

A Free Course on the History of Western Art

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- Welcome. This is one of over 200 talks on the history of Western Art. I have arranged the talks chronologically starting with cave art through to art produced in the last few years.

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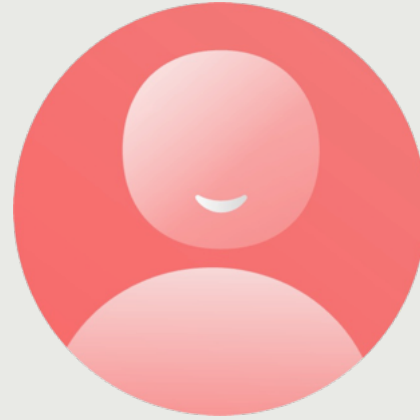
59-02 ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG

DR. LAURENCE SHAFE

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Robert Rauschenberg
Bed
1955



- This is Chapter 59 on **Neo-Dada**, a loosely defined tendency in American and European art of the 1950s and early 1960s that revived the spirit of the original Dada movement — it embraced chance, contradiction, and blurred the division between art and life.
- This talk is on **Robert Rauschenberg**, an artist who shattered the boundary between art and life. By inventing "**Combines**"—hybrids of painting and sculpture—he integrated everyday **detritus like tyres and street signs into high art**. His fearless experimentation with silk-screening and technology paved the way for Pop Art, forever expanding the definition of what art could be.

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Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008)

Self-Portrait

c. 1965

Photograph

Variable

Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, New York

Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008), Self-Portrait, c. 1965, Photograph, Variable, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, New York

- **Milton Ernest Rauschenberg** was born on 22 October 1925 in **Port Arthur, Texas**, an oil-refinery town on the **Gulf Coast**. His father worked for a utilities company; his mother, **Dora**, was deeply religious and famously frugal — she made the family's clothes from fabric scraps, a habit that embarrassed young **Milton** but arguably planted the seeds of his later collage practice. **Rauschenberg** was dyslexic, a poor student, and had no idea art existed as a profession until he stumbled into the **Huntington Art Gallery** while on leave from the **U.S. Navy** in **San Diego** during **World War II**. That single visit changed his life.
- After the war he studied at the **Kansas City Art Institute** on the **G.I. Bill**, changed his name from **Milton** to **Robert** because it sounded more artistic, and travelled to **Paris** to study at the **Académie Julian**, where he met **Susan Weil**. Together they enrolled at **Black Mountain College** in **North Carolina** under the fearsome **Bauhaus** master **Josef Albers**. **Albers** loathed **Rauschenberg's** work. **Rauschenberg** later called him the most important teacher he ever had.
- At **Black Mountain** he met composer **John Cage** and choreographer **Merce Cunningham** (pronounced “MURSS KUN-ing-am”, rhymes with “nurse”), beginning collaborations that would reshape postwar American culture. He married **Susan Weil** in 1950; their son **Christopher** was born in 1951 but the marriage lasted barely two years. **Rauschenberg** then began a relationship with **Jasper Johns** in 1953–54 that would prove one of the most significant creative partnerships of the twentieth century. It ended in 1961 partly because of the pressure on them from

their sudden fame at a time when same-sex relationships were illegal.

- Over a nearly sixty-year career, **Rauschenberg** invented the **Combine**, pioneered silkscreen painting, pushed printmaking to monumental scale, cofounded **Experiments in Art and Technology**, and launched the **Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange**. He won the **Grand Prize** at the **Venice Biennale** in 1964, the **National Medal of Arts** in 1993, and the **Praemium Imperiale** in 1998. He died of heart failure on **Captiva Island, Florida**, on 12 May 2008, aged eighty-two. His foundation continues to support artists worldwide.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Rauschenberg — ROW-shen-berg

Académie Julian — ah-kah-day-MEE zhoo-lee-AHN

Josef Albers — YO-zef AL-bers

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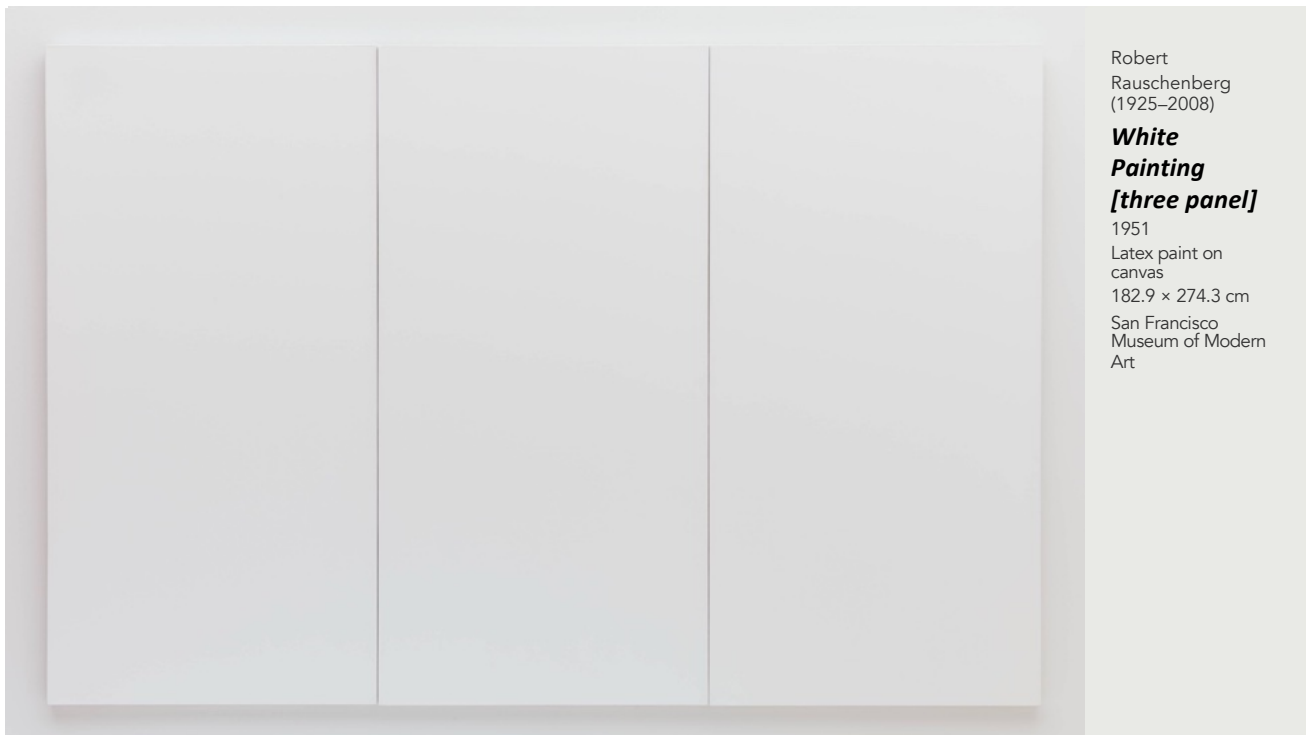
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Robert
Rauschenberg
(1925–2008)

