

Explain the different tactics Robert Rauschenberg used in his work to contest abstract expressionism. Consider, as part of your response, the following quote:
It is neither Art for Art, nor Art against Art. I am for Art, but for Art that has nothing to do with Art. Art has everything to do with life, but it has nothing to do with Art.

Robert Rauschenberg used numerous techniques in his art to challenge the hegemony of abstract expressionism. By introducing a new pictorial surface onto which he could incorporate themes and subjects from the outside world, Rauschenberg directly contested the distillation of painting revolving solely around the aestheticism of the medium. He composed his combine paintings carefully considering balance and rhythm, bringing in real life objects to demystify high art. He was critical of the idea proposed by the abstract expressionists that feelings and emotions could be conveyed through the colours and brushstrokes, and Rauschenberg used satire to censure ideas of the genius of the artist, and the creative authorship of art. His own sexuality not only informed his artworks but challenged the extreme masculinity of the prevailing art establishment. By incorporating three dimensional objects, and mass media icons into his work, Rauschenberg was an early exponent of Pop art, and attempted to democratise his practice by relating it directly to life.

Following World War II, New York had become the new centre of the visual art world as the birthplace of abstract expressionism. Covering a variety of painting styles, its practitioners conveyed a strong emotional content in their work, emphasising the sensuousness of paint and working on large canvasses. The abstract expressionists were influenced by surrealism in unleashing the power of the subconscious, and this was combined with a response to the conservative post-war American society. Artists felt a need to communicate their innermost feelings and experiences through bold and assertive work reflecting actions and emotions. Whilst abstract expressionism was lofty and dramatic and created by older heterosexual men, the heroic nature of their practice was challenged by Rauschenberg who desired art that was married to life rather than to itself.

Rauschenberg proposed flatbed or work-surface picture planes as the foundation of an artistic language that dealt with a new experience. The art critic Leo Steinberg described this period of Rauschenberg's practice as the invention of a pictorial surface that allowed the viewer 'back in' amongst the elitist notions of abstract

expressionism.¹ Rauschenberg's desire to use symbols and semiotics were incongruous with available types of pictorial surfaces that were too exclusive and homogenous. As a result, he moved away from the idea of the painting as a vertical surface towards a compositional method that Steinberg called the flatbed picture plane, upon which objects or images could be scattered. "Against Rauschenberg's picture plane you can pin or project any image because it will not work as the glimpse of a world, but as a scrap of printed material. And you can attach any object, as long as it beds itself down on the work surface."² While the painting of the abstract expressionists was visionary and prophetic, Rauschenberg's ability to accommodate recognisable objects and present them in a democratically understandable way was extremely revolutionary.

Rauschenberg redirected the viewer's attention from the psyche of the painter onto the outside world. Branden Joseph described his artistic position as "anti expressive, anti subjective, and anti authoritarian" that was responsible for a broadening of cultural expression by introducing a radically different point of view.³ Rauschenberg rejected the concept of the metaphorisation of paint marks for conflict and struggle that was heralded by critics as the true genius underlying abstract expressionism. Instead, he used his materials in a neutral manner, attempting to present facts rather than representations. Using assemblage, he united real life objects, often of three dimensions, together with painting to present a more logical and transparent art. Rauschenberg termed these pieces as combine paintings, which lay between painting and sculpture, some hanging on the wall others resting on the ground.

Canyon (1959) blurred these boundaries even further, incorporating elements that exist in real space, such as an eagle, protruding from the canvas, or subject to actual gravity like the pillow that hangs from the base of the piece. Rauschenberg mostly worked within "syncopated grid," a formal structure where he weighted and

¹ Leo Steinberg, "Reflections on the State of Criticism" in *Robert Rauschenberg*, Branden W. Joseph (ed.), Massachusetts Institute of Technology: Athens, GA, USA, 2002, p. 35

