

# Painter Robert Rauschenberg (1925-2008) at New York's Guggenheim Museum: "Life Can't Be Stopped"

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5 December 2025

Various events around the world are marking the centennial of the birth of American artist Robert Rauschenberg (who died in 2008). As part of this international commemoration, the Guggenheim New York has mounted "Robert Rauschenberg: Life Can't Be Stopped," which is on view through May 3, 2026. The exhibition focuses mainly on silkscreen paintings and solvent-transfer drawings, but the artist also worked in media as diverse as photography, sculpture and theater.

Rauschenberg belonged to a generation of artists (such as his friends and romantic partners Cy Twombly and Jasper Johns) that emerged between the twilight of Abstract Expressionism in the mid-1950s and the dawn of Pop Art in the early 1960s. Alongside his peers, Rauschenberg deepened the Abstract Expressionists' turn away from political engagement and even abjured serious ideas and large human problems as the basis for artwork. His passive stance spoke to the harmful social indifference that had become the norm in the art world after the traumas and tribulations of the 1930s and 1940s.

This was not the doing, much less the *fault*, of the individual artists, many of whom were both sincere and skilled but rather the objective consequence of disorienting events: above all, the terrible degeneration of the Soviet Union and the various Communist parties and its demoralizing influence on intellectual and cultural life. The confidence of artists and others in the perspective of society moving to a higher stage had been dealt damaging blows.

Rauschenberg was born in Port Arthur, Texas, which was (and remains) the site of one of the largest oil refineries in the US. His parents, Ernest R. and Dora Carolina Rauschenberg were Fundamentalist Christians. Ernest worked for Gulf States Utilities, a light and power company. As a child, the artist experienced some of the tumultuous events of the early 20th century, including the Wall Street crash of 1929 and the Great Depression. During World War II, he was drafted into the US Navy while still a teenager. He served in California as a neuropsychiatric technician in a Navy hospital until his discharge.

After the war, Rauschenberg studied at the Kansas City Art Institute on the GI Bill. At the Académie Julian in Paris, he met fellow art student Susan Weil, whom he would later marry. The two enrolled at Black Mountain College in North Carolina, which was based on philosopher John Dewey's educational ideas. Instruction was experimental and interdisciplinary, and many of the college's faculty members and students were or became highly influential artists. For example, Rauschenberg studied under German American artist Josef Albers and American composer John Cage. At Black Mountain, Rauschenberg pursued painting, sculpture, drawing, printmaking, photography and theater.

Several of the faculty members, including the Polish-born anthropologist Paul Radin, were considered suspect by the FBI, which conducted various investigations into the school. While culturally and

pedagogically "anti-establishment," however, Black Mountain's leading figures (including Cage, Rauschenberg, choreographer Merce Cunningham, poet Charles Olson, architect Buckminster Fuller and others) promoted a liberal humanism or a semi-anarchism, preferring an aesthetic and "lifestyle" response to the repressive atmosphere of the 1950s.

By this period, American painting had already undergone a profound change. The 1930s had been dominated by the explosive movement of the working class during the Depression. The existence of the Soviet Union and workers' radicalism drew many artists toward left-wing politics. Artists such as Ben Shahn, William Gropper, Philip Guston and Jack Levine infused their work with their radical views.

Many of the artists who later became Abstract Expressionists were also sympathizers of the Communist Party or other left-wing tendencies during the '30s, including Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman, Adolph Gottlieb and Robert Motherwell. However, the major defeats suffered by the working class in Germany and Spain, as well as the monumental crimes of Stalinism (e.g., the Moscow Trials and the Stalin-Hitler Pact) carried out in the name of "communism," led to a pulling away of the intelligentsia from socialism, revolution and the working class.

These traumas were followed by the slaughter of World War II and the nuclear incineration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the United States. America became the dominant world power. The postwar boom raised the population's living standards but also spawned a banal consumer culture fueled by an expanding mass media. Anticommunism became the state religion, and social conformity the rule. The imperialist powers made deals with Stalin and the Soviet bureaucracy but also took advantage of the latter's totalitarian character to terrorize the population with the danger of the "Red menace."

As one commentator noted, all this led among artists to a great "rush inward" between the late 1930s and the late 1940s. As we have noted, Marxism, or some version of it, tended to give way to psychoanalysis. Art critic and historian Meyer Schapiro writing in 1952 asserted that contemporary artists "would welcome the chance to paint works of broad human content for a larger audience," but they "find no sustained opportunities for such an art; they have no alternative but to cultivate in their art the only or surest realms of freedom—the interior world of their fancies, sensations, and feelings, and the medium itself."