**White
Painting
[three panel]**

1951

Latex paint on
canvas

182.9 × 274.3 cm

San Francisco
Museum of Modern
Art

Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008), **White Painting** [three panel], 1951, Latex paint on canvas, 182.9 × 274.3 cm, **San Francisco Museum of Modern Art**

- Three identical white canvases hang side by side, utterly blank. No brushstroke is visible. No texture, no gesture, no image. They look like freshly painted walls — which, in a sense, is exactly what they are. **Rauschenberg** rolled ordinary house paint onto the surface with a roller, deliberately eliminating every trace of the artist's hand. The result is the visual equivalent of silence.
- When first shown publicly at the **Stable Gallery** in **New York** in 1953, critics were outraged. **James Fitzsimmons** called them a "gratuitously destructive act." Others dismissed them as a cheap swindle. Yet **John Cage**, **Rauschenberg's** close friend and collaborator, understood immediately. He described the **White Paintings** as "airports for lights, shadows, and particles" — surfaces that reflected the environment around them, changing with the time of day, the weather, even the number of people in the room.
- **Rauschenberg** created the **White Paintings** in the summer of 1951 at **Black Mountain College**, right under the nose of **Josef Albers**, whose rigorous colour theory classes he was enduring. The paintings were an act of quiet rebellion — **Albers** worshipped colour; **Rauschenberg** eliminated it entirely. **Cage's** landmark silent composition 4'33" (1952) was directly inspired by these paintings. **Cage** later acknowledged that **Rauschenberg** got there first.
- The radical twist: **Rauschenberg** declared these paintings were meant to be repainted. He had his studio assistant **Brice Marden** — later a celebrated artist in his own right — refabricate them in the 1960s. **Rauschenberg** said "today" was their

maker. The physical object mattered less than the concept. This made the **White Paintings** some of the earliest examples of conceptual art, predating the movement by more than a decade.

Pronunciation Guide

Stable Gallery — STAY-bul

Brice Marden — Brice MAR-den

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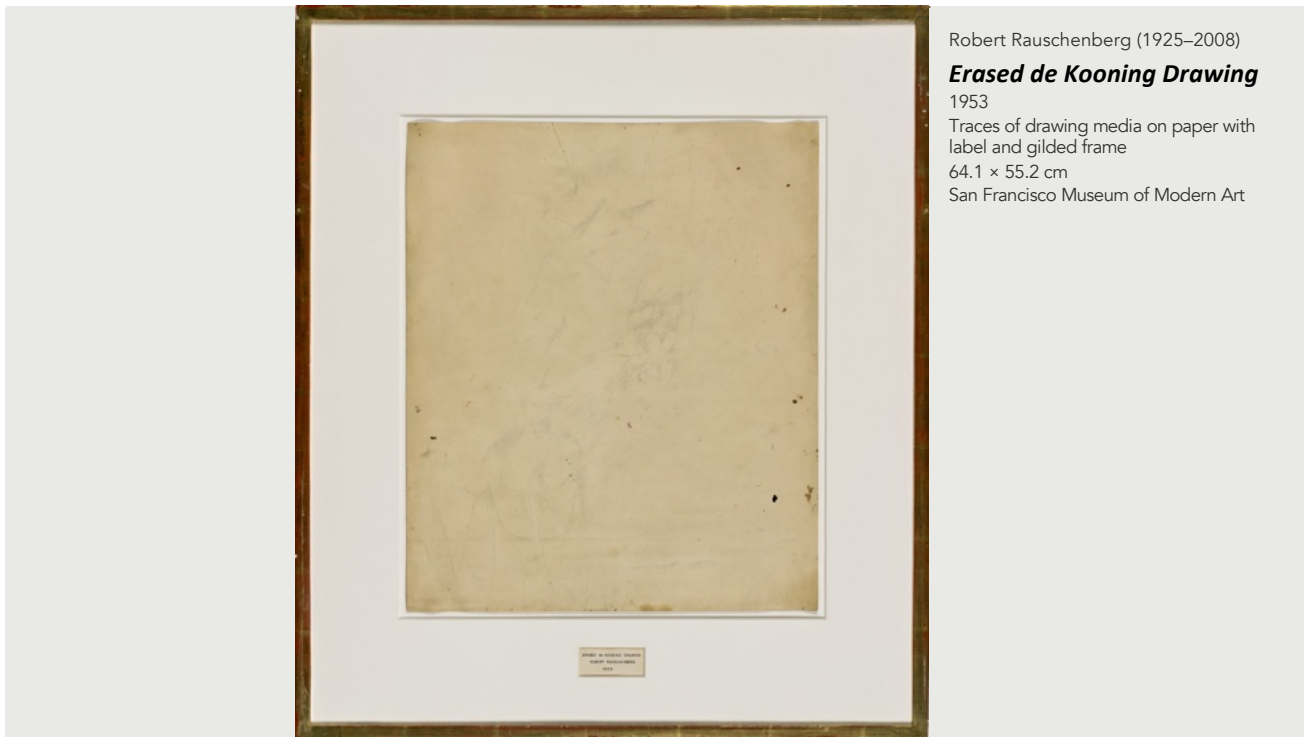
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Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008)
Erased de Kooning Drawing
1953
Traces of drawing media on paper with
label and gilded frame
64.1 × 55.2 cm
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008), *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, 1953, Traces of drawing media on paper with label and gilded frame, 64.1 × 55.2 cm, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

