Robert Rauschenberg

London and New York

by CATHERINE CRAFT

IN 1955 ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG submitted a work called *Short circuit* to the Stable Annual, a group show held annually by artists of the New York School. In the past, established artists had been able to propose friends and colleagues for inclusion in the Annuals, but when Rauschenberg suggested four artists, including his ex-wife, Susan Weil, and his current lover, Jasper Johns, he was refused. With a plethora of items – postcards, the programme for a John Cage concert, a swag of fabric – and doors that open and close, *Short circuit* (cat. pl.95; Fig.86) exemplified the format Rauschenberg had recently designated 'Combines', hybrids of painting and sculpture that could accommodate an unprecedented range of objects. In *Short circuit* these included small paintings by Weil and Johns behind the two doors – a canny act by which Rauschenberg 'short-circuited' the exclusion of those artists by the show's organisers.

That Rauschenberg's gesture of solidarity with Weil and Johns was no isolated act is made abundantly clear in *Robert Rauschenberg: Among Friends*, organised by Leah Dickerman at its current venue, the **Museum of Modern Art, New York** (to 17th September), and by Achim Borchardt-Hume at Tate Modern, London, where a version of the exhibition was shown (1st December 2016–2nd April). It is the first retrospective to assess the achievements of the artist (d.2008) since the enormous survey presented two decades ago by the Guggenheim, which filled the entire Frank Lloyd Wright building, the museum's downtown branch and an additional off-site location.[1] That exhibition – the last in the artist's lifetime – celebrated Rauschenberg's exuberant expansion of the materials and boundaries of art to the point of excess. The

86. *Short circuit*, by Robert Rauschenberg. 1955. Oil, fabric and paper on wood, 103.5 by 95.3 by 10.8 cm. (Art Institute of Chicago; exh. Museum of Modern Art, New York; © 2016 Robert Rauschenberg Foundation).

85. *Oracle*, by Robert Rauschenberg with Toby Fitch, Harold Hodges, Billy Klüver and Robert K. Moore. 1962–65. Five-part found-metal assemblage with five concealed remote-controlled radios, dimensions variable. (Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; exh. Museum of Modern Art, New York; © 2016 Robert Rauschenberg Foundation).

current project is a more tightly edited affair, an approach rewarded at MoMA (where this reviewer saw it), where works of art across varied media have space to breathe. With editing comes a more focused assessment of Rauschenberg's considerable achievements, attuned to the present moment. His daring integration of materials previously considered inappropriate for inclusion in works of art is by now several generations old, as is his decided turn away from the prioritisation of self-expression associated with his predecessors, the Abstract Expressionists, along with his early engagement with the iterability of photographic images and their circulation in mass media. Dickerman and Borchardt-Hume focus their attention on other aspects of Rauschenberg's *œuvre*, particularly his involvement with dance, performance and technology, as well as his embrace of collaboration, defined by a habitual tendency to root creative activity in relationships and communities.

In London, where there had not been a large Rauschenberg exhibition for more than thirty-five years, *Robert Rauschenberg* took on the format of a conventional retrospective, albeit often with only one or two works representing entire series or periods of the artist's career. There, Rauschenberg's engagement with performance and technology was manifest largely in archival photographs, documents, films and a programme of performances. In New York, where the artist spent most of the first two decades of his career, MoMA has taken a more distinctive approach. Retitling the exhibition *Robert Rauschenberg: Among Friends*, it has attempted a similar short-circuiting of the conventions of the retrospective, converting it instead into 'an open monograph'.[2]

This curious term christens a straightforward strategy: the inclusion of works in the exhibition by artists close to Rauschenberg as well as the recognition of contributions by others to works usually credited to Rauschenberg alone (such as *Automobile tire print*; 1953; pls.58–59, which MoMA has attributed to Robert Rauschenberg with John Cage). Especially in the first rooms of MoMA's presentation, this approach enlivens our appreciation of the fecund creative environment in which Rauschenberg came of age and thrived as an artist, as his early efforts appear in the company of others, including Hazel Larsen Archer, who taught photography at Black Mountain College, as well as his first artistic companions, Weil and Cy Twombly, followed by Johns. (MoMA's presentation benefits greatly from additional loans of Rauschenberg's early works.) With the advent of the 1960s, the scope widens to include Jean Tinguely and Niki de Saint-Phalle among others. Interspersed among works of art are touchstones of Rauschenberg's engagement with other disciplines, from designing sets and costumes for dances by Merce Cunningham and Paul Taylor and his friendships with composers, especially Cage, to the artist's efforts to bring art into dialogue with varied forms of contemporary technology, an effort spearheaded largely by the engineer Billy Klüver (Fig.85). Here Dickerman's careful selection and installation of objects work beautifully, her restraint providing clarity to the intoxicating mixture of ideas and disciplines in Rauschenberg's art.

Exhibitions that juxtapose paintings and sculptures with films, photographs and documents of performances and more ephemeral works present special challenges in conveying the shared, enlivening spirit that spurred such works into being. The success of MoMA's presentation in this regard is due largely to the contributions of the video artist and filmmaker Charles Atlas, who designed the multimedia installations inserted, for the most part seamlessly, throughout the exhibition (Fig.88). Multiple screens and soundtracks give life to the conflicting accounts surrounding such events as the Cage-led *Theatre piece no. 1* held at Black Mountain College in 1952 and often called the first Happening, and *9 Evenings: Theatre and Engineering*, the 1966 series of collaborations hosted at the 69th Regiment Armory in New York by

87. *Gull (Jammer)*, by Robert Rauschenberg. 1976. Sewn silk, rattan poles and twine, 261.6 by 508 by 48.3 cm. (Museum of Modern Art, New York; © 2017 Robert Rauschenberg Foundation).