Faced with the brutality and philistinism of capitalism and mistakenly believing that "socialism" had failed, many artists lost hope in the prospect for radical social change. They largely lacked the capacity to recognize the restabilization of capitalism as temporary. Meanwhile, the anti-Marxist Frankfurt School and related trends, though putatively leftist, encouraged demoralization and withdrawal. The Abstract Expressionists sought "timeless," "universal" themes often in the iconography of ancient

religions and Jungian psychology. Though they produced dynamic, heroic work in some cases, theirs ultimately was a current of despair.

Other changes in the art world were contributing to a crisis within modernism itself. The gallery system was expanding, and art was becoming integrated into the culture industry. Museums, galleries and the art market were beginning to professionalize and absorb the postwar avant-garde.

Rauschenberg's work emerged from these complex, often painful processes. Though an acquaintance and admirer of the Abstract Expressionists, he rejected their earnestness and their grand, existential (and Existentialist) themes. In fact, his work sometimes poked fun at their project without proposing new values or goals. By "debasement" his art with everyday materials, Rauschenberg showed more of a kinship with Dada, which had emerged during and after World War I. Yet he quite deliberately eschewed Dada's caustic social criticism.

One of the earliest works in the Guggenheim exhibition is the monochrome "Untitled (Red Painting)" (c. 1953). As practiced by Rauschenberg's predecessors such as Kazimir Malevich and contemporaries like Yves Klein, monochrome painting had emphasized purity through even application of paint on canvas. Malevich and Klein had also striven for "spiritual transcendence," whatever that precisely might have meant.

Rauschenberg, however, stuck scraps of fabric and newspaper onto the canvas before covering everything in red washes, splatters and impasto. Far from being uniform, the resulting surface buckles, sags and cracks. The various shades of red alternately suggest tomato sauce, ketchup and blood. Through his technique, Rauschenberg embraced contingency and "non-art" materials (even debris), thus rejecting ideas of purity, metaphysics and the "autonomy" of painting. Despite its strong sensory appeal, the painting implicitly deflates the social and spiritual ambitions of Malevich and the Abstract Expressionists. There is, to be frank, an aspect of trivialization, which was in its own way an accommodation to the cultural and political hardships.

As certain artists posed the issue to themselves, what was the alternative now to both political radicalism, widely associated with Stalinist "Communism," and the tormented emotionalism of the Abstract Expressionists? One option was a sort of mockery of high art through the elevation of "ordinariness" as a value in itself and the worship of the accomplished material or psychic facts, even if distorted or shredded, particularly given the economic "successes" of American postwar society.

Discarded materials became the focus of a series that Rauschenberg dubbed "Combines." "Bed" (1955) incorporated a quilt and a pillow splattered with paint, and "Canyon" (1959) featured a stuffed golden eagle. These works are not included in the exhibition, but one canvas at the Guggenheim shows Rauschenberg's transition from the Combines to a series of silkscreen paintings.

"Untitled" (1963) is a collage of silkscreened images amid washes and strokes of bold primary colors. Common things such as a barometer and a storefront are prominent. At the center is an image of Cunningham, with whom Rauschenberg collaborated. A toaster (painted pink) and plastic container are also attached to the canvas. Despite the apparent randomness of the images and the rough brushwork, a definite sense of composition emerges.

Unlike his near-contemporary Andy Warhol (1928-1987), whose silkscreen paintings depicted celebrities and consumer products, Rauschenberg continued to embrace everyday life. But neither artist viewed his subjects critically. Neither suggested that society in Cold War America needed to be changed—or even *could* be changed. Rauschenberg, undoubtedly a thoughtful, gifted individual, foreshadowed Pop Art's deplorable glorification of an unmediated surface reality.

The most imposing silkscreen painting in the exhibition is the 32-foot-long "Barge" (1962-63). The photos in the predominantly black-and-

white canvas invoke Rauschenberg's recurring themes of flight (a mosquito, a satellite, parrots), urban life (a construction site, water towers), sports (swimmers, football players), transportation (a truck, a cloverleaf interchange) and art history (the "Rokeby Venus" [1647-51] by Spanish painter Diego Velázquez). These photos jostle with each other and with drips, smears and splashes of paint. Despite its inclusion of a military truck and a spacecraft, the painting makes no discernible comment about American militarism, the Space Race or the Cold War. No image is given prominence over the others, and the ensemble is presented with more or less docile acceptance.

In 1964, Rauschenberg won the Grand Prize at the Venice Biennale, a prestigious international cultural exhibition. This victory was interpreted not only as an official embrace of Pop Art but also, and more fundamentally, as a Cold War triumph for the US. At the time, the US State Department and CIA made use of artists, musicians and others as part of its propaganda warfare against "Soviet communism," contrasting the supposed freedoms artists enjoyed in the "democratic" West, including the freedom to create experimental art, with repressive conditions in the USSR. None of the artists, rendered vulnerable by their indifference or active hostility to larger political concerns, objected to this fraudulent campaign.