- An almost blank piece of paper sits inside a gilded frame. Faint ghostly traces — barely perceptible smudges of graphite, crayon, and ink — are all that remain of what was once a heavily worked drawing by **Willem de Kooning**, the reigning king of **Abstract Expressionism**. Below the paper, an inscription in **Jasper Johns**'s careful hand reads: "ERASED DE KOONING DRAWING / ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG / 1953."
- **Rauschenberg** came up with the idea after his **White Paintings**. If he could make art by applying nothing, could he also make art by removing everything? He tried erasing his own drawings first but felt the result lacked conviction. He needed a drawing that was already unquestionably a work of art. He nervously knocked on **de Kooning**'s studio door, armed with a bottle of Jack Daniel's. **De Kooning** understood the concept immediately but said, "I don't like it." He then deliberately chose a densely worked piece — charcoal, pencil, crayon, oil paint — and warned the younger artist: "I'm going to make it so hard for you to erase this." It took **Rauschenberg** a month and dozens of erasers.
- Was it homage, provocation, vandalism, or Oedipal patricide? **SFMOMA**'s curator **Leah Dickerman** noted the work "eludes easy answers." In 2010, the museum used advanced digital imaging to recover faint traces of **de Kooning**'s original — several figures facing in different directions, including at least one female nude. But the revelation did not change the work's essential mystery.
- **Rauschenberg** was twenty-seven and virtually unknown when he committed this

audacious act. **De Kooning** was at the absolute peak of his career. The younger artist was also gay in 1950s America, and some scholars have read the erasure as a symbolic challenge to the hyper-masculine culture of **Abstract Expressionism**. The gilded frame and inscription — added by **Johns**, **Rauschenberg**'s lover — give the piece the ceremonial gravitas of a **Renaissance** drawing, adding another layer of irony.

Pronunciation Guide

Willem de Kooning — VIL-em duh KOO-ning

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Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008)

Bed

1955

Combine: oil and graphite on pillow, quilt, and sheet, mounted on wood support

191.1 × 80 × 20.3 cm

The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008), **Bed**, 1955, **Combine**: oil and graphite on pillow, quilt, and sheet, mounted on wood support, 191.1 × 80 × 20.3 cm, **The Museum of Modern Art, New York**

- A real pillow, sheet, and patchwork quilt hang vertically on the wall like a painting, splattered with drips and streaks of oil paint in red, yellow, black, and white. The bedding is rumoured to be **Rauschenberg's** own. He later recalled that it was summer, he was broke, and he had nothing else to paint on. The quilt kept insisting on being a bed no matter what he did to it, so he gave in and added a pillow. It remains one of the most provocative objects in the Museum of Modern Art.
- **Bed** is a key early example of what **Rauschenberg** called a **Combine** — a word he coined to describe works that were neither painting nor sculpture but inhabited the space between the two. **MoMA** curator **Ann Temkin** observed that the work "literally wanted to mess up the idea of painting as something pure and elegant." The drips clearly reference **Jackson Pollock**, who would die the following year. But where **Pollock** poured paint onto raw canvas on the floor, **Rauschenberg** poured it onto the most intimate domestic object imaginable.
- The Italian authorities initially refused to exhibit **Bed** at the 1958 **Festival of Two Worlds in Spoleto**, reportedly convinced it was evidence of a murder. When it was shown at the **documenta II** exhibition in **Kassel** in 1959, a review in **Der Spiegel** barely mentioned **Pollock** — the **Abstract Expressionists** were already being eclipsed by the younger generation.

- **Leo Castelli**, the legendary dealer, acquired **Bed** from **Rauschenberg's** 1958 exhibition — the only sale from the show. He later donated it to **MoMA** in honour of **Alfred H. Barr Jr.** At the time, the quilt was worth more as bedding than as art. **Rauschenberg** was earning so little that he supported himself by designing window displays for Tiffany & Co. and **Bonwit Teller** department store with **Jasper Johns**, working under the pseudonym **Matson Jones**.
- Incidentally, **Tracey Emin's** work **My Bed** sits within a tradition that includes Rauschenberg **Bed** and others, but as far as I know she did not acknowledge his work as an inspiration—she emphasized that hers was **autobiographical**—emerging from a depressive episode in which she remained in bed for several days.

Pronunciation Guide

Spoletto — spo-LAY-toh

documenta — dock-oo-MEN-tah

Leo Castelli — LAY-oh cas-TEL-lee

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Robert Rauschenberg
(1925–2008)

Monogram

1955–1959

Combine: oil, paper, fabric,
printed reproductions,
metal, wood, rubber shoe
heel, tennis ball on canvas
with oil and rubber tire on
Angora goat on wood
platform

106.7 × 160.7 × 163.8 cm

Moderna Museet,
Stockholm

Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008), **Monogram**, 1955–1959, **Combine**: mixed media with taxidermied **Angora** goat and rubber tire on wood platform, 106.7 × 160.7 × 163.8 cm, **Moderna Museet, Stockholm**

- A stuffed **Angora** goat stands on a painted wooden platform, its midsection threaded through a rubber car tire. The platform beneath is a collage-like painting strewn with paper, fabric, a tennis ball, a rubber shoe heel, and printed reproductions. It is, by almost any measure, the most famous **Combine Rauschenberg** ever made — and one of the defining images of postwar art.
- **Rauschenberg** found the goat in a secondhand office furniture store on **Seventh Avenue** in **New York**. He bought it for fifteen dollars — all the money he had. The work went through three incarnations over four years. In the first, the goat stood on a shelf attached to a wall painting. In the second, it stood on a narrow platform with a vertical extension. Only in the final version, at the suggestion of **Jasper Johns**, did **Rauschenberg** place the goat on a horizontal platform on the floor, as if grazing in a pasture. The title refers to the way the goat's horns and the tire interlock like the letters in a monogram.
- Dancer **Yvonne Rainer** recalled seeing **Monogram** for the first time at **Castelli Gallery**: "I nearly rolled on the ground with laughter. It was so refreshing after **Abstract Expressionism**." Critic **Robert Hughes** controversially insisted the work was a powerful image of anal intercourse, reading the goat as an ancient symbol of lust. **Rauschenberg** specifically disavowed this interpretation. Art historian **Arthur Danto** countered that the real shock was the sheer unexpectedness — no one had ever seen a goat wreathed with a tire before.

