

Switchboard by Robert Rauschenberg

Airport Series: Switchboard

Relief and Intaglio Print, produced at Captiva Island, Florida, 1974,
with support from Graphicstudio, University of Southern Florida

Milton Ernst Rauschenberg was born in Port Arthur Texas on October 22, 1925. His family was deeply religious, and Rauschenberg considered becoming a preacher, but decided against it because the Church of Christ did not permit dancing and he loved to dance. Following his discharge from the navy in 1945, Rauschenberg briefly returned to Texas where a friend convinced him attend art school in Kansas City. It was there that he decided to change his name from Milton, which he had never liked, to Bob. He was to find that the name Robert was also acceptable.

He spent a year in Kansas City, but felt that to be a legitimate artist one really had to study in Paris so he moved there in 1947. Less than a year later he returned to the US to attend Black Mountain College in North Carolina. There he studied under Joseph Albers. Despite their profound difference in philosophy and style, Rauschenberg always credited Albers with being the most important early influence on his art, teaching him the discipline and sense of restraint that would justify the liberties he took in subsequent work.

At Black Mountain, Rauschenberg met and began collaborating with avant-garde composer John Cage and innovative modern dance choreographer Merce Cunningham. After moving to New York City in 1950, he became acquainted with the young artist Jasper Johns. This group of friends, pursuing controversial new ideas in art, music and dance is sometimes referred to as the Fab Four of Neo-Dadism.

In 1951, Rauschenberg held his first one-man exhibition at the Betty Parsons Gallery. It featured seventeen of his "*White Paintings*" These would be followed by *Black Paintings*, *Dirt Paintings* (extended to *Grass Painting*) and *Red Paintings*. He then moved on to collage, initially incorporating found objects, then printed images and eventually combining painting, collage and construction in creations he called "Combines."

Rauschenberg famously once said that he wished to "work in the gap between art and life." In contrast to the Abstract Expressionists he downplayed artist self expression and focused on the objects and images from daily life with which he made his art. If a composition wasn't working, he believed it was the fault of the artist, not the materials. In the early days, he would walk around the block of his New York City apartment each morning, collecting discarded objects of great variety, preferably those in a relative state of decay. Upon his return home he would ar-

range and rearrange the objects until they formed a palette pleasing to him. He had once seriously thought about becoming a journalist and now considered himself to be a journalist who used the medium of art to record aspects of culture and news events of the time.

A well known example of his use of found objects involves the stuffed goat he saw in the window of a second hand store. He convinced the storekeeper to accept \$15 as down payment on the asking price of \$35, (he promised pay the rest when he earned it). It became the centerpiece of one of his most iconic sculptural pieces, entitled *Monogram* which consisted of the goat (with paint daubed on its snout) placed horizontally with a car tire encircling its middle, standing on a wooden platform covered with various collage elements ranging from a tennis ball to printed papers.

In the early days, Rauschenberg rarely had money to purchase materials and continued to use whatever came to hand. In this way he created another subsequently very famous (infamous?) sculpture entitled *Bed*. One morning Rauschenberg woke up and had no canvas or money with which to buy it. His eyes lit on an old quilt that had come with him from Black Mountain which he had most recently used to cover the hood of his old automobile. The colors and patchwork appealed to him so he made a stretcher for it, treating it as a canvas. His initial efforts to paint on the quilt were unsuccessful, but he found when he attached his pillow and part of a sheet to the top of the stretcher and applied paint to their white grounds, the quilt "gave up" and became a bed. Public reaction was not uniformly appreciative. Many people found it revolting because it looked to them like the scene of an axe murder or rape but Rauschenberg always considered it a friendly picture. "My fear has always been that someone would want to crawl into it."

During this period, Rauschenberg was not taken seriously by most of the New York art world because he was always testing the boundaries of established aesthetic principles. It wasn't until he was given an important one-man retrospective at the Jewish Art Museum in 1963 that he achieved his first real recognition. The show was critically acclaimed, and followed the next year by a second retrospective at the Whitechapel Gallery in London. Later that same year, he won the prestigious Venice Biennale.

Rauschenberg spent the rest of the sixties making art and designing costumes, lighting and scenery for the Merce Cunningham dance company. After a program director once mistakenly listed him as choreographer, he began including himself as a dancer. One of his most memorable performances was in the production *Pelican*, where he danced on roller skates wearing a large wing-like frame covered with parachute silk. One choreographer remarked "You had to watch Bob pretty closely because his ideas about costumes might destroy the effect of what you were trying to do. He'd want to get a stuffed lamb for a dancer to wear on his back, things like that."

