

Heard and Seen

RETROSPECTIVE RAUSCHENBERG

Robert Rauschenberg, whose show has just ended at the Whitechapel Gallery, is a traditional artist, binding into one vision all the major streams of experiment and achievement of twentieth-century art which interest him. The paintings, combine paintings, and objects on view are a digest of influences which in fact we all know; if we do not, then there is no excuse, because books on the art leading up to Rauschenberg are a commonplace in bookshops, let alone the pictures themselves which are on view at the Tate and other galleries. Rauschenberg's is probably the best example of a kind of art in the mid twentieth century which starts off by making you think it is *art autre*, and then it becomes *art engagé*, only, on final analysis to turn into a kind of *art pour l'art*. At first glance nothing could be more *art autre* than the first combine paintings with their wilful inclusion of everything that is not art. The point of *art autre* as I see it, is to cut to the root any kind of making or appreciating that involves the aesthetic faculty; it is done expressly to destroy the academic and conventional idea of what constitutes Art and substitute a gratuitous gesture in its place, a gesture that is in the end only made valid by the vision of the maker, the true artist. It is a simultaneous alienation of the art-object from the spectator and from art, or aesthetic, art; but this situation is never a complete success unless the art-object is thumpingly bad—then of course you do get a complete alienation. Rauschenberg's art is very good however and so the feeling of alienation is quickly replaced by a feeling of magnetism. I couldn't help becoming part of every work I saw there; I found myself participating in the combine paintings with all my faculties of sight, hearing, touch, even smell; only taste seemed to be left out of this sensual feast, otherwise all one's senses were assaulted simultaneously, compelling one to become an active even though unwilling extension of the painting. The combine paintings include everything; pinups, cuttings, bottles, enamelled metal plates, firewood, doors, wireless sets, flashing electric lights, bedlinen, sleeping-bags, stuffed birds—the list is endless; in some of the pieces, such as *Empire I* and *II* and *Odalisk* the entire object is made-up of detritus *trouvé*. Rauschenberg's mode of operation, which consists of oscillating between the real object and the synthetic object, however made, and between the emotional and the intellectual apprehension of objects, is a brilliantly persuasive technique. His use of 'real' objects, photographic objects, negative and positive, collage, together with a painted image, a profligacy of paint, and the bare white canvas, to say nothing of light, sound, movement, and other ephemera, is precisely calculated to create a traffic or trade between all the disparate parts, and so to involve the spectator, who is found incessantly questioning reality and unreality till the two fuse into an experience parallel to the experience of life. How successful he is; the whole of the Whitechapel Gallery has temporarily taken

on the atmosphere of Hieronymus Bosch's Garden of Delights, with bemused beats and mods wandering from exhibit to exhibit rather in the dreamlike way the innocent Adamites in Bosch's painting peer into their self-erected toys and playthings in the dreamgarden which is the anteroom to Hell. It is impossible for anyone to remain an outsider; all the spectators are taken, caught up in an involuntary act of integration with what they see.

Rauschenberg's overquoted remark about operating in the space between Art and Life should really only apply to his earlier work, i.e. the combine paintings up to 1963. His later paintings are very simple in facture; he has abandoned all attempts to destroy the surface of the picture with objects and special effects; the subject-matter is almost banal, it is in the putting together of it that Rauschenberg shows his stature, rather in the manner of Braque, or Chardin. I do not mean that his achievements are of the same order as Braque or Chardin, however. Rauschenberg is a great traditional painter rather in the way Tiepolo was; each transformed a whole train of experience into their vision; each skated over the thinnest of ice with consummate ease; they stand in almost identical relation to their so-called classical tradition, and they are both great artists. Whereas Giovanni Battista Tiepolo carried on the tradition of the Italian School, transforming the style of Veronese and Feti, Storzzi and Maffei into something altogether more volatile and witty, elegant and dexterous, without a hint of weight, Rauschenberg carries on the traditional art of Europe of the twentieth century as handed to America by Duchamp, Schwitters, Albers and Max Ernst, and developed by de Kooning, himself a Dutchman and the most seminal talent in America.

An analysis of Rauschenberg's immediate influences is enlightening. Marcel Duchamp is the first that comes to mind. His influence on Rauschenberg is considerable, as it is on almost every artist of the twentieth century. The *objet trouvé* and the readymade are never far away from Rauschenberg's thought, but in his painting one never gets a hint of the satanic irony of Duchamp, an irony so forceful that, as we know, it eventually compacted and fell in on itself, leading to Duchamp's retirement from any form of statement; Rauschenberg is not capable of taking his vision to such lengths of experience; his is altogether a more innocent vision.

Likewise the astonishing little collages of Kurt Schwitters, with their poetry distilled out of jetsam and excrement, with their tenderness and irony and detached inconsequence, have had a very great influence. Curious that so miniature an artist as Schwitters has had such an influence on a painter who is almost incapable of painting small pictures. This isn't perhaps an isolated example—one immediately thinks of the enormous influence Elsheimer had over Rubens—but it has an interest for me because of the sense of scale in Rauschenberg's work as opposed to that of Schwitters. All the collages of Schwitters are almost minute, and he swung in scale from this inscrutable minuteness to the incomprehensible environment-building of his *merz-bau* where the whole room, or house even, is made into a phantasmagorical surrounding purposefully evading the definition of space. Rauschenberg doesn't quite achieve the one or the other; I suspect he

would like to be both contemplational and environmental at the same time, but his combine paintings are too big for the one activity and too limited in extent for the other.