- Pontus Hultén purchased **Monogram** for the **Moderna Museet** in **Stockholm** in 1965, where it remains the museum's most famous work. In 2016, the goat left **Stockholm** for a world tour — visiting **Tate Modern**, **MoMA**, and **SFMOMA** — after conservators conducted X-ray analysis to confirm it was fit to travel. The goat, remarkably, had survived more than sixty years with its shimmering white coat largely intact.

Pronunciation Guide

Angora — an-GOR-ah

Moderna Museet — mo-DAIR-na moo-SAY-et

Pontus Hultén — PON-tus hool-TAYN

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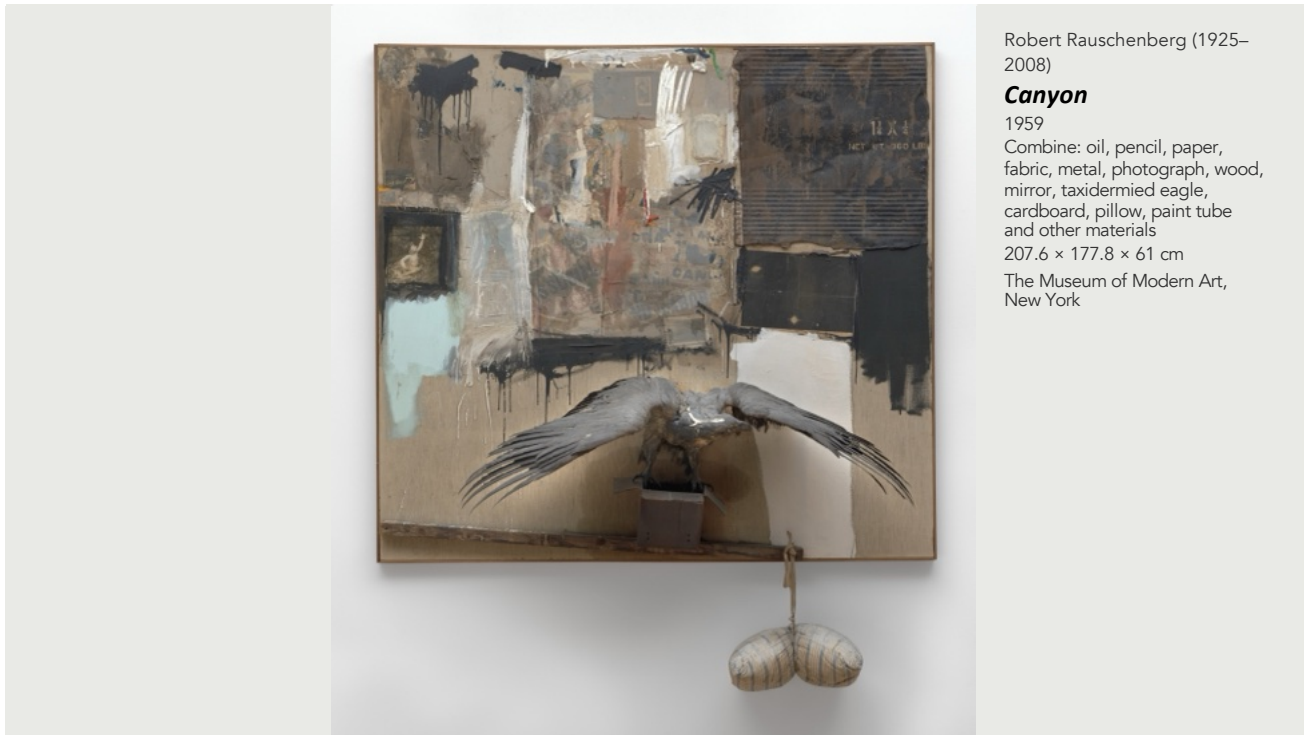
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Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008)

Canyon

1959

Combine: oil, pencil, paper, fabric, metal, photograph, wood, mirror, taxidermied eagle, cardboard, pillow, paint tube and other materials

207.6 × 177.8 × 61 cm

The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008), **Canyon**, 1959, **Combine**: mixed media with taxidermied bald eagle, pillow, and other materials, 207.6 × 177.8 × 61 cm, **The Museum of Modern Art, New York**

A massive canvas bristles with collaged photographs, fabric, wood, and paint — and jutting out from it, wings spread, is a taxidermied bald eagle. Below the eagle, a pillow dangles from a string, sagging like a pendulous weight. Among the collaged elements are a photograph of **Rauschenberg's** infant son **Christopher**, a postcard of the **Statue of Liberty**, a crumpled paint tube, a man's white shirt cut open, and fragments of printed text.

Art historian **Kenneth Bendiner** proposed that **Canyon** is a playful recreation of **Rembrandt's** 1635 painting **The Rape of Ganymede**, with the eagle standing in for **Zeus** and the hanging pillow representing **Ganymede's** buttocks. Others, including **Branden Joseph**, have argued that hunting for fixed iconographic meanings in **Rauschenberg's** work misses the point entirely. **Yve-Alain Bois** suggested the "lack of centre" is itself the statement.

Canyon came to **MoMA** through one of the most bizarre episodes in art-law history. It belonged to the gallerist **Ileana Sonnabend**, who considered it her favourite **Rauschenberg**. When she died, the **IRS** valued **Canyon** at sixty-five million dollars and charged her heirs twenty-nine million in estate tax. But selling the work would have been a felony — the **Bald Eagle Protection Act** of 1940 makes it illegal to sell, buy, or possess a bald eagle in the United States. The estate's appraisers valued it at zero. After a protracted standoff, the heirs donated **Canyon** to **MoMA** in 2012.

