

# Bard

Bard College  
Bard Digital Commons

---

Senior Projects Spring 2017

Bard Undergraduate Senior Projects


---

Spring 2017

## Rauschenberg's Journey to Dante: Or How to Keep a Clean Head

Maxwell Ian Eric Barnes  
*Bard College*, [mb9347@bard.edu](mailto:mb9347@bard.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj\\_s2017](https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2017)

 Part of the [American Popular Culture Commons](#), [Contemporary Art Commons](#), and the [Theory and Criticism Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

---

### Recommended Citation

Barnes, Maxwell Ian Eric, "Rauschenberg's Journey to Dante: Or How to Keep a Clean Head" (2017). *Senior Projects Spring 2017*. 217.  
[https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj\\_s2017/217](https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2017/217)

This Open Access work is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been provided to you by Bard College's Stevenson Library with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this work in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@bard.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@bard.edu).

Bard

Rauschenberg's Journey to Dante:  
Or How to Keep a Clean Head

Senior Project submitted to  
The Division of Languages & Literature  
Of Bard College  
By  
Maxwell Barnes

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2017

This work is dedicated to my family of both blood and brain.

# Table of Contents

Preface

Introduction:.....	1
Chapter I: Stepped from a Lake, Tossed in a River.....	4
Chapter II: A Date with Dante.....	17
Chapter III: How Combines became Cantos.....	22
Chapter IV: Idiot Box.....	28
Chapter V: Art in the Sea.....	39
Chapter VI: A Dance with the Devil Devoid of Dante...	48
Conclusion:.....	59

They couldn't see black as pigment, they moved immediately into association with 'burned out,' 'tearing,' 'nihilism and 'destruction'///I'm never sure what the impulse is psychologically, I don't mess around with my subconscious///If I see any superficial subconscious relationships that I'm familiar with -clichés of association-I change the picture."

Rauschenberg reacting to the reception of his black paintings (1951-53)

Quoted in Calvin Tomkins, *Off the Wall: Robert Rauschenberg and the Art World of Our Time* (Garden City, NY.: Doubleday, 1980), p. 89.

\*Please refer to Preface\*

## Introduction

Within this work I will be discussing the Dante Drawings (1958-60) by American artist Robert Rauschenberg. What is unique about the Dante Drawings is their acute subject matter. The sudden shift from work that required his audience to abandon, “Superficial Subconscious Relationships”, to a two and half year project of poetic illustration is an anomaly within Rauschenberg’s catalogue. By entering into the classification of illustration, the Dante drawings can be misunderstood if studied from a distance, as superficial subconscious relationships are inherent in an engagement of illustration.

With this in mind I begin my approach to the Dante drawings by first conducting a biographical study of Rauschenberg’s journey towards illustrating the *Inferno*, with attention paid to the artist’s time spent in Florence. As well I acknowledge the genesis of Rauschenberg’s artistic philosophy, the future guide to his conceptual approach within the Dante drawings. Rauschenberg’s movements and motivations towards the *Inferno* provide a context with which I approach the Dante drawings without “clichés of association”.

What I present in my second chapter is a study of the interactions between Robert Rauschenberg and Dante within the city of Florence. I assert that Rauschenberg’s initial motivation to work with the *Inferno* was not fueled by admiration but rather practicality.

After establishing the context of Rauschenberg's approach to Dante and his work, I move to a study of the combine method Rauschenberg was developing prior to its employment in the Dante drawings. I track the historical development of the combine method through discussing the pieces' relevancy to Rauschenberg's development of his individual artistic philosophy.

In chapter four I continue my discussion of the work Rauschenberg was making just prior to his two and a half year movement through the *Inferno*. I approach these works with a central focus on understanding the impact both television and dyslexia had on Rauschenberg's artistic philosophy. I continue to maintain the assertion that Rauschenberg desired his viewers to approach the Dante drawings as he intended, individually, without superficial understanding or association.

In chapter five I present my final contextual preparation before the intended engagement with the Dante drawings can properly be entered into. Through a close reading of an introduction to the Dante Drawings written by John Cage, that accompanied the works first showings in New York (1960), I show a unity of intent behind my proposal of the Dante drawings and this work by John Cage, one of Rauschenberg's closest friends. The poetic interpretations, from Cage's introduction, of the conceptual ideas I detail through my study of Rauschenberg and his work, allow me to engage with his artistic philosophy from a more abstract and personal position.

Finally, in chapter six, the Dante drawings are engaged with, relying on a purposefully superficial reading of Canto XXI, into order to properly conclude my institutional engagement with the work.

In the final act of my paper, I approach Canto XXI again from Rauschenberg's proposed position of individual engagement, one of suspended understanding and association. By describing my experience interacting with the Dante drawings I provide the final source of the paper as I dissect my own engagement with the work from the position of Rauschenberg's artistic philosophy. The use of I will be necessary for this final section.



## Chapter I:

### Stepped from a Lake, Tossed in a River

“I lost friends over that show. . . . A great many people thought it was immoral. In those days you could shock people and most of the people it shocked were other artists.” (Craft, P.230)

Eleanor Ward, director of the stable gallery in 1953, reminisced on the New York art world’s response to an early Rauschenberg show, one that had contained his black paintings referenced in my preface. Prior to his engagement with the *Inferno*, Rauschenberg’s reputation as an artist was that of a disturbance rather than progressive. Tracking Rauschenberg’s movement towards the *Inferno* as a developing young artist, it becomes clear that he was not interested in honoring a timeless work, but rather deconstructing it into a platform onto which he could most effectively display his artistic philosophies.

As critic Ed Krcma notes in his essay *The Dante Drawings and the Classical Past*, the Dante Drawings “played a key role in consolidating his status as a ‘serious’ artist, enabling him to shrug off his early reputation as an enfant terrible” (p.85)

The genesis of Rauschenberg’s artistic philosophy was formed during his first stint at Black Mountain College in 1948. There he would come under the tutelage of Joseph Albers who would help develop Rauschenberg’s conceptual understandings. Critic Leah Dickerman remarks

that, “Rauschenberg always spoke of Albers as his most important teacher”(p.33). His reasoning being, “Alber’s didn’t teach you how to ‘do art’” (Rauschenberg). Alber’s would state that in his class, “Our art instruction attempts to teach the student to see in the widest sense: to open his eyes to the phenomena about him and, most important of all, to open his eyes to his own living, being and doing.” (Albers)

This idea of an artist having to, “open his eyes to his own living and being and doing” would developed throughout Rauschenberg’s work in the 1950s and emerge as an essential conceptual component of the Dante Drawings. But as we have seen was commonplace in the young life of Rauschenberg, his approach to art was what kept him from being taken seriously.

Rauschenberg would say about his time as a student, “I was Albers’s dunce, the outstanding example of what he was not talking about”, even to a believer in the abstract notions of the Bauhaus movement, Rauschenberg’s philosophy was threatening, “Albers’s rule is to make order, as for me, I consider myself successful only when I do something that resembles the lack of order I sense” (Rauschenberg). Rauschenberg opposed the contemporary and classical expectations on art that were still very present on the turn of the 1940s.

It was during this stay at Black Mountain College that birthed not only Rauschenberg’s self awareness as an artist but, one in the same, his self-awareness as an individual. After having

been caught in a love affair with his future collaborator Cy Twombly, by his then wife during a visit to the college, Rauschenberg's own person was in turmoil.

“In January 1952, an incident took place that signaled the degree of his emotional distress. After leaving a jam session in the dining hall, Rauschenberg walked far out into the wintry cold waters of Lake Eden. As Olson wrote in a letter to Robert Creeley, “Twombly was twenty feet out, up to his hips, and saying with as much tension as his southern voice can, that he couldn't go any further, that he couldn't catch his breath. And it was Rauschenberg farther out, making these moans, & catchings of his voice—and obviously, at least mixed up, & probably stuck, in a trance” (Olson) Leah Dickerman continues, “it seems that after wading back from this treacherous point, Rauschenberg recognized himself—in his behavior and in his work” (p.37 Dickerman).

Oddly, Rauschenberg's development as an artist seems to associate with bodies of water from this moment until the completion of his Dante Drawings in 1960. Stepping out of the lake, Rauschenberg began to walk his own path towards the Dante drawings. As Dickerman says, “wading back from this treacherous point, Rauschenberg recognized himself” In doing so he provided himself the space of expression to experience the world around him without the tether of conformity. This description of personal development is directly tied to his development as an

artist as at this moment that Rauschenberg appears to have begun to work from a place of experience rather than expression.

In his essay, *Five Propositions* Achim Borchardt-Hume comments on Rauschenberg's artistic intent at this time, "For him, the experiences of art and life were intimately entwined. This is not to say that he wanted to make an art that was autobiographical—far from it. Rather, he wanted his work to create a confluence between art, life, and the world that could be generously shared with the viewer" (p.11 Borchardt-Hume).