Joseph Albers too has had an influence, but I suspect a negative one. His scrupulous Bauhaus discipline must have had a considerable influence and indeed could not have failed to hurt Rauschenberg at the same time as it did him some good; but Talleyrand's advice to the King, 'il faut s'appuyer sur ce qui résiste', if it is sound in politics is the last thing that would enliven an artist's vision, and I'm not at all surprised that they parted company after a very short time.

The decisive influence so far as the rhetoric of paint is concerned is de Kooning, a master in the handling of paint, and a great figurative artist, perhaps the only great figurative artist at present working in the United States. De Kooning's images, with their roots in European expressionism, together with his virtuosity and freedom in the act of painting, have influenced the whole course of modern American painting from Jackson Pollock and Franz Kline, to the younger generation, including Robert Motherwell. The lessons Rauschenberg learnt from de Kooning in the handling of paint couldn't have been learnt from anybody else.

Lastly I detect the influence of Max Ernst. It is apt to be forgotten that Ernst was in America together with André Masson at a time when the milieu of what we call the New American Painting was forming, that is in the early 40s; so far, with the abstract expressionists, the influence of Masson has seemed paramount, but with Rauschenberg it isn't difficult to see the influence of Ernst coming into its own after having lain dormant for so long.

These seem to me to be the main influences on Rauschenberg so far as art and other artists are concerned, but of course his art demands also that one look for influences outside those of art-history or personalities. There is the whole tradition in America of exact imagery and close attention to observed fact. Now the thing that has irked Americans ever since they began painting has been the uncomfortable knowledge that they cannot dismiss observed fact from their inherited store of images, but that at the same time it is artistically indigestible. The Puritan tradition of sharpened outlines and strong factual sense runs through an enormous amount of American art that is hardly known in Europe, the imagery of Methodists and Baptists. If Rauschenberg's background is Baptist, as they say it is, and not Jewish, as I thought it was before I read the notices, the measure of his escape from his first environment is enormous, and his preoccupation with exact imagery is explained. I suspect Rauschenberg was aware of the conundrum underlying appearances ever since he was allowed to see James Tissot's illustrated Bible as a juvenile Sunday treat in his father's house. He may even have been scared and disgusted by Gustave Doré's illustrations to Dante's *Inferno*. It is this imagery, ultimately, that underlies the blatant advertising imagery of peas, peaches, brassieres and cars, that offer you the plentitude of life, and hand you the last chapter of the Book of Job on a plate. In this respect it is important to realise that Rauschenberg's art is not Pop; it is as though his art is the true image from which all Pop art is a degeneration. His emotional range is far greater than is

possible if an artist confines himself within the narrow discipline of Pop.

The solution of this particular national, and to Rauschenberg obviously personal, dilemma was suggested to him by another painter, Andy Warhol, who showed Rauschenberg the possibility of printing photographs onto the canvas by means of the silk-screen process; in fact by using the silk-screen as a stencil. This technique, in the hands of an artist of Rauschenberg's calibre solves an awful lot of very tricky questions at once. Rauschenberg knew, as Andy Warhol will never know, the kind of alchemy needed to transmute photographs into art. His enormous facility and sleight of hand needed the silk-screen to produce that incessant changing and exchanging of the seemingly stable, but actually evanescent images taken from television and photography. It amounts to a compaction of retinal images half-retained, half-destroyed, and is, in its way, as great a breakthrough as the invention of collage. I don't think we will ever again see silk-screen process used with the delicacy and subtlety and artistic direction and point as in the later paintings of 1963 and 1964. Contrary to what many people would imagine, the very process of mechanization inherent in photographic transference to silk-screen is a liberating factor in Rauschenberg's art, enabling him to make far more penetrating and broader statements than had he been forced into a kind of faking by hand. It is the perfect medium for machine-made America used in a way that decisively puts the machine in its true context, as subject, object and servant. In Rauschenberg's hands it becomes a great art-form and the proof of this is in the relaxed and assured performance of his latest paintings; they are like the performance of a great athlete at the peak of his career; no hesitation, no doubt can be seen in them, and the facture is as simple as that of a Mantegna fresco or a Tiepolo ceiling. In the first-rate painters, as Sickert observed, the facture is always simple, because the design and the expression come first in the artist's mind.

Heroism alone is his Achilles Heel. It is the heroic tendency in American art that is the other specific tradition and a very dangerous one too. Heroism of event, of multiplicity of event, and of scale, has always been of a fatal temptation, as all American painters know. One can think of innumerable large murals from Puvis de Chavannes's, and, surprisingly, John Singer Sargent's decorations for the Boston Public Library, through Frank Brangwyn's Missouri State Capitol Buildings murals, which show the American urge to what may be called Panoramic Mysticism. Nowadays this is usually sublimated in media such as Todd-AO but the instinct still persists in art. These colossal works nearly always give one the most acute sense of bathos, with their apparent euphoria and actual vacuity of content and I cannot feel that Rauschenberg is ignorant of the danger.

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