² *Ibid.*, p. 32

³ Branden W. Joseph, *Random Order: Robert Rauschenberg and the Neo-Avant-Garde*, MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, USA, 2003, p. 67

composed lights, colours, and shapes.⁴ In *Canyon* he has the weight of the hanging pillow offsetting the strength of the eagle's wings as it pulls upward into the image-laden sky. Two narratives are brought together by Rauschenberg in this piece, America's role in the Space Race, and a retelling of the legend of Ganymede who was seized as by an eagle to be cup bearer for Jupiter. Stuffed animals were a reoccurring material in Rauschenberg's work, and separated him from Marcel Duchamp's preference for mass produced objects which he used for his ready-mades, or to Pop art's concentration on consumer culture. In this piece, he uses the eagle as a double motif, both for its role in the Ganymede legend and as a symbol of American power. Similarly, the image of the night sky represents both the heavens into which Ganymede was raised, and a symbol for the aspirations of the USA to beat the Soviet Union into outer space. This piece is heavy with allusion, metaphors and narratives, all of which are ideas in direct contrast to the philosophy of abstract expressionism. While Rauschenberg utilises vigorous brushwork to draw together the items in his combine, they do not contain the same sense of emotional commitment.

Rauschenberg was critical of the search for symbolism and meaning through colours, and the emotional content that they were projecting upon the canvas. *Collection* (1954) was a significant work in Rauschenberg's challenge to celebrated modes of representation. At the top of the field is a reference to abstract expressionism and the notion of mark making, with the empty areas of white, acknowledging the "confrontation of the artist with the blank canvas arena".⁵ Rauschenberg then presents the rest of the canvas as a collage, as a comment on the limitations that paint creates. He uses his paint strokes as another form of combine, all separated and detached, and refusing to amalgamate to become an overall aesthetic construction.⁶ The colours do not mix, and while they are applied in an active fashion, they are also not reflectionary. Rauschenberg uses both paint and crayon to scribble and scrawl over the picture plane to add another layer of meaning, deliberately challenging the abstract expressionists spontaneous and affective use of paint.

⁴ Mark Stevens, "Collage Education", *nyMAG*, December 15 2005, accessed 24 May 2011, <http://nymag.com/nymetro/arts/art/reviews/15332/>

⁵ Joseph, *Random Order: Robert Rauschenberg and the Neo-Avant-Garde*, p. 110

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 112

White Paintings were an innovative exploration in to temporality and served as a direct contestation to the dominant hegemony of abstract expressionism. The earliest of these works, *White Painting with Numbers* (1949) is made up of scattered and strewn lines and numbers which compose a surface that cannot be construed into anything else. In these pieces, Rauschenberg explored the idea of emptiness and negation. At the time of his Stable Gallery exhibition in 1953, Rauschenberg commented that the *White Paintings* were “either too full or too empty to be thought, thereby they remain visual experiences. These pictures are not art.”⁷ The response to the exhibition was mixed, with the pieces considered practical jokes by sections of the audience, and more favourably as strong challenges to the status quo by others.⁸ Rauschenberg was associated with many of the more established New York artists, and while they respected and liked him as a man and contemporary, they disregarded his art as “fooling around, not really being serious”.⁹ These pieces which were originally based on the application of printed matter and other flat materials to the canvas, soon developed to incorporate a wider range of assemblage.

Rauschenberg further explored the critique of an artists underlying feelings generating their art in *Factum I* and *Factum II* (1957), which offered a satirical comment on the emotional spontaneity that was a heralded aspect of the abstract expressionists. One of the canvasses is an adapted example of the abstract expressionist style while the other is an identical copy, right down to individual brushstrokes. The viewer is unable to determine “which came first, or which was the product of spontaneous creativity”.¹⁰ These two pieces are excellent examples of Rauschenberg’s contesting nature. The artist commented that even he could not tell the difference between the emotional content of one and the other after painting them.¹¹ *Factum* undermined the concept of the uniqueness and authenticity of the art object at a time when gesture was celebrated.

⁷ Joseph, *Random Order: Robert Rauschenberg and the Neo-Avant-Garde*, p. 57

⁸ Mary Lynn Kotz, *Rauschenberg: Art and Life*, Abrams Books: New York, NY, USA, 2004, p. 70

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 79

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 90

¹¹ Jonathan Fineberg, “Robert Rauschenberg's Reservoir”, *American Art*, 12, no. 1, EBSCOhost, accessed May 24, 2011