It is in this mindset of free experience, artistic community and communication that Rauschenberg began to travel. He and his good friend, Cy Twombly took an 8-month tour of Italy and northern Africa. After moving through Casablanca, the Atlas Mountains, the Tangier and Tetuan, Rauschenberg and Twombly arrived in Rome in February of 1953. From there they traveled to Florence, which is where the artists began to prepare for a dual show at the *Galleria d'arte Contemporanea* later that year.

Returning to critic Ed Krcma, he comments on the inherent opposition to the classical artistic expectation that is present in Rauschenberg's work, that it "did more than negate existing models of drawing, however, it also provided a way to incorporate and recharge the glut of mass-media imagery that pervaded modern life" (p.86).

It was this negation of existing models of creation, that were so intrinsic to the fabric of Florentine culture, that caused Rauschenberg's show to be so poorly received. As well, his incorporation of everyday items as high-art within a gallery was attempting to disrupt the classical modes of valuation that defined the city at that time. Notably a Florentine critic infamously wrote that the works within Rauschenberg's show be, "thrown into the Arno" (p.6, Smith). Rauschenberg complied and, except for a few of the prized items in the show, the rest were dumped into the Arno river. Tracing Rauschenberg's movements within water, we have seen him remove himself from a still, cold body. Now he willingly entered back into the defined movement of a river. An interesting correlation seems to be emerging.

Rauschenberg's show in Florence was titled, "*Scatole e Costruzioni Contemplative*" which loosely translates into "contemplative boxes and buildings". Little boxes, purses, and cases of all different materials were placed around the exhibition and filled with random assortments of artifacts and items Rauschenberg had collected during his travels in northern Africa. All of these boxes had amendments next to the work explaining the artist's motivation for choosing those specific items,

"The Material used for these Constructions were chosen for either of two reasons: the richness of their past: like bone, hair, faded cloth and photos, broken fixtures, feathers, sticks,

rocks, string, and rope; or for their vivid abstract reality: like mirrors, bells, watch parts, bugs, fringe, pearls, glass, and shells. . . . You may develop your own ritual about the objects.”

(Rauschenberg, p.232)



This show was an attempt by the artist to try and provide a shared experience through a physical manifestation of his Travels. Collecting artifacts, Rauschenberg’s goal was to display his inner experience in a tangible and public setting. What seems to be at play within the failure of this show was the presumption his audience placed upon it, unable to comprehend the metaphysical questions Rauschenberg was trying to charge through this collection of work, there was no “ritual” occurring.

Critic Kate Nesin, in her essay *Miniature Monument*, contemplated Rauschenberg’s intent for this show, “A miniature can seem capacious, hinting at an entire corresponding world or

system; it can also seem to support our cognitive possession of the world it represents by rendering tangible a larger idea or thing” (p.11 Nesin) and as Rauschenberg would resonate, “A bone on the stage of a box no bigger than a tube of lipstick becomes a miniature monument” (p.232, Rauschenberg).

Rauschenberg’s thought on placement, size and audience interpretation were all on display during the Florentine show, aspects present in his later Dante Drawings. But without any public acceptance or institutional support, Rauschenberg was forced to reconsider the most effective way to communicate his budding artistic philosophy.

It was clear that the Florentine public did not want to understand the movements Rauschenberg was orchestrating between the pieces of collection, “The show, according to Rauschenberg, was considered a joke by everyone, the gallery owner included. The objects were priced so low that several people bought them for laughs” (p.81-82 Tomkins) and Kate Nesin continues, “As for the Florence show, Rauschenberg claimed to have tossed his *Scatole* into the River Arno after a discontented reviewer advised he do just that.” (p. 35, Nesin)

Initially this act can be seen to be done in protest, a motion of angst against those who so casually tell an artist that he should trash his personal creations. But because of the immense success Rauschenberg would receive in the years after this show this movement into the Arno

can be seen as a voluntary transition away from producing work that operated from a personal perspective, opting instead for a further engagement with his immediate external environment.

Rauschenberg's experience with this Florentine show and his time in the city was influential. As told by Graham Smith within his work *Invisible Parlare*, "Rauschenberg and Twombly joined a long tradition, extending back to the late eighteenth century, by which American Artists completed their educations by studying the art and antiques of Italy" (p.6, Smith).

Rauschenberg's time in Italy was that of revelation, a completing of his personal education, and a graduation towards a new desire for his work. His particularly receptive energy at the time, sparked by the shock and admittance that his work needed to evolve, allowed for the city of Florence, and its proud cultural heritage, influence his engagement with the Dante drawings.

During the week of his show in Florence, 1953, Rauschenberg visited the *Galleria degli Uffizi* where he was able to see for the first time in person the unfinished work, *Adoration of the Magi*, by Leonardo da Vinci,. During an interview with French critic Andre Parinaud Rauschenberg revealed that seeing this work in person, "provided the shock which made me paint as I do now" (p.7, Smith).





Looking at the Leonardo da Vinci work, a parallel to Rauschenberg's transfer method seems to spring immediately from the page. As described in the Dante Drawings MoMA press release "Transfers are created by moistening areas of the drawing sheet with an Immediate solvent for printer's ink — turpentine or cigarette lighter fluid; the moistened area is then placed face down against a reproduction of a photograph from a magazine or newspaper. While moist, this area remains relatively transparent and the verso of the sheet is rubbed with the head of an empty ballpoint pen or with a pencil. The transferred image lifts the ink with which the reproduction was printed and appears in reverse on the recto of the drawing."(MoMA)

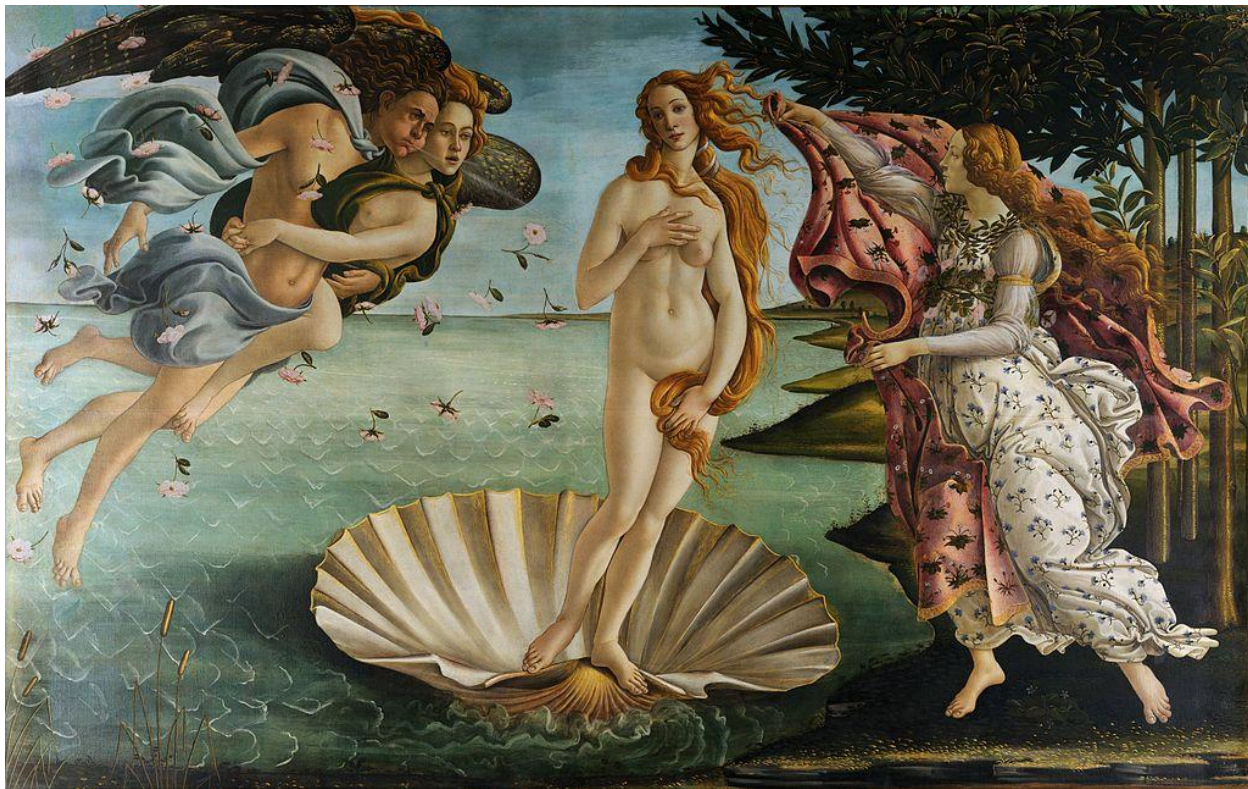
The transient aspect of many of the figures in the work are a result of it being “unfinished”. The direct similarity between the ghostly figures in *Adoration of the Magi* and the ghostly reproductions of Rauschenberg’s transfers within his combines reveals a visible conceptual connection. This “unfinished” piece affected him deeply as to “shock” him into “painting” in the abstractly confident way recognized now as his combines. We return to Ed Krcma’s essay, *The Dante Drawings and the Classical Past* for evidence,

“Rauschenberg’s solvent-transfer method reduces the work of the hand to a mechanical rubbing that has more in common with the indiscriminate action of erasure than with dexterous invention. Its nests of parallel marks do not correspond to the forms of the images they inscribe, which are often lost amid Rauschenberg’s manual scrawl” (p.86).