88. Installation view of *Robert Rauschenberg: Among Friends* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, showing a gallery of works devoted to late Combines by Robert Rauschenberg and Jean Tinguely, with video installations by Charles Atlas showing performances by Rauschenberg (Photograph Jonathan Muzikar).

Experiments in Art and Technology, an organisation Rauschenberg and Klüver founded with Robert Whitman and Fred Waldhauer. Often Atlas's interventions are low-key but immensely enlightening, as with the presentation of recovered footage of Cunningham's *Minutiae*, a dance that shares its title with Rauschenberg's set, among the earliest of the Combines, on view nearby (pls.88–89). Likewise, the inclusion of two later performances by Trisha Brown with sets and costumes by Rauschenberg are a highlight, particularly Atlas's ingenious double-screen presentation of *Glacial decoy* (pl.267; 1979), its backdrop of hundreds of changing slides resulting from Rauschenberg's return to photography after almost two decades.

Rauschenberg's and Brown's collaborations are among the few notable elements in the latter portion of the retrospective. After the exhilarating progression through Rauschenberg's work of the 1950s, the galleries devoted to the extraordinary proliferation and cross-fertilisation of his activities and engagements with others in the 1960s are in many regards the heart of the exhibition. The attention drops off precipitously for the work made after his 1976 retrospective, leaving more than three decades of the artist's career confined to a single large gallery and a small room at the exhibition's exit. While resistance to a prolific artist's late work is not unusual, surely much could have been gained on this occasion from a closer examination of the second half of Rauschenberg's career. Just two bodies of work, featured in dances by Brown and Cunningham – the suspended fabric Jammers of the mid-1970s (pls.229–32 and 234) and the scrap-metal Gluts (1986–92; pls.236–43) – receive sustained attention. Other series, such as the Night Shades and Anagrams (respectively, paintings on metal with tarnishes and silkscreened images, and works on paper using digitally transferred photographs and water-soluble dyes), represented by a single example at MoMA (pls.274 and 276), indicate an artist who continued to experiment with different technologies even in his later years. Likewise, Rauschenberg's global art-making tour of the 1980s, Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange (ROCI), which yielded a large body of varied work in its voyage to ten different countries and arguably reorientated the artist's approach to collaboration, is represented by a group of posters and three video monitors in the small final room. Tate's presentation included a few more works made after 1980 but did not present Rauschenberg's later years in a fundamentally different way.[3]

With contributions from fifteen authors in addition to essays by Dickerman and Borchardt-Hume, the exhibition catalogue somewhat mitigates this dearth of attention with important examinations of Rauschenberg's late work.[4] Hiroko Ikegami examines ROCI's impact in some of its host countries, while Sarah Roberts explores Rauschenberg's changing approach to the process of image transfer in works made after 1990. Emily Liebert also writes insightfully about the prevalence of techniques and strategies related to printmaking across Rauschenberg's *œuvre* – a key area of collaborative activity largely missing from the exhibition. Outstanding essays on Rauschenberg's earlier work include Dickerman's consideration of the impact on the artist of Black Mountain College and Catherine Wood's meditation on the relation of objects to performance, elucidating and bringing coherence to Rauschenberg's wide-ranging activities of the early to mid-1960s.

For an exhibition that emphasises the importance of collaboration, there is surprisingly little attempt to define it beyond citing Rauschenberg's own insistence on its benefits. Yet failing to sort out the variety of relationships brought together under the umbrella of 'collaboration' muddies an assessment of such interactions' actual contributions to Rauschenberg's art. MoMA's subtitle *Among Friends* ostensibly narrows the focus to Rauschenberg's network of personal relationships, a structure difficult to uphold in his later life, when paid studio assistants did the work that previously a friend, such as Johns or Cage, might have pitched in to do. Indeed, one wonders if Rauschenberg's shift in the late 1960s to using studio assistants perhaps accounts, in part, for the relative absence of his later work from the retrospective.

The affectionate tone of the subtitle intimates a protective, mutually supportive closeness that is troubled by the almost total absence of consideration given to Rauschenberg's sexual orientation and same-sex relationships. This was already a problem in studies published during the artist's lifetime, but given the fact that his closest collaborators throughout his life were frequently also his lovers, omitting this topic from serious consideration greatly limits our understanding of what collaboration meant to Rauschenberg and how it fed his art.[5] If, as the exhibition's organisers claim, Rauschenberg is 'a defining figure for contemporary art practice', this must surely encompass art whose practitioners identify as queer, trans, or gender-fluid, and build their subversive, non-binary approach to making art on practices that Rauschenberg pioneered. *Robert Rauschenberg* makes a powerful case that his art was all about openness – to experimentation, to working with others, and to bringing art into contact with as many parts of life as possible. We can only hope it has laid a foundation for a more profound openness about this subject as well.

[1] Reviewed by Lynne Cooke in this Magazine, 140 (1998), pp.64–65.

[2] This phrase is used in MoMA's press release and the introductory panel at the exhibition's entrance.

[3] A larger number of late works is apparently to be included at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, where the exhibition will be shown under the title *Robert Rauschenberg: Erasing the Rules* (18th November–25th March 2018).

[4] Catalogue: *Robert Rauschenberg*. Edited by Leah Dickerman and Achim Borchardt-Hume. 414 pp. incl. 436 ills. (The Museum of Modern Art, New York, and Tate Publishing, London, 2016), $75. ISBN 978–1–63345–020–2.

[5] There are a few references to same-sex relationships in the catalogue and exhibition didactics, but these are so discreet as to be mystifying. In fact, *Among Friends* blurs the differences between these and platonic friendships almost as much as the obituaries of earlier generations that described life partners as 'friends'.