Robert Rauschenberg: Art as Experience

Robert Rauschenberg was an artist who emerged during the 1950's and is often associated with Neo-Dada and the Fluxus movement, despite having a dislike of either label. Although he is most widely renowned for his painting, he worked across a large variety of media. His work focusses conceptually on the fusion of art and life, Rauschenberg himself stated "I try to act in that gap between the two"[1]. This is most famously reflected in his *Combines* - works that remove the distinction between painting and sculpture, breaking away from Modernist aesthetics that were prevalent in the painting of 1950's America[2]. They place physical objects within paintings, or vice-versa, in order to bring the work into three-dimensional space (fig. 1). Sound was not a medium that he began to explore until the late 1960's, when radio art was gaining traction and technology was becoming more user friendly. Rauschenberg, heavily influenced by his friend and contemporary John Cage, was instrumental in bringing sound into the world of fine art. He worked with modern dance, building sets and eventually choreographing performance. He then married sound and technology to performance art through E.A.T. (experiments in art and technology), an organisation created "to catalyse the inevitable active involvement of industry, technology and the arts"[3]. This collaborative work carried over into his individual practice, resulting in some of the first dynamically interactive art installations. These include *Soundings* (1968) which reacted to the pitch of the experiencer's voice by lighting different areas of a Plexiglas print, and *Mud Muse* (1968-71), a tank of "listening mud"[4] which used sound far more extensively in artistic content, material and interaction.

Fig. 1 - *Monogram,* (1955-1959)[5] *– Robert Rauschenberg*

[1] B.W. Joseph; Rauschenberg Robert*, Random Order: Robert Rauschenberg and the Neo-avant-garde"* MIT Press, Boston, M.I., 2003, p.62.

[2] W. Hopps; S. Davidson, *Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective,* Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1997.

[3] B. Klüver; R. Rauschenberg, *E.A.T. news,* Vol. 1, no. 2 (June 1, 1967), New York : Experiments in Art and Technology, 1967. p.1.

[4] M. Brown, *Rauschenberg show to include 1,000 gallons of 'listening' mud*, https://www.theguardian.com, *Art and Design*, published 29th November 2016, accessed 24th April 2018.

[5] Rauschenberg, Robert, *Monogram,* Combine,1955-1959, https://www.rauschenbergfoundation.org/art/series/combine, accessed 18th April 2018.

Rauschenberg's classification as a Neo-Dadaist is a reflection not only of his work's intention to fuse art and life, but also of its rejection of "didactic Modernist attitudes"[6]. He possessed a refusal to create work that may be understood by any inherent meaning, repositioning the role of the artist as "a facilitator of experience"[7]. Rauschenberg, with a few exceptions, created "works that are strong straight precise and forever beyond understanding [in a logical manner]"[8]. This line from the first *Dada Manifesto* is best exemplified in Rauschenberg's *Combines.* Rauschenberg wanted to convey "the randomness of experience"[9] through the works, which focus on a completeness of composition; according to John Cage in a combine "each thing that is there is a subject"[10]. There is no single way of understanding one of these works and it is left to each audience member to derive personal meaning from them. Here we have the *Death of the Author*[11] evidenced in visual arts. Yet, as in the work of his contemporary Jackson Pollock, each element is incredibly considered; it took five years for Rauschenberg to finish *Monogram*[12]. Although Rauschenberg may have rejected many of the ideas of abstract expressionism solidified by Pollock's work, there is an undeniable connection between the two artists; the spatial concepts of their major works are incredibly similar, and heavily influenced the core values of Fluxus. Rauschenberg's Combines are far more direct in their approach to creating art that inhabits life than Pollock's gesture based works, however, through stretching the edge of the canvas to the back of the painting, Pollock removed any tentativeness that may have been felt near the edge of the surface. The result is that "the space of these creations is not clearly tangible… the entire painting comes out at us"[13] , a description strikingly similar to that of a *Combine*. Where Pollock removed two-dimensional borders to expand a painting's metaphorical environment, Rauschenberg removed three-dimensional ones, physically bringing a painting into space and allowing it to become part of its environment, a fusion of painting and life like no other before it.

Whilst Rauschenberg was attending Black Mountain College, along with John Cage and Merce Cunningham, he received lectures from Josef Albers, who taught on the properties of materials[14]. It is from this point on that we see multi-media usage in Rauschenberg's work develop. However, it is

[6] K. Glandein, *SoundArt and Performativity*, http://kerstenglandien.com, Papers and Talks, accessed 22nd April 2018 http://kerstenglandien.com/papers-talks/, p.2.