Looking at *Magi*, the figures within the piece that are incomplete superficially can still be easily seen as full forms within the mind’s eye. That is to say their wiry, sketchy and incomplete qualities do not keep them from being assumed and still participating within the larger narrative of the work. The scene is still set, and despite it being obviously incomplete, it still resonates within the souls of people like Rauschenberg, who are receptive to the movements occurring outside of a frame. In this example the familiarity of a human body, though incomplete, allows the viewer to complete the picture in their mind’s eyes. It is this innate association he saw



ingrained in an individual's experience of art that would inform Rauschenberg's work's leading up to the Dante drawings.



Across the hall from *Adoration of the Magi* in the Uffizi was the famous piece by Sandro Botticelli, *Birth of Venus*. The inspiration felt by *Birth of Venus* translated into Rauschenberg's first official combine entitled *Rebus*. Graham Smith comments on the work, "The Birth of Venus coexists in *Rebus* with contemporary American images drawn from *Life* and *Sports Illustrated*, suggesting that Rauschenberg wished to make visible a relationship between the New and Old Worlds" (p.82 Smith).



It is possible to still apply a superficial understanding of this combine work as primitive and working from within a barbaric codex, as it relied on pedestrian culture in its use of magazines and newspapers. Then appears the image of the *Birth of Venus* in all its classically respected glory, suddenly the work of Rauschenberg is undeniably self aware of its position in opposition to an established perspective of art.

It transfers the power of precision and appreciation born from that masterpiece and demands it be seen through application of a transfer within the environment of the combine. An

undeniably recognizable reproduction, yet removed from its previous position due to the presence of Rauschenberg's movement of application. A combine transforms its components, be it a classical Renaissance piece or a Sports Illustrated advertisement, into something that both reflects and deconstructs its previous iteration.

## Chapter II:

### A Date with Dante

Rauschenberg's journey to make personally fulfilling work was affected, but not hindered by his struggles with dyslexia. It was so severe that well into his adult life, Rauschenberg avoided reading, and preferred the company of the television to a book. As Branden Joseph details in his focused work, *Split Screens*, Rauschenberg's affinity towards the medium of television was evidence of his disregard for classical expectations.

“Rauschenberg would ultimately prove as uninterested in post minimalist institution critique as in formalist modernism. This testifies, perhaps, to the fact that was no longer focused on the confines of the disciplinary institutions but was already, as indicated by his attraction to television, considering the mediatized, technological spaces of control.” (P.207 Joseph)

The expectation of narrative within text, forged through a repeated engagement with books, was not present within Rauschenberg's lexicon. The collection of items in Rauschenberg's *Scatole* show were chosen because they had a special connection to himself, yet his abstract associations were not registered by publics whose expectations were built by those disciplinary institutions.

During the exhibition of *Scatole e Costruzioni Contemplativi* Rauschenberg was not interested in presenting the audience with something “complete”. He makes clear to the audience that they should feel comfortable moving the objects around in the gallery space and even transferring objects to other vessels until the individual has arranged a “ritual”. The rejection of his offering caused Rauschenberg to reevaluate how he wanted to engage his audience.

An American tourist visiting Florence once said, “You are everywhere convinced, in passing through the streets of the city, that [Dante] is its presiding genius. Everywhere, in public or private, from the bathroom to the baptistery, from the café to the cathedral, you are reminded by the bust or the portrait, fresco or tablet, of the greatest of Italian poets.” (P.259 Spencer).

During Rauschenberg’s stay in Florence an environment of artistic appreciation engulfed the city. Adorations to the great creative of Florence’s past were inescapable and yet Rauschenberg had been met with disdain and even disgust when presenting his contemporary vision of western art. After presenting a physically manifested portion of his travel experience, it was clear to Rauschenberg that his own person was not the vessel that could effectively communicate his vision.

In *Visible Parlare* Graham Smith provides us with the scope of which Florence was Dante’s city still at the time of Rauschenberg’s visit, “The Dantification of Florence increased



during the second half of the nineteenth century because of the great international celebrations that were held in 1865 to mark the sixth centenary of the poet's birth. Similar plans were made in the first decades of the twentieth century in order to celebrate in 1921 the sixth centenary of the poet's death and make the city, as Medina Lasansky put it, 'a public stage for a particular historical narrative.' (Lasansky, p.58) It was probably with something of this context in mind that Rauschenberg and Twombly viewed Enrico Pazzi's colossal statue of Dante at the Centre of Piazza di Santa Croce, inside Santa Croce, Tuscany's Pantheon, they would also have seen Stefano Ricci's monument to Dante" (p.8 Smith).

It is this centuries old tradition of institutional praise towards for Dante that had entrenched him into the fabric of Florence. The visual celebration of Dante's life that was curated throughout the city informed the connection Rauschenberg forged with the work of the *inferno*. It is well documented that Rauschenberg was severely dyslexic and struggled with reading his entire life. Because of this, at the time of his trip to Florence, Rauschenberg had not read any of Dante's work. This connection Rauschenberg found in Dante and particularly the *Inferno* was circumstantial and not a work of adoration.

His initial shows in New York and Florence were disregarded as vapid despite their simplistic compositions being charged with metaphysical wealth. Robert Mattison has suggested in his book, *Robert Rauschenberg: Breaking Boundaries*, that Rauschenberg's Dyslexia allowed



him, “to express the character of a confusing, volatile modern world” (p.37 Mattison). The Florence show was a failure, and unsure of his purpose as an artist, the physical presence of Dante within the city of Florence spoke to Rauschenberg’s vision, one that prefers the effectiveness of an idea rather than its meaning or history. Without any literary context, it would be the monumental presence of Dante within Florence that would have been registered by Rauschenberg for its effectiveness, not an appreciation for the cultural history he represented.

Who steered Rauschenberg physically towards the *Inferno* was gallerist Leo Castelli, an American devotee of Dante. Castelli is most well known within the story of Rauschenberg’s career as the man who gave the young artist his first solo show in January 1958 in New York. It was with Castelli’s support that Rauschenberg began to work on the Dante Drawings that year, and soon it became clear that this project was one he would need to truly dedicate himself to. In a small segment of Rauschenberg’s application for a grant we can see the first public iterations of the idea that would manifest into the full Dante drawing collection,

“I plan to illustrate Dante’s “*Inferno*” with thirty-four “Combine Drawings”, a technique of my own invention and naming which is involved with the use of water color, pencil, and photographic transfers.

I am making one Illustration for each canto of the poem and each illustration for each canto of the poem and each illustration is an attempt to evoke the spirit, moods, and actions of the entire canto, rather than to depict any particular incident which occurs in the poem.” (P.1, Rauschenberg)

Rauschenberg was reacting to the larger institutions that had now been exposed to his unhinged post modernist style. As is made clear in the quote, Rauschenberg was intent on not allowing the narrative to dictate the work, but rather the, “spirit, moods, and actions” evoked in him through his reading of the *Inferno*. These are the conceptual classifications that Rauschenberg desired to implement in his uncharacteristically focused Dante drawings. It also allowed him to bypass any critique of his interpretation of the piece, instead demanding the works be engaged with through its metaphysical properties.

The Dante drawings were Rauschenberg’s attempt to prove the legitimacy of his untethered artistic philosophy, one that dealt in the metaphysical properties and potential of the world around oneself rather than the expectations of classical talent. This attempt was not only in response to the disdain afforded his early work by critics, but also an attempt to show himself that he was pursuing a style of substance and importance worthy of personal dedication. Once he had secured funding, Rauschenberg’s life for two and a half years became entirely about the production of the Cantos.

## Chapter III:

### How Combines became Cantos

In 1959 Rauschenberg secured a car tire around the midriff of a taxidermy goat. The now famous piece *Monogram* displayed his vision for the contemporary post modernist movement.



The hooves of the beast stand atop the face of the canvas, transitioning this sacred space of fine art into a mere panel for display of the active and tangible desires of the artist in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The creation of this combine would display the method with which Rauschenberg would engage the

*Inferno*, building upon its familiar form; the composition renders the host as a platform.

The tire and the goat both spoke to Rauschenberg's intent to reveal and engage hidden connections that existed between everyday items we may interact with in our daily lives. The continuous slap dash construction of this piece was intrinsic to its radical position against the preconceptions of art and its worth. But to others it was evidence of Rauschenberg's naivety as

to what he considered art. Well known critic Brian O'Doherty would describe Rauschenberg's initial works as, "unrewarding of full contemplative regard" (p.86 O'Doherty) and his position was echoed by many who felt that his work was too dependent on the artists guidance, that there was no desire for further query of meaning as they already felt the artists process was contrived.

