberg's *Dante Drawings*, illustrating the *Inferno*.

²⁵ Paul Goodman, "Advanced-Guard Writing, 1900-1950," *Kenyon Review*, (Summer, 1951), quoted in Brad Gooch. *City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O'Hara*, (New

York: Alfred Knopf, 1993), 187. The master of the occasional poem, Frank O'Hara, is presumably the chief, if unspoken, subject of Goodman's analysis.

²⁶ Judith Butler, "Wittig's Material Practice: Universalizing a Minority Point of View," in *GLQ*, Vol 13, no.4, (Fall, 2007).

²⁷ David Riesman, *Individualism Reconsidered*. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor. 1955); Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor. 1959); David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1950).

²⁸ For a full discussion of the striking parallels between mainstream cultural discourse and queer subjectivity during the Cold War, see my "Passive Resistance: On the Critical and Commercial Success of Queer Artists in Cold War American Art," *L'image*, Paris, no. 3 (Winter, 1996). Also available online at <http://www.queerculturalcenter.org/Pages/KatzPages/KatzLimage.html>

²⁹ It goes without saying that assemblage needs to be thought through not only in response to Cold War social conditions, but also as a *refusal* of other, more directly political, aesthetic possibilities. My thanks to Christian Thorne for this insight.

³⁰ William Seitz, et al., "The Art of Assemblage: A Symposium" (1961) in *Essays on Assemblage*, eds. James Leggio and Helen M. Franc, Studies in Modern Art, Vol. 2 (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1992), 87.

³¹ *Ibid*, 32.

³² *Ibid*, 92.

³³ William Whyte, Jr., *The Organization Man*, (New York: Clarion Books, 1956), 3

³⁴ *Ibid*, 148.

³⁵ Leslie Fiedler, "Our Country, Our Culture," *Partisan Review* 19, no.3 (May-June 1952), 297.

³⁶ Leo Steinberg, *Artists of the New York School: Second Generation*, exhibition catalog (New York: The Jewish Museum, 1957), 6-7

³⁷ David Riesman, *Individualism Reconsidered* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1955), 10.

³⁸ Nigel Dennis, *Cards of Identity* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1955), 86.

³⁹ See both my "Passive Resistance," cited above, and Moira Roth's "The Aesthetic of Indifference," *Artforum* 16 (November 1977): 46-53, which first addressed the import of sexuality to cold war art. For a reprint of that article and my commentary on its import and its oversights, see Roth and Katz, *Difference/Indifference: Musings on Postmodernism, Marcel Duchamp and John Cage*, (New York: Gordon & Breach, 1998).

⁴⁰ Allan R. Solomon. *Robert Rauschenberg*, (New York: Jewish Museum, 1963), unpaginated

⁴¹ Branden Joseph, *Random Order*, 11. See also Richard Meyer's review of Joseph's book, "Two on one: Richard Meyer on Robert Rauschenberg – Books," (*ArtForum*, Feb, 2004).

⁴² *Ibid*.

⁴³ Moira Roth first modeled this contextual approach in 1977.

⁴⁴ Perhaps the most significant analysis of this moment in all its complexity remains Amelia Jones' landmark *Post Modernism and the Engendering of Marcel Duchamp*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

⁴⁵ For an example of precisely this kind of nuanced reading, see Richard Meyer, “Warhol’s Clones,” *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 7, no. 1 (1994), 79-109, and by the same author, *Outlaw Representation: Censorship and Homosexuality in Twentieth Century American Art*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 128-56.