[7] K. Glandien, 'Sound and Interactivity', *Theory and History of Sound Art*, Digital Music and Sound Art, University of Brighton, 18th April 2018.

[8] T. Tzara, *Dada Manifesto,* 1918 in: A, Danchev, 100 Artists Manifestos from the Futurists to the Stuckists, Penguin Classics, London, 2011, p.143.

[9] M.L Kotz, *Rauschenberg, art and life*, Abrams, New York, 1990, p.91.

[10] ibid.

[11] R. Barthes, translated by R. Howard, *The Death of the Author,* Ubuweb Papers, accessed 6th May 2017, http://ubu.com/aspen/aspen5and6/threeEssays.html#barthes,

[12] Kotz, op. cit, pp.89-90.

[13] A. Kaprow, *The Legacy of Jackson Pollock* (1958), in Allan Kaprow – Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life. ed. J. Kelley. University of California Press, Berkeley/ Los Angeles/ London, 2003, p.6.

[14] Kotz, op. cit.

also key to consider Gibson's concept of A*ffordance* in regard to Rauschenberg's art. The concept was appropriated for use with objects by Donald Norman, who coined the term "action possibilities"[15] - meaning all the functions a single object may possibly have when interacted with by a human. It was at Black Mountain College that Rauschenberg created the *White Paintings* (fig. 2).
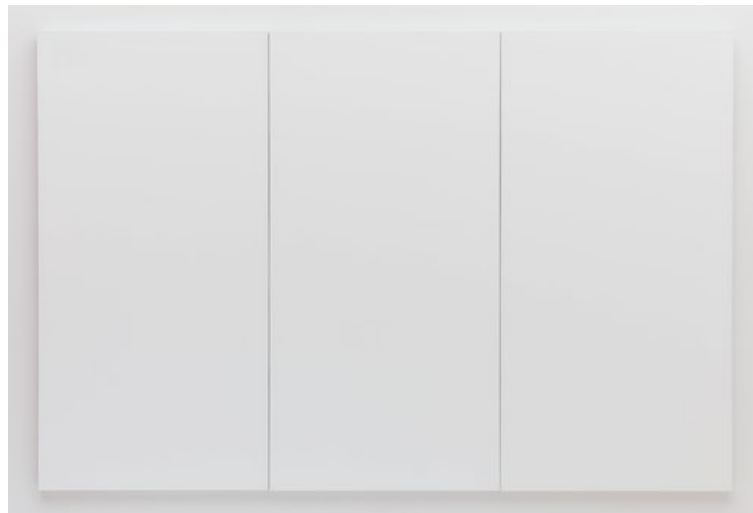

Fig. 2: White Painting [Three Panel] (1951)[16] – Robert Rauschenberg

These were an experiment on Rauschenberg's part to see how much could be removed from a painting, without it becoming something other than a painting. However, once they were created and displayed they became a perfect example of a painting's affordance to an action other than displaying an image, "They are airports for lights, shadows and particles"[17]. The white paintings became a kind of mirror, upon which the physical properties of their environment were displayed. Rauschenberg even went so far as to state "that you would know how many people were in the room, what time it was, and what the weather was like outside"[18] if you had a sensitive enough perception of the paintings. The works created a new meaning to what painting could be and were a direct influence to John Cage, resulting in 4'33". The paintings also expand on the idea of Rauschenberg's practice as a facilitative rather than absolute artist, they are more open than the Combines in the sense that they react to and represent the world around them; they are open to infinite variation due to the interplay that they facilitate between the canvas and its environment, between art and life - "once a man's shadow gets into a painting for a moment, everything becomes possible."[19] .Having said this, both of these series fit into Umberto Eco's definitions of an *open work*,

[15] D. Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things,* MIT Press, 2013

[16] Rauschenberg, Robert, *White Painting [Three Panel],* Painting, 1951, https://www.sfmoma.org/artwork/98.308.A-C, accessed 24th April 2018

[17] J. Cage in: Kotz, Op. Cit. p.76.

[18] Robert Rauschenberg, video interview by David A. Ross, Walter Hopps, Gary Garrels, and Peter Samis, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, May 6, 1999.

[19]A. Kaprow in: Kotz, Op. Cit, p.79.

but neither are yet open enough to constitute a *work in movement*. Instead a combine is "open to a virtually unlimited range of possible readings"[20] – the most generic definition, as it can be applied to any work assuming we accept the premise of Barthes' *Death of the Author,* and understand that once a work is created an artist's intended meaning has no agency. The *White Paintings,* however, are a step above this, "though organically completed [they] are "open" to a continuous generation of internal relations"[21]. To find a true openness in Rauschenberg's work we must look to his sound installation, where an interactive, participatory, element is introduced and art moves from object to experience. However, it is first necessary to understand his interest and development in sound and performance, as catalysed by his friendships with both John Cage and Merce Cunningham.