In 1966, in opposition to the Vietnam War, Rauschenberg, a life-long pacifist, provided much of the funding for the "Artists' Tower of Protest" built in an empty lot on the Sunset Strip in Hollywood. Four years later, again in an anti-war protest, Rauschenberg withdrew from the US pavilion at the Venice Biennale.

He often returned to the silkscreen technique, experimenting with supports other than canvas. Rauschenberg painted "Easter Lake (Galvanic Suite)" (1988) on galvanized steel. Composed in three rough columns, the painting includes images of a curtain, chickens, bicycles, printed fabric and swans. Its palette comprises white, airy grays and black, while the swans are rendered against a faint pink background. A large area of negative space adds to the painting's airiness. The steel gives the images harder edges and endows Rauschenberg's gestural smears and splashes with a certain coldness.

The world had passed through major upheavals between "Barge" and "Easter Lake (Galvanic Suite)." However, artists like Rauschenberg, committed to an approach that *consciously* rejected a concern with concrete historical and social development, could not in their work valuably, richly reflect or make sense of the enormous social shocks. A detrimentally static, frozen element makes itself felt. Rauschenberg's artistic technique and his political semi-abstention remained fundamentally the same.

Largely, technological change found reflection in his art. Realizing that they increased his control over color and value, Rauschenberg began using large-scale inkjet printers in the early 1990s. "Bilbao Scraps [Anagram (A Pun)]" (1997) was created using this technique. At the United Nations (UN) Conference on Environment and Development in 1992, Rauschenberg had learned that the chemical solvents he often used were environmentally hazardous. For "Bilbao Scraps," he used inks based in soy or vegetable dye instead.

Rauschenberg created this painting at about the time that a retrospective of his work was being shown in the titular Spanish city. He used his own photos of Bilbao, which show street scenes, a café interior, a stained glass window, cardboard boxes and pot lids. Again, the contrast with Warhol's favored subjects is notable. Warm and dark tones predominate, and Rauschenberg's hand is evident in the imperfect transfer of the images to the support, as well as in the cockeyed arrangement of photos.

The Guggenheim exhibition is silent about the Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange (ROCI), which the artist announced at the UN in 1984. The stated purpose of ROCI was to foster international dialogue and cultural understanding through art. Mostly at his own expense,

Rauschenberg toured 10 countries in seven years, taking pictures and making artworks inspired by the cultures that he observed. He often donated artworks to local institutions.

This project took Rauschenberg to countries or areas that US authorities had targeted for cultural diplomacy (meaning propaganda and covert action). The itinerary included China, the USSR, Berlin (then divided between Eastern and Western zones) and Cuba. Rauschenberg also visited Mexico and Chile, the latter of which was suffering under the bloody, US-backed dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet. Whatever Rauschenberg's intentions, the "apolitical" ROCI provided de facto support for various US imperialist operations.

The Guggenheim exhibition does not fully convey Rauschenberg's complexity as an artist. Still less does it examine the era of artistic, economic and political shifts and transitions during which he emerged.

In important respects, Rauschenberg foreshadowed artists' turn toward postmodernist subjectivism and pessimism. His supposed demystification of the artwork (e.g., in the Combines) inspired the Conceptual artists who followed him, for whom the "Concept" was "the most important aspect of the work." They de-emphasized artistic form and aesthetics, arguing, like Sol LeWitt, that "execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art." But artists such as LeWitt, Joseph Kosuth and Lawrence Weiner moved away from the sensuality of Rauschenberg's work toward colder, language-based forms. Their work was more rarefied and even less socially engaged than Rauschenberg's.

Similarly, Rauschenberg's appropriation and juxtaposition of photographs from mass media pointed the way for later artists like Barbara Kruger and David Salle. But Kruger's grim word art and Salle's unintelligible, overlapping (and sometimes pornographic) images convey a far bleaker perspective than Rauschenberg's.

Overall, Rauschenberg's efforts convey an appealing warmth, physicality, spontaneity and embrace of human culture in various forms. He inevitably reflected the conditions and contradictions of his time, which were not conducive to artwork that took on titanic questions or challenged the status quo. Rauschenberg's acceptance of the world as he found it was a symptom of the historical difficulties and a general retreat by the artists from social reality and commitment.

As encouraging and heartfelt as they were, Rauschenberg's aesthetic rebellions (e.g., his blurring of categories, his "messiness" and his use of discarded materials) never coincided with consistent opposition to the art market or to the political system.

The Guggenheim exhibition, though small, is worthwhile for anyone interested in the development of modern art. Rauschenberg's work reflects the crisis of perspective that continues to afflict art today.



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