Rauschenberg found the stuffed eagle in the hallway of his studio building in the mid-

1950s, years before it became part of **Canyon**. He provided a notarised statement that the bird had been taxidermied by one of **Theodore Roosevelt's Rough Riders** before the protective laws came into effect. The work's title may be a pun on the letters "CAN" visible in a fragment of text on the canvas.

Pronunciation Guide

Ileana Sonnabend — ee-lay-AH-nah SON-ah-bend

Ganymede — GAN-ih-meed

Yve-Alain Bois — EEV ah-LAN bwah

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Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008)

Factum I

1957

Combine: oil, ink, pencil, crayon, paper, fabric, newspaper, printed reproductions, and printed paper on canvas

155.9 × 90.2 cm

The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles

Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008)

Factum II

1957

Combine: oil, ink, pencil, crayon, paper, fabric, newspaper, printed reproductions, and printed paper on canvas

155.9 × 90.2 cm

The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008), Factum I, 1957, Combine: oil, ink, pencil, crayon, paper, fabric, newspaper, printed reproductions, and printed paper on canvas, 155.9 × 90.2 cm, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles

- Two paintings hang side by side. They look almost identical — the same drips, the same collaged photographs, the same calendar pages, the same apparently spontaneous brushstrokes. **Factum I** and **Factum II** were made as a pair. The first appears loose and instinctive; the second is a painstaking copy. Together they pose a devastating question: if an expressive gesture can be exactly duplicated, how spontaneous was it in the first place?
- This was a direct challenge to the central myth of **Abstract Expressionism** — that every mark on the canvas was an unrepeatable expression of the artist's inner state. **Rauschenberg** demonstrated that apparent spontaneity could be faked with enough care. Critic **Leo Steinberg** called this a "flatbed picture plane" — a horizontal surface of accumulation rather than a window onto emotional depths. The twin paintings were first exhibited together at **Castelli Gallery** in 1958.
- **Rauschenberg** produced the Factum paintings during a period of intense creative rivalry and romantic partnership with **Jasper Johns**. The two artists lived in adjacent studios on **Pearl Street** in lower **Manhattan** and saw each other's work daily. **Johns** was pursuing his own interrogation of artistic convention through flags, targets, and numbers. Both men were dismantling the heroic myths of the previous generation, but in very different ways.
- **(CLICK)** **Factum I** is now in the **Museum of Contemporary Art** in **Los Angeles**; **Factum II** is in the **Museum of Modern Art** in **New York** — permanently separated, like the

relationship that produced them. The works' greatest prank is that most viewers cannot tell which is the "original" and which is the copy. That, of course, is the entire point. **Rauschenberg** once said he trusted materials more than ideas, especially good ones.

Pronunciation Guide

Factum — FAK-tum

Leo Steinberg — LEE-oh STINE-berg

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Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008)

Retroactive I

1963

Oil and silkscreen ink on canvas

213.4 × 152.4 cm

Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Connecticut

Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008), **Retroactive I**, 1963, Oil and silkscreen ink on canvas, 213.4 × 152.4 cm, **Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Connecticut**

- **President John F. Kennedy** dominates the canvas, his hand thrust forward in a commanding gesture from a televised debate. His image has been silkscreened in blue, then repeated slightly offset. Around him swirl other screened images — an astronaut with a parachute, a crate of oranges, a walking female nude, a construction site, a glass of water. Broad strokes of paint bind these disparate fragments together.
- **Rauschenberg** had sent photographs to a commercial silkscreen fabricator and was preparing to use **Kennedy's** image in a new series when news of the assassination reached him in November 1963. He was devastated and nearly abandoned the work. He eventually decided to continue, and what had been intended as a commentary on media saturation became, unavoidably, a memorial. **Washington Post** critic **Sebastian Sme**e wrote that the painting captures exactly how we live now — "present, but frantically elsewhere. Briefly concerned, but ultimately heedless."
- The silkscreen paintings of 1962–1964 represent **Rauschenberg's** most commercially successful period. He borrowed the technique from **Andy Warhol**, who had started using it slightly earlier. But where **Warhol** isolated and repeated single images obsessively, **Rauschenberg** layered multiple images into kaleidoscopic compositions that feel like flipping through a magazine at speed. The approach drew directly on the image-bombardment of American television and print media.
- 1963 was a landmark year. The **Jewish Museum** gave **Rauschenberg** his first museum retrospective. He staged a wild performance at a roller-skating rink. And his friend and rival **Andy Warhol's** star was rising fast. **Retroactive I** is one of eight works

featuring **Kennedy** that **Rauschenberg** made in 1963–1964. He had earlier sent a transfer drawing as a gift to President and Mrs **Kennedy** in 1961, writing that his concern with the election had interrupted a project illustrating Dante's Inferno.