Rauschenberg began working within the world of sound not as a composer, but a choreographer and set designer alongside Cunningham's revolutionary dance company, though it is safe to assume an historic interest in the medium through Cage's mentorship. Another link is through some early sound-sculpture, heavily influenced by Dada object work. Rauschenberg's piece *Music Box* (C.A. 1955) (fig.3) is a crate, with nails through it, containing several loose stones. It is intended to be shaken so that the stones create sounds as they make contact with the nails. It is a very primitive sound-sculpture, but effective as an instrument which can be 'played' by any individual, thus moving closer to Eco's definition of a *Work in Movement* as a piece that is "characterised by the invitation to make the work together with the author"[22]. The box would have no function if it were not interacted with, with Marcel Duchamp stating, after interacting with the box, "I think I have heard this song before."[23]

Fig. 3. Music Box (1953)[24] - Robert Rauschenberg

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[20] U. Eco, *The Poetics of the Open Work* (1959) in: Audio Culture. eds. C. Cox & D. Warner. Continuum, New York/ London, 2004, p.173.

[21] ibid.

[22] Eco, Op. Cit.

[23] Kotz, Op. Cit., p.83

[24] Rauschenberg, Robert, *Music Box,* sculpture, 1953, https://www.rauschenbergfoundation.org/art/artwork/music-box-elemental-sculpture accessed 24th April 2018

As technology developed, sound became an increasingly accessible material for traditionally visual artists to experiment with in order to "bring sound into their work. This phenomenon, vital to SoundArt, was pioneered by Robert Rauschenberg"[25]. With the foundation of E.A.T. alongside Bell Laboratories engineer Billy Klüver, Rauschenberg sought to propel the engagement between art and technology, with the project producing mainly works that used sound and light within a performative context. One such work, that offers a fantastic example of a *work in movement*, is *Open Score* (1966) a performative piece that opens with a tennis game, when the ball is hit by a racket it triggers a sound and the stage lights, forming a random audio-visual composition from the tennis match, yet maintaining silence between the hits so as to incorporate the sounds of the two players moving. This slowly descends into a loosely choreographed, chance and choice based, swarming of the stage by three to five hundred people, lit and broadcast only by infra-red. Instructions for the piece written by Rauschenberg (fig. 4) outline the choices present within the second half of the performance.
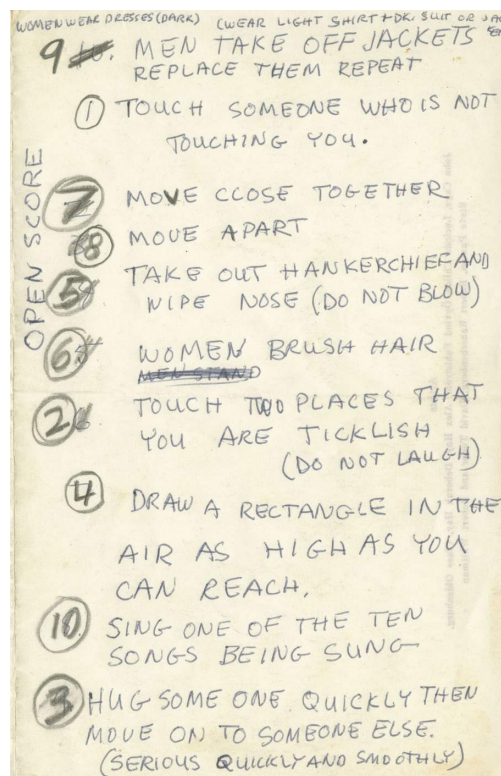

Fig. 4. Instructions for *Open Score* (1963)[26] - Robert Rauschenberg

After the end of E.A.T. Rauschenberg continued to work with sound and technology, beginning to create installation pieces rather than performances. The first of these was *Soundings* (1968), a Plexiglas corridor, screen-printed with chairs that would light in different places depending on the pitch of the experiencer's voice. Though this installation was interactive, it took in sound and gave

[25] K. Glandien, *Art on and off Air: The Affinity of Radio & Sound Art & its Future Prospects*, 2010, www.kerstenglandien.com , accessed 23/04/2018, p.7

[26] Rauschenberg, Robert, *Open Score*, Performance, 1963, http://www.tate.org.uk/rules-of-rauschenberg/ accessed 22nd April, 2018

back light, using sound as a trigger rather than a medium. It was far less realised than the installation that came after it – *Mud Muse* (1968-71).