It was within this cultural environment that Rauschenberg set about completing a journey he started in Florence five years prior. In 1958 Rauschenberg applied for financial support from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation in order to complete a series of works inspired by the Cantos of Dante's *Inferno*.

"I plan to illustrate Dante's "Inferno" with thirty-four "Combine Drawings," a technique of my own invention and naming which is involved with the use of watercolor, pencil, and photographic transfers.

I am making one illustration for each canto of the poem and each illustration is an attempt to evoke the spirit, moods and actions of the entire canto, rather than to depict any particular incident, which occurs in the poem.

The "look" of these illustrations falls loosely into that of contemporary United States abstract painting, perhaps, with a certain forward use of materials in evidence; and includes photographic aspects of contemporary life, modern dress, etc. The visual focus tends to be multiple, employing freedoms of scale and distances: near and far being presented

simultaneously. The result seems to indicate a large and complex “view” or “scene,” containing implications of activity and changes of movement from the literal to the figurative, from the general to the specific.

The first six of these illustrations were completed during five months of this year, but I have had to put the project aside, for the time being, in order to attend to my financial needs. I believe that if I can give full attention to the “Inferno” I will be able to finish the thirty-four illustrations within one year.

If a Fellowship be awarded to me, it will be used for financial support for myself and materials needed while working on this proposed project. Because of its extended nature, it has become impossible for me to continue the project and, at the same time, to work at other aspects of my profession which might be remunerative. A Fellowship would be a valuable solution to this problem, allowing me fully to dedicate myself to the project for the necessary time and to work at it and treat it as one large work, without the interruptions which necessitate frequent retrogressions and new beginnings.

The Leo Castelli Gallery intends to exhibit the entire set of illustrations when they are completed. And if no art publisher is interested in using them at that time, Mr. Castelli expects to publish them privately.

I shall be living in New York City and, while referring to several translations of the “Inferno,” will work, primarily, from John Ciardi’s translation” (Rauschenberg).

The *Inferno*’s respected status allowed Rauschenberg to legitimize his work through investment that would not have been received in support of an ‘original’ project. As his financial situation is mentioned multiple times in this piece it is evident that this was a motivation for the *Inferno*’s selection. Mentioned earlier the gallerist Leo Castelli, mentioned within the application was a key figure in Rauschenberg’s move towards the *Inferno*. To Rauschenberg, not only did the *Inferno* provide him with a vessel to breach the unfamiliarity of his conceptual designs, but also it was clearly a financially smart project to pursue.

This is merely demonstrating the distance assumed between Dante and Rauschenberg when they are associated superficially through illustration. Rauschenberg’s now apparent practical financial motivations do not detract from his engagement with the work. This application displays intent to engage meaningfully with the work.

The focus on manipulated perception and distance is a particularly interesting lens to apply to a study of the Dante works as the hand of the artist is felt particularly heavily in the composition of each Canto’s scene. Rauschenberg’s clarification that he will, “attempt to evoke the spirit, moods and actions of the entire canto, rather than to depict any particular incident

which occurs in the poem.” Is evidence of Rauschenberg’s attempts to display the Dante drawings within a space between life and art, where an image’s effectiveness within a work is more valuable than its literal history in the “real”.

So why does a man who barely reads at all, and has never studied Dante choose this specific text to work on for two and a half years of his young adult life? Because Dante had proven to be the most effective vessel to manifest and communicate Rauschenberg’s ideas on contemporary art when so many were adverse to that style of expression. As John Ruskin wrote in 1853 in the third volume of *The Stones of Venice*, “I think that the central man of all the world, as representing in perfect balance the imaginative, moral, and intellectual faculties, all at their highest, is Dante” (p.187 Ruskin).

This understanding of Dante was not lessened with time and many of Rauschenberg’s contemporaries, most notably his first gallerist Leo Castelli, were still devoted fans of Dante’s work during the 1950s. In a world where Rauschenberg found artistic potential in every item he could see, it makes sense that this figure of Dante that had time and time again arisen in Rauschenberg’s journey through the 1950s created a resonance in him.

In the study of the Dante drawings one must keep in mind that they are not homages to a work meaningful to Rauschenberg. They are the stark manifestations of a demand to be seen by a world that had disregarded his depth of his artistic philosophy. The Dante combines form a

calculated costume composed superficial of *The Inferno*, reimagined by a vastly self aware Rauschenberg, in order to make his movements and philosophies of free association more approachable.

In describing his motivation in working with the *Inferno* Rauschenberg said, “I had been working purely abstractly for so long, it was important for me to see whether I was working abstractly because I couldn’t work any other way, or whether I was doing it out of choice. So I really welcomed, insisted, on the challenge of being restricted by a particular subject, which meant that I would have to be involved in symbolism. I mean the illustration has to be read. It has to relate to something that already is in existence.” (Rauschenberg)

The motivation of the Dante drawings was the creation of a work tethered to something already respected in existence. Rauschenberg reiterates that the success of his piece will not be in how truthfully it presents the story of the Inferno, but rather the effectiveness with which he can transfer the “spirit, mood, and action” from the text. This language hints at the conceptual move Rauschenberg would make away from a meaningful engagement with the text, instead, the Dante drawings exist as markers of Rauschenberg’s rejection of the concepts of association and understanding.



## Chapter IV:

### Idiot Box

Rauschenberg was severely dyslexic and because of that struggled to read his entire life.

In a 1976 interview Rauschenberg lays out how this affected him in his professional life, “I still have a struggle reading [dyslexia] and so I don't read much...Probably the only reason I'm painter is because I couldn't read yet I love to write, but when I write I know what I'm writing, but when I'm reading I can't see it, because it goes from all sides of the page at once. But that's very good for printmaking.” (Rauschenberg)

Rauschenberg reveals the struggles he faced as an artist trying to translate a “handicapped” vision of the world outside of printmaking. Within my discussion of Rauschenberg's dyslexia, I want to make clear that his disease neither hinders, nor accelerates his genius. Rauschenberg's dyslexia was simply the catalyst for his unique vision on the role of an artist in the age of mass media. Though his struggles with literature primed his mind to engage with images more intently than normal, the combine works are not a product of dyslexia.

Rauschenberg's relationship with dyslexia created chaos on the page whenever he read; It is key to notice the language he uses to describe said chaos. By stating that the words, “goes from all sides of the page” when he reads, Rauschenberg is supplying us with the initial evidence

as to the compositional strategy that composes his chaotic combine paintings. It is motion that is present within the Dante drawings that is recognized as uniquely Rauschenberg, the evidence of his hand's movement in the application of the transfers.

Returning to Ed Krmca's work, he details the process with which the combines were created, "To make the drawings, Rauschenberg returned to the solvent-transfer method he had discovered in 1952, which involved clipping images from the printed mass media, moistening them with lighter fluid, placing them face down on a sheet of paper, and rubbing their backs with an old ballpoint pen, forcing the printed ink from the magazine page to the sheet below. The resulting transfers—reversed, striated, spectral residues of their mass-produced originals—were then worked over with diagrammatic lines, accents of bold color, and other marks in pencil and watercolor." (P.84 Krmca)

It is this physical motion of transfer that endues the Dante combines with their own motion between art and life. It removes media images from their familiar memetic association and returns them to a state of freedom, one without the protection and definition of societal conformity. Within the racing mind of Rauschenberg the world is processed and understood differently. What seems like a collection of random, static items without unity to the viewer is transformed into a work in motion when seen through the mind of Rauschenberg. It is the motion of interaction within the works components, between the viewer's eye and the canvas, the

movements before and after the viewer has seen the piece. Rauschenberg said in a description of his show, *Broadcast*, “to make a surface which invited a constant change of focus and an examination of detail. Listening happens in time. Looking also had to happen in time” (Rauschenberg).

We can now interpret his *Scatole* show with the knowledge of what happens to Rauschenberg when he sees words on a page. The items were all in conversation with each other, far from a static relic as popularized by the dynamics of a museum. Rauschenberg’s belief was that everything on earth possessed artistic potential, it just required an open mind to allow for the interpretation.

This is how Rauschenberg’s dyslexia should be interpreted, rather than a handicap, Rauschenberg was unarguably elevated in the conception of his images because of his unique relationship to them due to his dyslexic childhood. This is a testament to the power of Rauschenberg’s work and their ability to redefine the familiar.

When we engage with a Rauschenberg we participate in a removal of definition, one that is initiated internally. For Rauschenberg, his work allowed his struggle to be redefined as his strength; it transformed the familiar figures of advertisements into agents of hell, and transforms his career into a success. Rauschenberg had recognized the power one possesses when the world around you is not assumed to be defined and static.

When the invention of television entered into the working person's home during the early 50s, it gave Rauschenberg an avenue in which to navigate his artistic philosophies and translate them into a form both he and his audience understood despite the difference between the artist and viewer's conceptual comprehension. Giles Delueze, in a letter to Serge Daney states, "television is the form in which the new powers of 'control' become immediate and direct" (p.61 Delueze).