Pronunciation Guide

Retroactive — ret-roh-AK-tiv

Wadsworth Atheneum — WADZ-worth ath-uh-NEE-um

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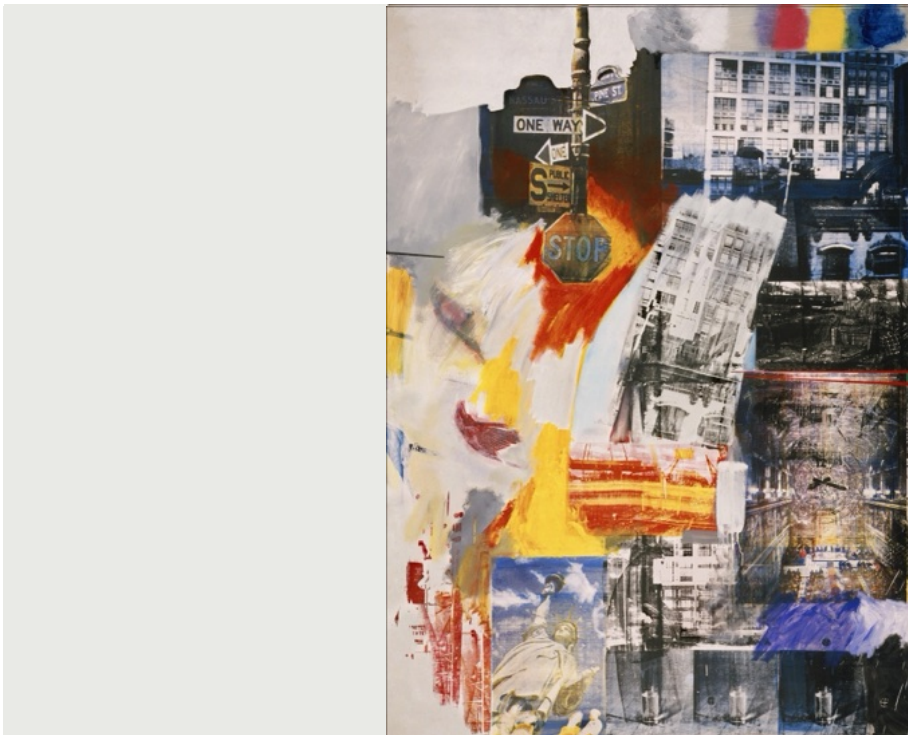
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Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008)

Estate

1963

Oil and silkscreen ink on canvas

243.2 × 177.2 cm

Philadelphia Museum of Art

Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008), **Estate**, 1963, Oil and silkscreen ink on canvas, 243.2 × 177.2 cm, **Philadelphia Museum of Art**

- A towering canvas crackles with colliding images: the **Statue of Liberty**, **Michelangelo's Last Judgement**, a 1962 rocket launch, a glass of water, a stop sign, and architectural fragments. Broad swathes of red, orange, and black paint sweep across the surface, unifying the chaos. **Estate** is among the finest and most complex of **Rauschenberg's** silkscreen paintings — a dizzying visual inventory of mid-century American life.
- The **Philadelphia Museum of Art** describes **Estate** as drawing its power from the tension between photography and painting. The seemingly spontaneous splashes of paint recall the vocabulary of **Abstract Expressionism** while unifying this incongruent inventory of images. **Rauschenberg** was the first American artist to systematically combine found photographic images using the silkscreen process at this scale, exploiting mass media imagery from the banal to the monumental.
- **Estate** was painted in the summer of 1963, during the period when **Rauschenberg's** career was accelerating toward an international breakthrough. The following year, he would win the **Grand Prize** in Painting at the **Venice Biennale** — the first American to do so. The award caused fury among European critics who saw it as evidence of American cultural imperialism. The **Vatican's** representative reportedly walked out of the ceremony. French critics accused the jury of capitulating to the art market.
- **Rauschenberg** had mastered his silkscreen technique with black-and-white works before introducing colour in late 1963. He described the new palette simply as "delicious." He completed the monumental **Barge** at the **Guggenheim** that summer,

then unleashed colour into works like **Estate**. The shift was electrifying. By this point **Rauschenberg** was producing at a ferocious pace — he would abandon the silkscreen technique entirely by 1964, never one to repeat himself.

Pronunciation Guide

Biennale — bee-en-NAH-lay

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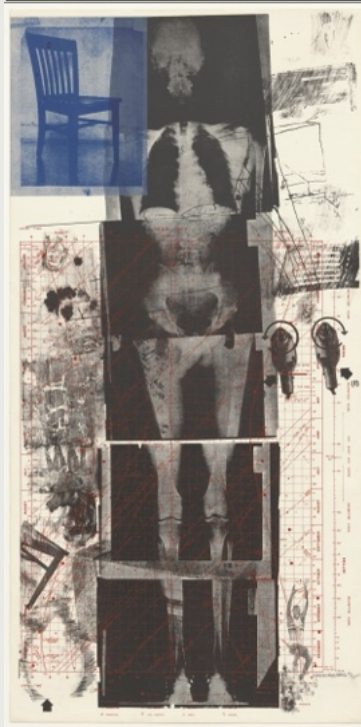
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Robert Rauschenberg
(1925–2008)

Booster

1967
Lithograph and screenprint on
paper
183.4 × 90.4 cm (sheet)
The Museum of Modern Art,
New York

Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008), **Booster**, 1967, Lithograph and screenprint on paper, 183.4 × 90.4 cm (sheet), **The Museum of Modern Art, New York**

- A life-size human skeleton stares out from the paper — except it is not a skeleton at all. It is a full-body X-ray of the artist himself, taken at a **Los Angeles** hospital. Around and upon this ghostly self-portrait, **Rauschenberg** layered images of an electric drill, a chair, an astronomical chart, and gestural marks. At over six feet tall, **Booster** was the largest hand-pulled lithograph ever made at the time of its creation, and the first print to combine lithography and screenprinting.
- **Booster** was produced at **Gemini G.E.L.**, the legendary **Los Angeles** print workshop that became **Rauschenberg**'s primary collaborator for decades. The technical challenge was immense. Master printer **Kenneth Tyler** had to devise new methods to handle the unprecedented scale. The print required multiple passes through the press and demanded exacting registration. The result established printmaking as a medium capable of rivalling painting in both ambition and physical presence.
- The X-ray gives **Booster** an eerie intimacy. This is **Rauschenberg** stripped bare — literally transparent, his bones and organs exposed. The astronomical chart positions him within the cosmos. The everyday objects anchor him to the mundane. It is a self-portrait that reveals everything and nothing simultaneously. Critic **Lawrence Alloway** praised **Rauschenberg**'s graphic works for expanding the possibilities of what a print could be.
- By 1967, **Rauschenberg** had stepped away from painting and was channelling his restless energy into printmaking, performance, and technology. That year he co-founded **Experiments in Art and Technology** with engineer Billy Klüver, dedicated to

fostering collaborations between artists and scientists. He was also still working as lighting designer and stage director for the **Merce Cunningham Dance Company**, a role he had held since 1954. The X-ray in **Booster** would reappear thirty years later in his autobiographical painting **Mirthday Man** (1997).