Mud Muse (fig. 5) is a 274 x 366cm tank of thick mud with air pumps installed underneath the surface[27]. The pumps are activated by audio, fed to the installation by a reel to reel tape machine. The installation also contains microphones which record the room around it, as well as the sound of the mud being bubbled by the pumps[28]. The tape plays back the live recording, as well as some sounds that were pre-recorded by Rauschenberg. Thus the installation generates itself, through recording itself and its environment and translating that recording to the voltages that power the air pumps, yet it maintains a "structural vitality"[29] through continuity in the type sounds it produces. It exemplifies conceptual issues tackled in the creation of a *work in movement,* the audience are engaging with and manipulating the work simply by making sound within its vicinity. It should be receptive to the interaction, forming a clear dialogue between art and experiencer to encourage creative play as from of processual event art[30]. Eco states that the *work in movement,* must also represent the general scientific thought of an era. Mud muse, with its set occurrences, as well as internal and external interactions, can quite conceivably be drawn parallel with Einstein's model of the universe. This is in no way suggesting that this is what the work represents, just that inevitably the nature of art will follow the nature of societal thought. In the 20th century there was a focus on the nature of the universe and *Mud Muse* almost too perfectly demonstrated its newfound ordered chaos.

Fig. 5. Mud Muse (1968-1971)[31] - Robert Rauschenberg

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[27] The Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, *Mud Muse,* accessed 15th April 2018. https://www.rauschenbergfoundation.org/art/artwork/mud-muse

[28] Tate Gallery, *The Rules of Art According to Rauschenberg*, 2017, accessed 15th April 2018. http://www.tate.org.uk/rules-of-rauschenberg/

[29] Eco, Op. Cit.

[30] K. Glandein, *SoundArt and Performativity*, http://kerstenglandien.com, Papers and Talks, accessed 22nd April 2018 http://kerstenglandien.com/papers-talks/, p.1.

[31] Rauschenberg, Robert, *Mud Muse*, Installation, 1968-71, http://www.tate.org.uk/rules-of-rauschenberg/, accessed 24th April, 2018

The work also came to be open in a very different way, seemingly unintentionally – "People reached their fingers in and felt the mud…Then they started putting their whole hands in and making brown mud prints on the dove grey wall. One woman was about to jump in and do body prints on the wall."[32]. This description likens it to event art pieces such as Allan Kaprow's *Yard* (1961), which involved filling an entire gallery courtyard with tires and allowing people to interact with them however they wanted. This was a full body experience, and was designed to be one that invited active participation. The triumph of *Mud Muse* here is that from itself, and the perceived openness of the work, people with no instruction to physically engage immerse their body in the mud and begin to draw with it, creating new visual art. It not only produces and reproduces sound and experience infinitely, through audience engagement image is externally created.

It is clear that Robert Rauschenberg was a revolutionary artist who has widely influenced a huge number of fields, from visual to sound art. He influenced Fluxus ideals and engaged with Dada whilst maintaining his own distinctive style and never becoming enveloped within a single artistic movement, or even one medium. The open nature of his works remove the hierarchical distinction between artist and audience replacing the roles with facilitator and experiencer[33], though not all necessarily interactive works they all are open in the sense that they call for the audience to impose their experience upon them in order to derive meaning. Rauschenberg sought to work "in the gap between"[34] art and life and in doing so broke down the boundaries between many art forms including painting, sculpture, dance and installation. Thanks to Rauschenberg the "young artists of today need no longer say, "I am a painter" or "a poet" or "a dancer". They are simply "artists"."[35]

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[32] F. La Haye in: R. Rauschenberg, A. Kren, *Robert Rauschenberg: haywire: major technological works of the 1960s*, Hatje, New York, 1997, p.57.

[33] K. Glandien, 'Sound and Interactivity', *Theory and History of Sound Art*, Digital Music and Sound Art, University of Brighton, 18th April 2018.

[34] B.W. Joseph; Rauschenberg Robert, *Random Order: Robert Rauschenberg and the Neo-avant-garde"* MIT Press, Boston, M.I., 2003, p.62.

[35] Kaprow, Allan. "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock" (1958), in Allan Kaprow – Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life. ed. J. Kelley. University of California Press, Berkeley/ Los Angeles/ London, 2003, p.9.

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