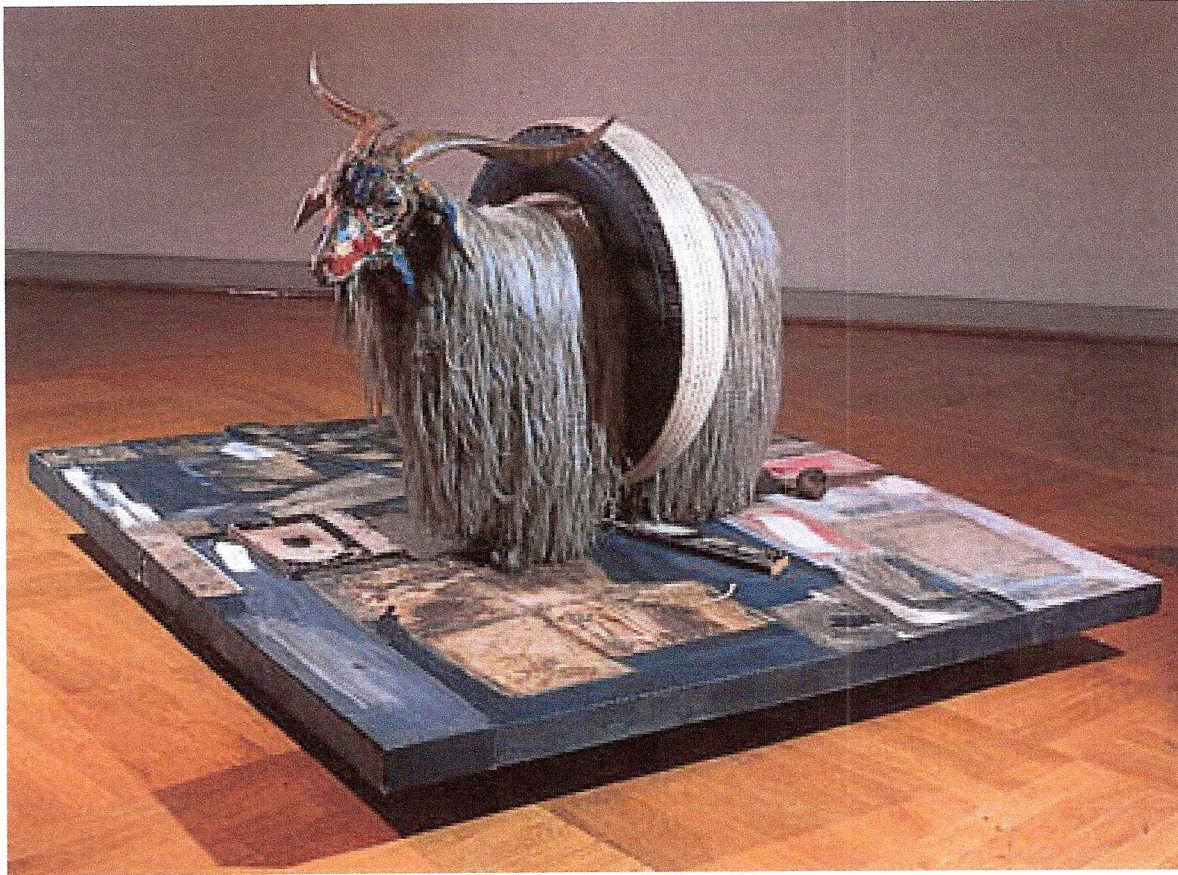
In 1972, Rauschenberg was invited to participate in a unique collaboration of faculty, artists and master printers at the University of South Florida. This program was the idea of Donald Saff, then chair of the art department at the university. He attracted noted national and international artists (Pearlstein, Rosenquist, Dine and Ruscha among others) and provided them with master printers, materials and equipment in a large workshop space. Students were encouraged to mingle informally with the artists, in contrast to the usual Artist in Residence format consisting of master classes and seminars. Rauschenberg stayed at Graphicstudio for three months in 1972, during which time he completed the *Made in Tampa Suite* of 12 prints as well as a suite of five clay pieces which used flattened corrugated cardboard boxes to make molds. He left for a time to travel in Israel but resumed his relationship with Graphicstudio in 1973-74 and produced the *Crops Suite* and the *Airport Series*.

The Airport Series, so named because Rauschenberg signed the contract for it at the Tampa Airport Hotel, was the first Graphicstudio project realized off the campus of USF. Printers, press and materials were moved to the artist's studio at Captiva Island where he produced his first intaglio prints. Not only was printing on fabric innovative, but the method of printing was totally new. By folding fabrics of differing weaves, he was able to print on and through several layers of materials simultaneously. After printing, the fabric was unfolded and sections sewn. In this way, Rauschenberg achieved images of great expansiveness through a single press run. He further extended the visual impact of this series of prints by additions of bottle caps, rulers, neckties, and in the case of *Switchboard*, an IBM electrographic pencil.