Pronunciation Guide

Gemini G.E.L. — JEM-in-eye jee-ee-ell

Billy Klüver — KLOO-ver

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Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008)

Sky Garden (Stoned Moon)

1969

Lithograph and screenprint

226.7 × 106.7 cm

The Museum of Modern Art, New York
(and other collections)

Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008), *Sky Garden (Stoned Moon)*, 1969, Lithograph and screenprint, 226.7 × 106.7 cm, The Museum of Modern Art, New York

- At nearly ninety inches tall, **Sky Garden** was the largest hand-pulled lithograph ever created when it was printed in 1969 — surpassing even **Rauschenberg's** own **Booster** from two years earlier. The print teems with imagery drawn from **NASA** archives: rocket schematics, astronaut equipment, technical diagrams, and the lush **Florida** landscape around **Cape Canaveral**. Hand-drawn passages and bursts of colour mingle with the documentary material to create a sense of awe tinged with anxiety.
- **NASA** invited **Rauschenberg** to witness the launch of **Apollo 11** in July 1969 — the mission that put the first humans on the Moon. He was one of several artists commissioned under **NASA's** art programme, established in 1962 to document space exploration through creative eyes. The experience overwhelmed him. He later described watching the **Saturn V** rocket lift off as the most profound sensory experience of his life, a moment when technology and nature seemed to merge.
- The resulting **Stoned Moon** series comprises thirty-four lithographs, created in collaboration with **Gemini G.E.L.** **Sky Garden** required two lithographic stones, four aluminium plates, and a silkscreen to produce its extraordinary scale and visual effects. The series title is a typically **Rauschenberg** double entendre — "stoned" referring both to the lithographic stones used in printing and to an altered state of consciousness. **SFMOMA** holds twenty-nine of the prints.
- Flight had fascinated **Rauschenberg** since his earliest **Combines**, where birds, parachutes, and aeroplanes appeared repeatedly. The space programme gave this obsession its grandest canvas. But the **Stoned Moon** prints are not simple

celebrations. They capture the ambivalence many Americans felt in 1969 — pride in technological achievement alongside unease about the **Vietnam War**, environmental destruction, and the vast sums spent on space exploration while cities burned. **Rauschenberg**, who had already used his **Dante** illustrations to protest the **Vietnam War**, embedded these tensions into the work.

Pronunciation Guide

Cape Canaveral — Cape kuh-NAV-er-ul

Saturn V — SAT-urn five

lithograph — LITH-oh-graf

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Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008)

Cardbird III

1971

Photolithograph and screenprint on corrugated cardboard with tape
c. 66 × 69 cm

Various collections including Museum of Fine Art, Houston

Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008), **Cardbird III**, 1971, Photolithograph and screenprint on corrugated cardboard with tape, c. 66 × 69 cm, Various collections including **Museum of Fine Art, Houston**

- At first glance, this looks like a flattened cardboard box someone pulled from a skip. It has creases, folds, printed labels, and strips of packing tape. It is, in fact, an elaborately produced trompe l'oeil print — every fold, every label, every crease meticulously reproduced using photolithography and screenprinting onto actual corrugated cardboard. **Rauschenberg** even added real packaging tape alongside the photographically printed tape. The result is a masterpiece of deception.
- The **Cardbird** series of 1971 emerged from **Rauschenberg's** move to **Captiva Island, Florida**, in 1970. After years of creating dense, image-saturated urban works in **New York**, the relocation marked a dramatic shift. He arrived surrounded by piles of packing boxes. The name **Cardbird** is a play on words — the flattened boxes resemble birds in flight, and the artist had long been fascinated by both birds and wordplay.
- **Rauschenberg** produced the **Cardbirds** at **Gemini G.E.L.** in an edition of seventy-five. Unlike **Andy Warhol's Brillo Boxes** — which were painted wooden replicas that questioned the boundary between art and commerce — **Rauschenberg's Cardbirds** use actual cardboard and real printing processes to question the boundary between reality and representation. **Warhol** elevated the commercial; **Rauschenberg** elevated the discarded. The "FRAGILE" label printed on several of the works reads like a wry joke.
- The move to Captiva coincided with profound personal changes. **Rauschenberg** had left behind the **New York** art world, his partnership with **Johns** had ended years

earlier, and he was drinking heavily. The **Cardboards** and **Cardbirds** — works made from the humblest possible material — represented a stripping back, a return to essentials. His mother **Dora**, who once made family clothes from scraps, might have recognised the impulse. **Rauschenberg** said a desire had built up in him to work in "a material of waste and softness."

Pronunciation Guide

Captiva — kap-TEE-vah

trompe l'oeil — tromp LOY

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Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008)

Mirage (Jammer)

1975

Sewn fabric

209.6 × 178.1 cm

Robert Rauschenberg Foundation,
New York

Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008), *Mirage (Jammer)*, 1975, Sewn fabric, 209.6 × 178.1 cm, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, New York

- Rectangles of marigold, red, and translucent silk have been sewn together and hung on the wall, barely touching it. A diaphanous layer of gauze partially veils the saturated colours beneath, like a heat haze shimmering over a tropical horizon. There are no images, no collage elements, no found objects, no paint. This is **Rauschenberg** at his most radically restrained — and, paradoxically, at his most beautiful.
- The **Jammers** series (1975–76) represents one of the most surprising turns in **Rauschenberg's** career. After decades of dense, image-laden, aggressively urban work, he produced these airy, imageless constructions of brightly coloured fabric hung from rattan poles or attached to the wall with pushpins. The title refers to **Windjammer** sailing vessels, reflecting his new life on **Captiva Island**. **Rauschenberg** said the **Jammers** had multiple meanings — grooving musicians, pajamas, and the square-rigged ships that once plied the trade routes.
- The immediate catalyst was a trip to **India** in 1975, where **Rauschenberg** visited the **Gandhi Ashram** in **Ahmedabad** to explore textile and papermaking traditions. His son **Christopher** recalled that his father was "just amazed at the colours." The vivid fabrics of **India** — cotton, muslin, silk — offered a completely new vocabulary. **Rauschenberg** imposed extraordinary restraint on himself, saying that "nearly everything I could think to do previously would have violated what these pieces wanted to be."
- Critics were divided. Some saw the **Jammers** as a retreat from the combative engagement with contemporary culture that had defined **Rauschenberg's** greatest

work. The reviewer at **Abstract Critical** noted they felt like the work of a different artist — elegant, tasteful, imageless, and rustic. Others recognised them as a genuine expansion of his practice. The **Jammers** directly inspired the set designs for **Merce Cunningham's Travelogue** (1977), reconnecting **Rauschenberg** with his oldest collaborator after thirteen years apart.