The popularity of television meant that the masses were now programmed to respond instantaneously to visual queues and images. No longer was a narrative something worked through at an individual pace, where the undescribed aspects of a scene were filled in by the reader's preference. Now the world was participating in conformity and repetition, of tracking and identifying the same narrative simultaneously around the country. As Andy Warhol is quoted as saying one encounters, "the same plots and the same shots and the same cuts over and over again"(P.50, Warhol).

This "power of control", as mentioned above, was now being integrated into the practicing arts by those apposed to societal control. The work of Rauschenberg's that dealt in abstract representation through images was more relevant than ever. While television possessed the potential to control, it also inspired in Rauschenberg a pursuit of the difference inherent in

reproduction. At the genesis of the most powerful cultural technology on the planet at that time, Robert Rauschenberg had been born and bred to exist, evaluate, and help understand the world we were creating through participation with mass media.

What is almost divine about Rauschenberg at this moment contemplating the *Inferno* in the shadow of mass media is that he was intent on making work that quarantined itself from any superficial understanding or cliché association. He was hesitant to prescribe meaning to his work beyond the motivations that pushed him and drew him to its creation. Just as with television Rauschenberg believed his presence on the canvas should be, “immediate and direct”. Just as is present in his work, Rauschenberg’s mind was something in constant movement, a translucent eyeball darting through American culture. Achim Borchardt-Hume in his essay *Five Propositions* comments on this movement, “One gets the impression that Rauschenberg rarely stood still. The pervasive image of the artist is of someone in motion, be it abseiling from the ceiling into a drum lled with water in *Elgin Tie* (1964), on roller skates in *Pelican* (plates 187–89), roaming the streets of Lower Manhattan, or traveling the world” (p.12 Hume).

Rauschenberg moved from work to work channeling his intent and acting confidently through his intuition.

Rauschenberg recalls his engagement with the world at the time he began to create his combine drawings in Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, “I was bombarded with TV sets and magazines, by the refuse, by the excess of the world... I thought that if I could paint or make an honest work, I should incorporate all of these elements, which were and are a reality.” (P.345 Rauschenberg).

As previously stated, Rauschenberg interacted with the world visually, hyper aware to the potential artistic application of an image. Rauschenberg’s artistic philosophy has prepared him to engage confidently with the realities of industrial production of corporate images. This was the reality of false permanence, of false codification and the superficial definitions of images. The reality where advertisements and medias we interact with are not simply compliments of our society, they attempt to define the society they engage with, allowing themselves to more effectively promote an idea or product.

With his combine works, specifically the Dante drawings, Rauschenberg directly confronts the phenomenon of the controlled image that was being broadcast across the country. During a symposium entitled *Art of Assemblage* held at the Moma in 1961 Rauschenberg was quoted as dismissively describing “understanding” as “a product of good marketing, a general agreement that disposal is necessary,” and “an economical way to feel.” (Rauschenberg)

There is an obvious disdain in his language in regards to the culture being promoted by television, one of exponential conformity. It seems to stem from the illusion of understanding that is allowed by a unified acceptance of a memetic image. These are images or ideas that, as Richard Dawkin first described in his work, *The Selfish Gene*, “propagate themselves in the meme-pool by leaping from brain to brain via imitation” (p. 192, Dawkins). Aharon Kentorovich would clarify Dawkins idea by saying in his piece, *An Evolutionary View of Science: Imitation and Memetics*, “a meme's success may be due to its contribution to the effectiveness of its host. Memetics replaces the traditional concern with the truth of ideas and beliefs. Instead, it deals with the success of memes, which is expressed by their rate of spread.” (P.1, Kentorovich). Like a gene, the most effective image will cultivate within the minds of the people and grow, replicate and evolve.

For example, the phenomenon of advertising within the car industry that arose at the same time as Rauschenberg was working on his Dante drawings. This movement was the collective understanding by advertising firms that by insinuating that the brand and style of a car had a direct correlation to your virility as a man, they could sell cars through effectively playing on societies insecurities. This was an idea not bore out of any reality, but rather an idea whose host released it strategically to the public in order to maximize its effectiveness.

This was the type of “understanding” Rauschenberg was revolting against in this quote, his language shows how deeply apposed to this controlling dynamic of imagery he was. Using the phrase, “a general agreement that disposal is necessary” Rauschenberg touches on another of his major disagreements with the modern media at the time. Through the reproduction of an image, the host attempts to render other variations of that image lesser, and affirm it’s ideological control over an image. Rauschenberg reminisces on watching this occur to his early combine paintings, “People keep shuffling up to the picture with everything that has happened to them and turning to their neighbor and telling them that this is what the picture is about. But any two people and any one painting would show that couldn’t possibly be the case” (Rauschenberg).

This type of thought persists through Rauschenberg’s work at the time, his pieces center around this study on individuality within a unified cultural perception. Here Rauschenberg encourages his audience to regard their experience of his work as correct yet singular, yet he is unconcerned with the meaning being extract from his work. Rauschenberg is much more interested with the movements through association and interaction that his work evoked in those engaged with his combines from the perspective detailed in this paper, a perspective devoid of a pursuit for understanding and association.

As Branden Joseph says in *Split Screens*, “Rauschenberg’s transfer drawings mark the beginning of a larger aesthetic transformation brought on by the pressure of the media” (p.180



Joseph), and Rauschenberg's good friend John Cage would chime in that the transfer work, "seems like many television sets working simultaneously all tuned differently" (Cage, p.105).

Appreciating the Dante drawing's contextual importance lies in suspending the majority belief that the television cannot be a medium, participant, or inspiration for higher artistic pursuits. Quoting Branden Joseph from his essay *Split Screens* as he discusses the debate over



television's institutional legitimacy, "Yet television, which appears at first sight a very trivial thing, and easily understood, is in reality (as Marx said in another context) a very odd thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties" (p.183 Joseph).

Contemporary art, particularly post modernism seems to be thought of in the same way as television. Just like people's responses to his

black paintings early in New York, the simple, approachable dynamic allows cliché association to betray its, "Metaphysical subtleties".

*Factum I and II* is Rauschenberg's attempt to engage the new relevance of repetition, a natural phenomenon that took on new meaning due to the scientific realities of the television

broadcast. As described by Branden Joseph, “Viewed as a parodic attack on abstract expressionism’s pretensions to originality, the *Factums* are commonly understood as the painstaking duplication of one apparently spontaneous work by another. Despite the enumeration in the titles, however, Rauschenberg actually worked on both canvases simultaneously- sometimes adding to one and then the other, and sometimes the reverse” (p.191, Joseph)

Rauschenberg would further explain the Factum piece in an interview with Emile de Antonion and Mitch Tuchman, “I painted two identical pictures, but only identical to the limits of the eye, the hand, the materials adjusting to the differences from one canvas to another. Neither was painted first to compensate for that.” (P.94, Rauschenberg)

As this quote suggests, at issue for Rauschenberg was not the exactness of reproduction but the difference within repetition. “I was interested in the role that accident played in my work, I wanted to see how different, and in what way, would be two different paintings that looked that much alike” (p.96-97).

Looking at the canvases, it is clear that its production was a direct precursor to the composition of the Dante works. While in the Dante drawings, his use of repetition is partly alluding to artistic strategies employed in illustration; the *Factum*’s were purely in conversation with the emergence of a dominant new media emerging in the late 1950s. The beauty of the *Factum* works is found within its “metaphysical subtleties”.

Simply by composing a single piece onto two separate canvases Rauschenberg had removed the focus of the work from within their literal frames. The focus of the work was being transmitted from the space between the two seemingly identical pieces, not from any quality of the physical work. What this means for our understanding of Rauschenberg's connection to the "simple" medium of television is that his interests lay in the space between the television and the viewer as well as transmission to screen. What we can see within the actual composition of the piece is that it attempts to entrap those viewers who themselves would subscribe to the "understanding" of art that he so disdainfully described earlier. A work like *Factum I and II* is intentionally positioning itself beyond the frame in the same way Rauschenberg's understanding of culture was manifested outside the pages of the written word.

To experience the combine works of Rauschenberg is to enter into an experience of art opposed to the orthodoxy of tradition and even an understanding of itself. It is to enter into a unique perspective of the world, where every minute detail, every mundane item or expression is filled with the potential to inspire metaphysical discussions on our social environment and ourselves.

## Chapter V

### Art in the Sea

Rauschenberg was not attempting to be revealed within his work, “This is not to say that he wanted to make an art that was autobiographical—far from it” (p.11 Hume).

So how do we attempt to connect personally through a piece with an artist that was so intent on repelling any attempts of understanding from his works? When it came time for the world to be introduced to the Dante Drawings, Leo Castelli was understandably excited to announce that the introduction for the Dante drawing’s collection, “will be written by none other than John Cage, who has known Rauschenberg since the beginning and is perhaps one of the persons who understand his work best” My engagement with Cage’s writing presumes this opinion of Castelli to be true. Therefor, when Cage comments on Rauschenberg, it should be seen as the personal reveal not extended by Rauschenberg to the public. Rather Cage acts as a surrogate Rauschenberg, moving intimately through the privileged information understood by his closest friend.