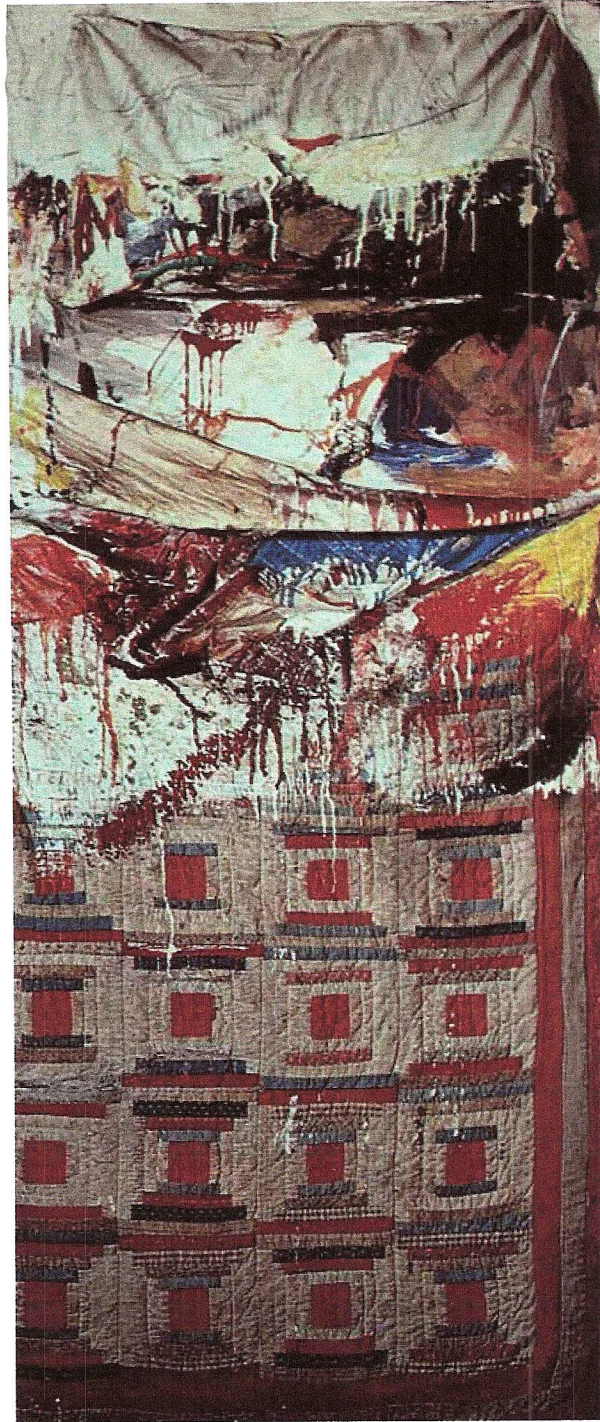
Rauschenberg often delayed titling his work (many are simply *Untitled*) so it is likely that he gave this piece the name *Switchboard* upon its completion primarily to differentiate it from other works in the series. He used the term "edition" to describe the group of 20 images titled *Switchboard*. Some of the printers objected to this term, since elements had to be manually reset before each print was made, they preferred to call them "multiple originals."

Today, Robert Rauschenberg is remembered for being one of the most influential artists of the twentieth century. His was the beginning of a new generation of artists wholly engaged in life and the process of art in a direct, intense and optimistic way without commitment to any of the familiar existing institutions. By blurring the distinctions between art and life, Rauschenberg helped pave the way for subsequent art movements such as Pop Art, Conceptualism, Happenings and Body Art.

Janet Wolf, May 16, ,2010



Robert Rauschenberg *Monogram* 1955-9
Freestanding combine 42x64.5 ins
Modern Museet, Stockholm



Robert Rauschenberg *Bed* 1955

Combine painting: oil and pencil on pillow, quilt, sheet, on wood supports

75.25x31.5x6.5 ins

Gift of Leo Castelli to the Museum of Modern Art, New York City

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Robert Rauschenberg

Fat Questions

1. As you look at this print and compare it to other prints you've seen, how would you say it is different?
2. What do you see in this piece that is a familiar part of everyday life?
3. This piece is #xxx in an edition of 20. What does the word "edition" typically mean when applied to art? Do you think that word is appropriate to use for this particular series? (How is it different from the traditional use of the term referring to a specific number of identical prints)