Pronunciation Guide

Ahmedabad — AH-med-ah-bad

Jammer — JAM-er

diaphanous — dy-AF-uh-nus

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Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008)
The 1/4 Mile or 2 Furlong Piece (detail)
 1981–1998

Mixed media including painting, silkscreen, photography,
 sculpture, found objects, and sound
 c. 305 m (total length), 190 panels
 Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, New York

Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008), The 1/4 Mile or 2 Furlong Piece (detail), 1981–1998, Mixed media, c. 305 m (total length), 190 panels, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, New York

- One hundred and ninety panels stretch approximately a quarter of a mile — roughly three hundred metres. Together they form a single work created over seventeen years, from 1981 to 1998. It is **Rauschenberg's** magnum opus, a self-contained retrospective of his entire career. Textiles, photographs, mass media images, and bold passages of paint mingle with everyday objects — chairs, cardboard boxes, traffic lights, stacks of library books. An audio track of sounds recorded during the artist's travels accompanies the work.
- The quarter-mile span represents the distance between **Rauschenberg's** studio and his home on **Captiva Island** — the daily walk that embodied his famous desire to work in the "gap between art and life." **Rauschenberg** described the piece as a self-portrait and noted that "as I change, as my interests change, it changes. This work is actually many works which take on their own character, like something unrolling in time." **LACMA** director **Michael Govan** called it "a museum of images unto itself."
- During the years of its creation, **Rauschenberg** also undertook his most ambitious cultural project: the **Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange (ROCI, pronounced "ROH-see")**, launched in 1984. He travelled to twelve countries — including **Cuba, China, Tibet, Chile, and the Soviet Union** — often in defiance of **Cold War** policies. Each visit produced an exhibition of works inspired by the host country. **Roberta Smith** of **The New York Times** summarised the project as "at once altruistic and self-aggrandizing, modest and overbearing."

- The 1/4 Mile was exhibited in its entirety for the first time at **LACMA** in 2018–2019, ten years after the artist's death. The final room of the installation stunned visitors with panels of shimmering, almost transcendent beauty. **Rauschenberg** suffered a stroke in 2002 that left his right hand partially paralysed. He continued to work with his left hand until his death in 2008 — a final demonstration of the restless creative will that had driven him for six decades.

Pronunciation Guide

ROCI — ROH-see

LACMA — LACK-mah

furlong — FUR-long

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Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008)

Early Bloomer
[Anagram (A Pun)]

1998

Vegetable dye transfer on
polylamine

155.6 × 311.2 cm

The White House, Washington,
D.C.

Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008), *Early Bloomer [Anagram (A Pun)]*, 1998, Vegetable dye transfer on polylamine, 155.6 × 311.2 cm, The White House, Washington, D.C.

- Photographic images of flowers, architecture, and geometric patterns float across a luminous surface in brilliant colour. The images have been transferred using biodegradable vegetable dyes onto polylamine — a translucent, reflective material that gives the work an almost backlit glow. This is late **Rauschenberg** at his most technologically adventurous: an artist in his seventies embracing digital tools and environmentally responsible materials with the same appetite for the new that had driven him since the 1950s.
- *The **Anagram (A Pun)*** series (1997–2002) represented **Rauschenberg's** final major body of work. Using digital inkjet printers, he transferred his own photographs onto polylamine surfaces, allowing for high-resolution, large-scale works that shimmer between painting and photography. The title reflects his lifelong love of wordplay: the images can be rearranged and recombined, like letters in an anagram, each new configuration producing a fresh visual pun.
- **Early Bloomer** joined the **White House** collection in 2011, donated by the **Robert Rauschenberg Foundation**. In 2013, it became one of the first contemporary artworks displayed in one of the public rooms of the **White House**, unveiled in a ceremony during the **Obama** administration. For an artist who had once erased a **de Kooning** and hung a quilt splattered with paint in a museum, the **White House** represented an ultimate, ironic vindication.
- In 2002, he suffered a **major stroke** that left his right side paralyzed. Unwilling to stop creating, he spent his final years learning to work with his left hand.

Although he suffered increasingly from health challenges he remained remarkably prolific. He died on **May 12, 2008**, at the age of 82. He passed away from **heart failure** at his home and studio on **Captiva Island, Florida**, where he had lived and worked for decades.

Pronunciation Guide

Anagram — AN-uh-gram

polylaminate — pol-ee-LAM-in-ate

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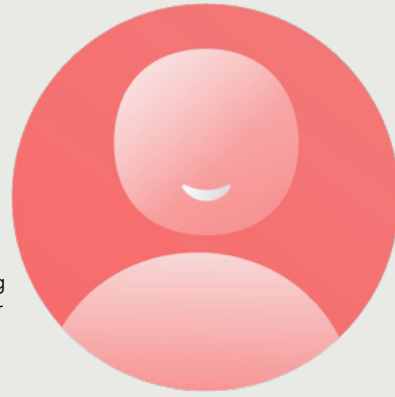
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Robert Rauschenberg
Early Bloomer
[Anagram (A
Pun)]
1998

- In keeping with his lifelong commitment to environmental causes, **Rauschenberg** used only biodegradable dyes and water-based transfer processes in his later work. He had founded **Change, Inc.** in 1970 to provide emergency grants to struggling artists, and the **Robert Rauschenberg Foundation**, established in 1990, continues to promote world peace, environmental sustainability, and humanitarian issues. The **Vatican** had commissioned him to create a work for the **Jubilee** year 2000 but rejected his vision — **The Happy Apocalypse** — because he depicted God as a satellite dish. Classic **Rauschenberg** to the end.
- Thank you for your time and I hope to be seeing you again soon.



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