What Cage produced was a wonderfully detailed and eloquent, yet fleeting, engagement with the Dante drawings whose presence was palpably evoked in the text. Cage’s piece is a

brilliant work that helps to summarize the perspective of calculated disengagement that is registered in Rauschenberg's Dante drawings,

“Conversation was difficult and correspondence virtually ceased. (Not because of the mails, which continued.) People spoke of messages, perhaps because they'd not heard from one another for a long time. Art flourished. The goat. No weeds. Virtuosity with ease. Does his head have a bed in it? Beauty. His hands and his feet, fingers and toes long-jointed, are astonishing. They certify his work. And the signature is nowhere to be seen. The paintings were thrown into the river after the exhibition. What is the nature of Art when it reaches the Sea? Beauty is now underfoot wherever we take the trouble to look. (This is an American discovery. ) Is when Rauschenberg looks an idea? Rather it is an entertainment in which to celebrate unfixity....He changes what goes on, on a canvas, but he does not change how canvas is used for paintings—that is, stretched flat to make rectangular surfaces which may be hung on a wall. These he uses singly, joined together, or placed in a symmetry so obvious as not to attract interest (nothing special). We know two ways to unfocus attention: symmetry is one of them; the other is the overall where each small part is a sample of what you find elsewhere. In either case, there is at least the possibility of looking anywhere, not just where someone arranged you should. You are then free to deal with your freedom just as the artist dealt with his, not in the same way but, nevertheless, originally. This thing, he says, duplication of images, that is symmetry. All it

means is that, looking closely, we see as it was everything is in chaos still. To change the subject: "Art is the imitation of nature in her manner of operation." Or a net." (P.98-108, Cage).

Presented in this selection of Cage's piece, besides a lyrical dance through Rauschenberg's metaphysical ideas, is a tale of the very journey dissected meticulously in this paper. Just as in Rauschenberg's work itself, Cage purposefully seems to interrupt any interpretation of this writing's superficial relationships beyond what is displayed within the sentences. In this way I believe Cage is displaying, in his very description of Rauschenberg's technique, how it can be utilized outside of canvas bound medium.

Rauschenberg was not able to engage with the text dominant entertainment and education sections of society. It is evident that this struggle early in life motivated Rauschenberg to attempt to engage with the world visually in the intimate a way one would read an eloquent text. Critic Ed Krcma in *The Dante Drawings and the Classical Past* says, "Setting the Inferno in motion within a great wheel of contingency and collaboration, Rauschenberg relaunches Dante's poem for fresh encounters with the contemporary world, its epic coherence freshly patterned by his responsive improvisation" (p.169 Krcma).

Here both the effectiveness of Rauschenberg's style as well as its alienating qualities are present in this quote. Rauschenberg's "responsive improvisation" is what is being appropriated by Cage in a form not available to Rauschenberg as a dyslexic person. What is provided by this style of movement through a conceptual work, unhindered by expectation or destination, is a freedom of experience but also the lack of cultural reinforcement. That is to say that if the viewer is not prepared to engage with items and images in the way that Rauschenberg desires, there is a high chance that this style of work will not provide an introspective experience for a viewer.

Cage reinforces the fact that Rauschenberg's work is not readily available but has to be experienced and worked into to register its metaphysical value. Within this text we are shown what the Dante works are capable of inspiring, as Cage's divergent form is certainly in conversation with the very works the piece is detailing, "The paintings were thrown into the river after the exhibition. What is the nature of Art when it reaches the Sea? Beauty is now underfoot wherever we take the trouble to look." This passage is especially beautiful within the now storied context of Rauschenberg presented within this paper.

Acknowledged by Cage as well, this journey is deeply rooted in Rauschenberg dumping his work in the Arno. Cage's omission of context from this factual statement is telling of the intent of the writing. It agrees with Rauschenberg's "economical" interpretation of understanding. Where and when this momentous experience with the river occurred, that is not

important, it was simply a canvas on which the larger question and experience was displayed, “What is the nature of Art when it reaches the Sea?”

Just as in Rauschenberg’s combines, Cage’s ideas are fleeting and merely presented rather than being disseminated or explained. But that does not remove them from any conversation of importance or depth. In fact, the above quoted statement should be seen as an abstract and concise interpretation of the very purpose of this paper. The Dante drawings are “Art” dispersing into the Sea. The analogy returns us to consider movement once again and we are presented with the movement of a river juxtaposed against the movement of the sea.

The movement of a river is concentrated and carved out, a predetermined path that has been so for centuries. This is the movement that Rauschenberg began to work in opposition against when he detached himself from his work by releasing it into the Arno. The Dante works should be analyzed as the moment that that river water meets the ocean.

Suddenly, water, whose movement has been contained and managed within a focused direction, is suddenly influenced by the movement of every other molecule within the sea. That is why this question posed by Cage, and inspired by Rauschenberg, makes the reader attempt to answer it and in doing so realize the nature of the Sea. That the Sea is a singular, connected mass of innumerable molecules all responding simultaneously to the movement of each other.



The disdain towards understanding that was present in Rauschenberg is more approachable because within the sea how can one prove where the movement of the sea was initiated. There is no individual movement of the ocean just as there is no singular catalyst for understanding on the surface of a combine; the infinite interaction of its composition deems it uncontrollable and indeterminable. This is the most compact explanation of Rauschenberg's gallery of work one can confidently propose, it is art that has entered into the sea. But again the Dante works themselves should not be seen as having entered into the ocean, nor having exited the river.

“He changes what goes on, on a canvas, but he does not change how canvas is used for paintings— that is, stretched flat to make rectangular surfaces which may be hung on a wall. These he uses singly, joined together, or placed in symmetry so obvious as not to attract interest (nothing special). We know two ways to unfocused attention: symmetry is one of them; the other is the over-all where each small part is a sample of what you find elsewhere. In either case, there is at least the possibility of looking anywhere, not just where someone arranged you should. You are then free to deal with your freedom just as the artist dealt with his, not in the same way but nevertheless, originally. This thing, he says, duplication of images, that is symmetry. All it

means is that, looking closely, we see, as it was everything is in chaos still. To change the subject: "Art is the imitation of nature in her manner of operation." Or a net." (P.108, Cage).

As Cage announces, "you are then free to deal with your freedom just as the artist dealt with his, not in the same way but, nevertheless, originally." This is the state of mind that Rauschenberg should be assumed as inhabiting while creating these fluid and untethered works of illustration. The Dante drawings are just as much an attempt by the artist to relinquish "understanding" as an attempt to deal with his freedom as a citizen of the west. This meant engaging with a world that had become comfortable and defined, by those in control of perception and images, from a position of freedom.

Freedom should be seen as the ultimate untethered experience, where one is both unbound of constraints but also unprotected from the many truths of the earth that society keeps at bay. What creates fear in one person can create joy in another. To return to the original reaction to the critique on his black drawing in the preface, Rauschenberg would accept anyone seeing black as not just a pigment when they are aware that it is *their* reality and freedom of interpretation as an individual that is directing this reading. By being aware of this innate connection one is forced to engage it and destroy it to rebuild their perception of their world as something beneficial to them individual, not as a consumer of art or memetic devices.

As Cage says, Art is, “a net”. We can think of the detached images of the combines as connected by strands, while still maintaining open space between them for superficial relationships to pass through. The Dante drawings are a Sea made of up of trillions of individual molecules. So to are they like a net as it is the hundreds of connected segments that allow a collection of strands to form a cohesive structure fastened by its collective engagement with the Dante work.

The individual cantos and the work as a whole should be seen as a trawler net that swaths over any topic that it comes into contact with. They separate the images caught up within its net and allow its catch’s superficial “understanding” to be exited from the net, until what remains is a fresh virgin image that is primed for reengagement by the viewer.

Through these interpretations of the Dante works as presented by Cage, it becomes apparent how removed these illustrations are from the work that inspired them. Yet they are so effective as pieces of art that they maintain their conceptual importance despite not conforming to the expectations of their illustration.

Without proper introduction to the context and craft of the Dante drawings it is very possible to read them as literal, individually contained works that are dedicated to the *Inferno*. The Dante drawings are meant to be observed from the mouth of the river as it enters into the

ocean, tracing the movement of ideas from their dispersal into the infinite space of the sea, back to their original singular movement as they exited from the river.

## Chapter VI

### A Dance with the Devil Devoid of Dante

The presentation and structure of many of the works representing the postmodernist movement could be seen as conceptually lacking. When compared to a classical work, some would comment that the postmodernist vision did not seem as technically achieving and far too familiar to be recognized as “High-Art”. This opinion is a river, contained within its predetermined expectation; there is no room for the importance of the work to exist outside of the canvas, where it is often unquantifiable.