Of all the abstract expressionists, Willem de Kooning was the artist who Rauschenberg admired the most. In a testimonial for de Kooning Rauschenberg quoted a conversation the two had. Rauschenberg asked de Kooning whether he was bothered that most of the New York artists painted like him, and he replied that it didn't worry him, as they "couldn't do the ones that *don't work*".¹² *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953) is Rauschenberg's most daring and iconoclastic piece. Rauschenberg went to de Kooning's studio and told him that he'd like to erase one of his drawings as a work of art. de Kooning was intrigued by the idea, but purposefully chose to give Rauschenberg a drawing of ink and crayon that would be difficult to erase completely. Rauschenberg spent one month attempting to get the page completely clean – to a state similar to that of his most blank *White Paintings*. Rauschenberg's practice was based on the idea that the artist's feelings at the time of work were unimportant, and this piece represents that notion. He was effectively destroying a work of art created by someone who he celebrated in order to create a grand 'gesture' of his own. Despite stating the he "erased the de Kooning not out of any negative response" and merely needed an artist of his stature to create the necessary tension in the piece to push the work out in to the world.¹³ Whilst he was adamant that his actions were not motivated by critique or negation, the symbolism of Rauschenberg's philosophical action is perhaps his bluntest contest to abstract expressionism.

In one of his most iconic combines *Bed* (1953), Rauschenberg took his own bed, smeared paint on its pillow and quilt and propped it vertically against the wall. In taking such a recognisable object and placing it in the vertical position of art, Rauschenberg plays upon the Duchampian concept of authorship. Although the materials come from a bed, and are arranged like one, the artist has caused them to lose function but has maintained its association with intimate moments in life; sleep, dreams and sex.¹⁴ Critics have also seen the drenched fabric containing allusions to violence and morbidity, creating an "ultimate moment of blissful and terrifying

¹² Herman Cherry, "Willem de Kooning" *Art Journal*, 48, no. 3, EBSCOhost, accessed May 24, 2011

¹³ Vincent Katz, "A Genteel Iconoclasm", *Tate Etc.*, 8, 2006, accessed 18 May 2011, <http://www.tate.org.uk/tateetc/issue8/erasuregenteel.htm>

¹⁴ The Museum of Modern Art, *MoMA Highlights*, The Museum of Modern Art: New York, NY, USA, 2004, p. 207

confusion”.¹⁵ From this point on, Rauschenberg used his combines to further separate his art and position himself at the cutting edge of the New York scene.

Monogram (1959) is his most outlandish work. A stuffed Angora goat with a rubber tyre around its middle stands on roughly painted boards mounted on castors and is splattered with paint, a suggestion of action painting. This hybridity of painting and sculpture is full of allusions to the gap that Rauschenberg felt existed between art and life. The tyre on the goats body depicts the burden the animal is under, struggling to support an object that in turn held a large machine, and from this relationship the artwork title is sourced. Rauschenberg saw the integration of the goat with the tyre as being similar to the interweaving of letters in a monogram.¹⁶ The incorporation of an object as peculiar as taxidermy into an artwork breaks down the barrier between banal and high art, and by elaborating his subject’s meaning through additions Rauschenberg revealed his calculated and considered thoughts.

Sexuality was also a key tenet of exploration throughout Rauschenberg’s oeuvre. In stark contrast to abstract expressionism which emphasised its heterosexuality, Rauschenberg was not afraid to disseminate from a homosexual or bisexual perspective which was extremely significant for other contemporary artists. Through the 1960s, Rauschenberg’s inquisitive personality drove him to explore and experiment with a wider range of media. Driven on by an insatiable appetite to create new things, and to simply investigate as much as possible, he created a series of work using new technologies such as lighting and video projection. Combining this medium with an incorporation of a broad range of sexualities, Rauschenberg was working in stark contrast to the masculine ideals of abstract expressionism. He was comfortable with using naked male and female bodies as source material, often presenting ambiguous sexual imagery, and created work that tested the boundaries

¹⁵ Helen Molesworth, “Before Bed” in *Robert Rauschenberg*, Branden W. Joseph (ed.), Massachusetts Institute of Technology: Athens, GA, USA, 2002, p. 89

¹⁶ Kenneth Benider, “The sins of the world”, *Apollo Magazine*, October 1 2006, accessed 20 May 2011, <http://www.apollo-magazine.com/october-2006/68567/the-sins-of-the-world.shtml>

between pornography and high art in the *Carnal Clocks* (1969) series.¹⁷ In these pieces, Rauschenberg presented a variety of close up photographs, including photos of his own and his friend's sex organs, on a reflective box. This reflection served to project the image of the viewer back to them as they view the piece, directly incorporating them into the piece whilst startling the audience with the graphic imagery.