What can be frightening and intimidating about postmodernist work, is they often seem to lack a familiarity to their structure that would allow for a superficial engagement from their audience. These “simplistic” works are determined to reveal something about the spectator themselves and therefore displaying their quality outside of the physical work’s composition. A piece of postmodernist art is relevant in relation to the audience’s engagement and experience of it, its value concurrent with the effectiveness of its communication with a viewer.

It is not possible to place any item on a table and call it profound, though Rauschenberg does believe in every item possessing artistic value. Just as the skilled hand of a painter would elevate that artist above his peers, today artists are often praised for their conceptual prowess.

They imbue their works with elite levels of thought that render the otherwise ordinary items or ideas they are utilizing as active participants in an artwork.

I will begin my engagement with the *Canto* through a decidedly more superficial engagement than Rauschenberg would prefer.

Frantic scratches and marked edges forming the transferred images in *Canto XXI* show the presence of Rauschenberg within the work. Much like the movement of one's eye frantically trying to absorb a work intent on its separation, these transfer markings begat a wicked pace of the hand. One that is more intent on reproducing the most necessary parts of the images in order for them to be effective within the work, than providing any uniform application that would provide it with its original context.



For example, we can see the soldier in the far left of the image practically lose his recognizable form as a human, as the edge of the transfer leaves his figure incomplete. His right side is more assumed than present in the work and it is clear that he was not necessary to the

mood Rauschenberg was trying to display. The technique of transferring in itself is metaphoric to the type of focus that is present within the Dante drawings. A vague gathering of assumptions and ideas that occupy the surface of his image, blurred and untethered around the focused reproduction at the center.

Just through physical interaction of a transfer the center of the image is the section that would naturally receive the most attention from his hand. Through this technique Rauschenberg was able to use a physical application onto canvas to manifest a display of interest and focus, thus removing the need for language and narrative. The very application of an image into a combine gave it movement within a 2d plain. It is in these scratched reproductions that Cage saw, “something like a multitude of television sets all tuned to different channels” (Cage).

As has become evident this was not coincidence, as the impact that television had had on Rauschenberg is documented within his very work itself, and particularly the Dante Drawings. Sameul Weber describes the motivation for Rauschenberg’s conceptual inspiration due to new mass media, “television is both here and there at the same time, then, according to traditional notions of space, time and body, it can be neither fully there nor entirely here. What it sets before us, in and as the television set, is therefore split, or rather, it is a split or a separation that camouflages itself by taking the form of a visible image” (p.120, Weber).

Television offered him the security that his intent to discover what lay hidden between the space of repetition, the space between art and life, would no longer be something unable to be grasped by his peers. Once the pool of images Rauschenberg was transferring became culturally recognizable he was able to play on this familiarity and implemented it in his desire for individual engagement to occur. It is in the display of this relationship to television within the Dante drawings that securely places Rauschenberg's intent as an artist outside of the "river" of institutional thought. Rather, he floated further out to sea where he had the space and freedom to engage with the torrent of images and topics bombarding him from the media. Once the concept of television can be separated from the forms of social control that manifest through it, a wealth of metaphysical inquiry arises.

The Dante drawings are important and relevant because of the engagement they offer to the viewer's intuition. But it should be acknowledged, the soldiers that manifested their own importance in my head are as they are because of an association Rauschenberg had to place within this Canto to pay his minimum dues to the narrative.

Despite all of the previous evidence and engagement, this work is still an illustration that remains in a constant motion with the poem itself albeit, superficially. In this example these soldiers are representative of demon guards that encircle a pit of tar in which bankers are forced



to burn and drown for eternity. A particularly famous reference made in the text is to that of a Guards farting out of their Asses like a trumpet,

“They turned along the left bank in a line:  
but before they started, all of them together  
had stuck their pointed tongues out as a sign  
to their Captain that they wished permission to pass,  
and he has made a trumpet of his ass” (p.174 Ciardi).

It is in Rauschenberg’s direct engagement with the text that he allows some of the institutional expectation of representation be catered to. Here Rauschenberg again shows the power of his artistic philosophy. His ability to craft a visual joke that abstractly and faithfully interprets the text is impressive in itself. But when a direct association of depth is created through a process that is based on improvisation and availability, then no longer can that medium be said to be, “unrewarding to full contemplative regard” (p. 86, O’Doherty).

It is in as much Rauschenberg’s ability to notice the contextual relevancy in an arbitrary image, as it is his curation of the canvas, which makes the Dante drawings an American classic.

Quoting Thomas Crow in his essay *This is Now: Becoming Robert Rauschenberg*,

“Rauschenberg’s studious and intensely serious application to the task [of creating the drawings],

his continually apt and surprising discovery of contemporary visual equivalents to the imagery of the poem, undermines any perception—then or now—that his art is a conduit for an indiscriminating “vernacular glance.”

Rauschenberg has said that, “I was interested in the role that accident played in my work”, the powerful connection I experienced when engaging with the soldiers in Canto XXI is by definition an accident. A happy one to be sure, but it was by no tactful search that Rauschenberg selected this image. To quote Ed Krcma, “It is tempting though, to risk a more precise interpretation” (p.168, Krcma) and try and confine Rauschenberg’s process to something where the brilliance of his improvised application can be quantified as premeditated. But Krcma continues, “he continually tempted interpretation without guaranteeing final answers”. The Dante drawings are void of any final answers present on the canvas.

The representation of the narrative text, one structured and created to be “understood” through its complex language and literary technique, is only superficially displayed in the Dante Drawings. While Rauschenberg’s ability to form innate associations through abstract representations of the *Inferno* produced memorable visual illustrations, they make no attempt to engage with the substance of the language surrounding their description. The *Inferno* within the Dante drawings should be seen like the Canvas under *Monogram*, an archaic, respected platform on which he built his work.

Before engaging with the Cantos personally, as I have argued is Cage's desired interaction from his viewers, Cage's admiration for Rauschenberg's mind and process should reverberate in the viewer, "Does that mean whatever enters has room?" This is the question



viewers must ask themselves as they engage with these Dante Drawings. For when we have allowed that, "we can see what we look at because our head is clear".

Rauschenberg's work is built off his intuitive transference of his emotional response to the poem onto the canvas.

That means that the work that was most

effective to me would be an instant connection. As has been shown, combine drawings are attempts by Rauschenberg to confront the conforming ideas of imagery, opting to allow the viewers experience to control it's engagement, not any set parameters of its desired "understanding".

I was immediately stricken by the black eyes of the gas mask that is looking directly at the viewer. Here was my first conversation with the movements of Canto XXI. All throughout the Cantos the viewer is confronted with reproductions of human figures, and in doing so Rauschenberg charges these images with the questions of what brought them into the space of the combine. Simply by displaying bodies in motion Rauschenberg's work creates associations to the outside world where they have been transferred. In doing so the viewer is engaging in the movement of exiting and entering the piece consciously, grappling with the multiple realities of a transferred image.

What makes this image unique from the other cantos in this series is these figures are faceless. It is this moment that the gasmasks themselves become extremely defined and my eyes focus in on them. The movement of my minds eyes has descended, like Dante on the back of the beast, to come face to face with these figures becoming more and more abstract the further I descend into the image.

Suddenly I am aware of their stance and build, I am registering these figures as enemies, as aggressors aware of my presence. I feel an instinctual response of animalistic concentration as my subconscious grapples with this sensation, I prepare to confront a perceived aggressor. These associations are happening very rapidly, so much so I realize how deep I have fallen in my

narrative association with the work in an instant. Upon this realization I am confronted with my superficial association of the work, I move out of the image and into my own thoughts.

This new context is not one determined by Rauschenberg, at this point I have completely exited a conversation with his intention and have instead begun an exploration constituted by the “freedom” allowed in these works. This freedom is not safe; the anxieties that come with a loss of definition are very present in my perception of the work.

In this case, my apocalyptic associations with gas mask gangs, with organized, oppressive men, informed my emotional response to the combine. But in doing so I began my own movement towards an understanding of my superficial association. I am now deconstructing my initial attempt of “understanding” a Rauschenberg piece, doing away with personal approaches to art that Rauschenberg would be happy to see go.

This dissociative movement, brought on by the critique of association inherent in Rauschenberg’s philosophy and therefore rightfully applied to this piece, strengthens my proposal that these works operate outside a need for understanding and association.

Rauschenberg was more interested in the movements occurring between two canvases than what was on them individually. This intent to explore the space between life and art occurs when the space between an individual’s association to an image in life and the image as it exists in the “freedom” of a combine is consciously critiqued.

Returning to Cage's musings on Rauschenberg's mind, the viewer who has engaged with his work as is desired can now identify the serenity experienced by Rauschenberg, "Is Rauschenberg's mind then empty, the way the white canvases are? Does that mean whatever enters has room? [...] And since his eyes are connected to his mind, he can see what he looks at because his head is clear, uncluttered?"

Rauschenberg's mind as described here is the product of his artistic philosophy being implemented continuously throughout his life. We are able to return to his struggle of dyslexia as; "his eyes are connected to his mind" makes direct reference to its roll in his artistic philosophy. I have shown that one does not have to be dyslexic to reflect on his art in the way Rauschenberg intends; his philosophy only requires the desire to implement it.

Rather Cage insinuates that when we participate in this movement with Rauschenberg, that we are experiencing a dyslexic process, not only that but we benefit from it. This is a testament to the powerful experience I have proved emerges when ones personal association to art is internally critiqued. To do so objectively and actively, as I have shown is Rauschenberg's intended approach towards the Dante drawings, they reveal to the individual a space between life and art that allows for personal growth of the viewer. Growth that would lead to a Zen, an experience of life devoid of the anxieties of superficial "understanding" and association. Once

this has been achieved one will reside like Rauschenberg did himself one, “can see what he looks at because his head is clear”.

## Conclusion

Regardless of the pride and excitement I have turning in this project, at its start I was supremely disinterested in writing a research paper. As is evident in my transcript, over the last few semesters I was preparing myself to be able to create a series of my own work in an abstract interpretation of my *Language and Literature* requirement by taking a majority of studio art and art history classes. Due to some misunderstanding on my part this kind of senior project was not going to be possible within my discipline and in an already dissociative state as a student I admittedly arbitrarily chose to write on the illustrations of Dante's *Inferno*. In an increasing similarity to the subject of my paper, I was not even aware that Robert Rauschenberg had work on the *Inferno* prior to my engagement with the Dante drawings.

This contextual understanding of my work adds some of the “magic” that seems to surround the Rauschenbergian way of thought, one where all of life's components possess the potential to become conceptually relevant in the world of art. Before my study of Rauschenberg I was unaware of how participatory I was in a philosophy he was instrumental in contemporizing.

What has been revealed to me as I conclude my senior project is that I have gained not only a further understanding and confidence in my own abilities and desires as an artist, but I have found a companion of development in Rauschenberg. In his position set squarely against



the expectations of the Art establishment in the 1960s I have found a mentor for which to approach my appreciation for the internet and the world it allows me to exist in.

What I found the most rewarding about this project is that my interest in the topic I covered extends beyond this proposition of approaching the Dante drawings from a position of suspended understanding. Rauschenberg's opinions and application of his vision has allowed me a new vocabulary and history for me to relate my own work to, allowing me to participate in conversations with a mentor I never had.

I believe I have gained more from this process than creating a show would have ever afforded me. I have been forced to work in a way I am not comfortable in and in doing so have learned about what work it is I want to create. More importantly, I, for the first time, feel I have a vocabulary to discuss my philosophies on creation as Rauschenberg has been revealed to be my inspiration before I even knew who he was. I feel I now possess an intellectual confidence to pursue my works through the immediacy of my intuition,

I am proud to say that I feel this paper has become my rivers end. The content I was unfortunately forced to omit from this paper, as well as the intellectual movements my continued thought on the topic has provided, I feel are my first movements from the mouth of my river into the ocean of my life a post grad. I enjoyed the process of building a precisely sourced argument presenting the proposal that a works meaning is non-existent because it rejects that containment

of definition. My personal attraction to Rauschenberg's philosophy of understanding means that I am intent in strengthening its presence in his cannon, as well as create a contextual argument for its validity through the direct sourcing I provided in the paper. This meant that I was constantly fighting the urge to following an association that would pull me away from my focused argument, in doing so I was contradicting my belief in the validity of my intuition.

This is what informed my unorthodox approach to the final section of my work.

Throughout the paper I had approached the Dante Drawings through my roll as author of this work. That constrained me and limited the experience I could communicate through my writing. By allowing my free flowing, poetic, inquisitive movements to punctuate and participate in the argument I have proposed, I feel I created a space for performance within my piece.

This work now feels particularly personal and I have been amazed by the direct and immediate presence Rauschenberg has begun to occupy in my everyday thinking. My fear entering into my project was due to a anxious perception that I creating a work that I would look back on with disappointment. But I have never worked harder or been more proud than to hand in a senior project that I can describe as reflecting who I was when I wrote it, and displaying who I hoped to become.

## Bibliography

- Albers, Josef, "Concerning Art Instruction," Black Mountain College Bulletin 2, June 1934, n.p.
- Ashton, Dore, "Art: *The Collaboration Wheel: A Comment on Robert Rauschenberg's Comment on Dante*," Arts & Architecture 80, no. 12 (1963): 10.
- Ashton, "Rauschenberg's Thirty-Four Illustrations for Dante's Inferno," 54.
- Borchardt-Hume, Achim. "Five Propositions." Comp. Leah Dickerman. Robert Rauschenberg. New York: MoMA, 2016. 11. Print.
- Botticelli, Sandro. *Birth of Venus* (1484-1486). Digital image.
- Cage, John, "On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and His Work" (1961), in *Silence* (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 1961). P. 105
- Castelli records, *Castelli to Alfieri*, January 28, 1961.
- Craft, Catherine. *An Audience of Artists: Dada, Neo-Dada, and the Emergence of Abstract Expressionism*. Chicago, Ill: U of Chicago, 2012. Print. Quoting Elenor Ward.
- D. Medina Lasansky, *The Renaissance Perfected: Architecture, Spectacle, and Tourism in Fascist Italy* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 2005), 58.
- Dante, Alighieri, and John Ciardi. *The Divine Comedy*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1970. Print.
- DaVinci, Leonardo. *Adoration of the Magi* (1481). Digital image.
- Dawkins, Richard. *The Selfish Gene*. New York: Oxford UP, 1976. (p.192) Print.
- Dickerman, Leah. "Foundations at Black Mountain College." Robert Rauschenberg. Comp. Leah Dickerman. New York: MoMA, 2016. 28-59. Print.

- Deleuze, Gilles. *Letter to Serge Daney: Optimism, Pessimism, and Travel*. New York: Columbia UP, 1995. Print.
- Feinstein, Roni, "Random Order: The First Fifteen Years of Robert Rauschenberg's Art 1949–1964" (Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, New York, 1990), 377, n. 19.
- Joseph, Branden. *Split Screens*. Cambridge: MIT, 2007. Print.
- Kantorvich, Aharon. *An Evolutionary View of Science: Imitation and Memetics*. Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv U, 2014. Print.
- Krcma, Ed. "The Dante Drawings and the Classical Past." Robert Rauschenberg. Comp. Leah Dickerman. New York: MoMA, 2016. 67-86. Print.
- Mattison, Robert S., *Robert Rauschenberg: Breaking Boundaries* (New Haven and London Yale University Press, 2003), 34–39, at 37.
- Nesin, Kate. "Minature Monument." Comp. Leah Dickerman. Robert Rauschenberg. New York: MoMA, 2016. 11. Print.
- O'Doherty, Brian, "Rauschenberg and the Vernacular Glance," *Art in America*, 60, no. 5 (1973): 86.
- Olson, *letter to Creeley*, January 29, 1952, in *ibid.*, p. 60.
- Rauschenberg, Robert. "Art of Assemblage." *Art of Assemblage*. MoMA, New York. 1961. Lecture.
- Rauschenberg, Robert. *Canto XXI* (1960). Digital image.
- Rauschenberg, Robert. *Factum I & II* (1957). Digital image.
- Rauschenberg, Robert. *Grant Application from Rauschenberg Foundation*. Publication. New York: Robert Rauschenberg, 1960. Print.
- 'Robert Rauschenberg talks...', Maxime de la Falaise McKendry, 6 May 1976, p. 34

- Rauschenberg, Robert. *Monogram* (1959). Digital image.
- *Rauschenberg's hand-edited typescript of this untitled 1953 statement for the Galleria dell'Obelisco* p. 232.
- Rauschenberg, Robert. *Rebus* (1955). Digital image.
- Rauschenberg, Robert. *Scatole* (1952-53). Digital image.
- Rauschenberg, Robert, *statement in Hopps*, Robert Rauschenberg: The Early 1950s, p.232
- Rauschenberg, Robert, quoted in Emile de Antonio and Mitch Tuchman, *Painters Painting: A Candid History of the Modern Art Scene, 1940-1970* (New York: Abbeville, 1984), p. 94.
- Rauschenberg, Robert, quoted in Kostelanetz, "A Conversation with Robert Rauschenberg." Pp. 96-97. Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles 1999
- 
- Rauschenberg, Robert, quoted in Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors: Five Masters of the Avant-Garde* (Harmondsworth,
- Rauschenberg, Robert, Quoted in Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), p 345.
- Ruskin, John. *The Stones of Venice*. New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007. Print.
- Smith, Graham (2016) "Visibile Parlare": Rauschenberg's drawings for Dante's Inferno, *Word & Image*, 32:1, 77-103,
- Spencer, Oliver M. "Dante," in *The Ladies' Repository: A Monthly Periodical, Devoted to Literature, Arts, and Religion*, 18, no. 5 (Cincinnati: Methodist Episcopal Church, 1858), 259.

- Tomkins, Calvin, *O the Wall: Robert Rauschenberg and the Art of Our Time* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1980), p. pp. 81–82.
- Warhol, Andy, Hackett, Pat *Popism: The Warhol Sixties* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), p. 50.