Rauschenberg is strongly affiliated with his contemporary Jasper Johns, as the two went against the grain of abstract expressionism, looking to create a link between abstraction and representation in their art. Johns, whose handwriting created the caption on *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, produced works using similar subject matter to Rauschenberg, such as numbers, along with maps, flags and targets. The two were described as being neo-Pop artists for incorporating recognisable objects into high art. *Field Painting* (1963) by Johns is a piece which alludes to the colour field artists Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman. Similar to his friend's combines, Johns chose to break up the field by incorporating stencilled letters, neon lights and paint tins to subvert the idea that pure painting was able to convey raw emotion and instil a heightened state of consciousness in the viewer.

Rauschenberg's influence was also seen in art movements that followed him. Roy Lichtenstein stated that he was responsible for the return of the subject, marking the end of abstract expressionism. Along with others, such as Andy Warhol, Rauschenberg pioneered the use of Plexiglass, mirrors, plastic and Mylar as print surfaces.¹⁸ *Star Quarters I-IV* (1970) is made up of four silk screen prints containing urban and natural themes on mirror Mylar polyester film detailing pictorial representations of constellations over the four seasons.

¹⁷ Catherine Craft, "Grand Central" in *Robert Rauschenberg: Haywire*, Cornelia Faist and Alfred Kren (eds.), Hatje: Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany, 1997, p. 26

¹⁸ Benjamin Genocchio, "Master of Mixed, and Stirred, Media", *The New York Times*, February 13 2005, accessed 25 May 2011, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9E07E2DF173AF930A25751C0A9639C8B63>

Rauschenberg's practice was lengthy, and as Pop took over as a dominant art genre, he used his art to further explore his interests in current affairs. *Currents* (1970) was a series of photo silkscreen prints based on collages of headlines from newspaper and popular magazine sources from across the United States. The images deal with the social issues of the time; racism, war and terrorism, and the bluntness of the headlines underscore the volatility of the time. John Stoller, the director of Gallery 12 in Minneapolis where the works were first exhibited, said about Rauschenberg, "he was the type of person who took these social issues very, very seriously. He was the most remarkable, extraordinary man. He spoke poetry."¹⁹ Utilising consumer items as subject matter, Rauschenberg was at the forefront of Pop art, as he created work to reflect life.

His *Gluts* series produced between 1986 and 1995 are assemblages of found objects into new sculptural forms. These pieces provoke the viewer to question just what it is they are viewing. From the outset, Rauschenberg's sculptural practice involved the use of discards and detritus and he loved exploring junkyards for material. Thompson states that he "always embraced the non-hierarchical and real, he stood outside the confines of fine art in his own undemarcated territory."²⁰ By sourcing this everyday material, whether it be an iconic Coca-Cola logo boards or commonplace road signs, Rauschenberg was creating very democratic and identifiable art. He transformed the scrap-metal detritus into wall reliefs and freestanding sculptures that recalled his earlier combines, giving the audience an experience of looking at everything in terms of what its many possibilities might be. The democratic nature and accessibility of these 'neo-pop' pieces are an excellent demonstration of Rauschenberg's challenge to the genre of abstract expressionism.

In attacking the domination of abstract expression of post war America Robert Rauschenberg used a range of tactics. By bringing the real world into art through found objects, incorporating photographs, newspaper clippings and referencing

¹⁹ Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum, *Au Courant: Robert Rauschenberg's Currents*, June 20 2009, accessed May 19 2011,

<http://www.weisman.umn.edu/exhibits/Rauschenberg/comm.html>

²⁰ Mimi Thompson, "The Inside Out Idea" in *Robert Rauschenberg: Gluts*, Susan Davidson and David White (eds.), Guggenheim Museum: Venice, Italy, 2009.

current affairs he made art more accessible. The three dimensional nature of many of his works, sometimes in an ugly and confronting manner, gave them a shocking impact. His unconventional monochrome palette challenged the idea that emotions could be expressed through colour. The ironic style of Rauschenberg's combines attacked the individuality of the artist and in his innovative use of sexual images he pushed back the limits of conventionality. Over his long, successful and ground-breaking career Robert Rauschenberg stayed true to his principle that "painting is more like the real world when it's made out of the real world".²¹

²¹ Carolyn Lanchner, *Robert Rauschenberg*, The Museum of Modern Art: New York, NY, USA, 2009, p. 25

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