

Random Order: Robert Rauschenberg and the Neo-Avant-Garde by Branden W. Joseph, an October Book, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA and London, 2003, 418 pp., 103 b & w illus., \$34.95, ISBN: 0-262-10099-1 (hardback)

For those who have followed Robert Rauschenberg's career, it would seem that this has, until recently and with notable exceptions, been a relatively undertheorised area.¹ It is in this context that this book is a welcome attempt to redress that imbalance. In addition and perhaps more significantly, Branden Joseph has attempted to put in place a substantial theoretical basis for our understanding of one of the most significant artists to have emerged from the milieu that sits historically between Abstract Expressionism and later Pop Art and Minimalism. More broadly, Joseph's project is to refigure the ideas and intellects behind the art associated with the term neo-dada and, with the use of more recent theoretical ideas and methodologies, to identify an authentically new and challenging form of avant-gardism in the post-war period. His is a circuitous course which appears to have many different agendas, some of which he shares with other writers including those who have been published recently by October books.² As such, this cannot fail to beg the question amongst Rauschenberg observers whether Joseph's project is one that will enhance our understanding of his work or utilise it in order to embody more far reaching cultural issues.

A superficial reading of *Random Order* appears to confirm the latter view. In a significant number of cases Rauschenberg's mentor and collaborator John Cage stands in as a more erudite and conceptually sophisticated surrogate for the artist himself. In chapter one, for example, it is Cage's more consistent reading of Rauschenberg's infamous *White Paintings* of 1951–52 that is privileged over the latter's almost embarrassing naivety and interest in spiritual symbolism that informs his understanding of these works at the time that they were executed.³ From this reading Joseph proceeds tangentially to an in-depth exegesis of Cage's understanding of first Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, then Henri Bergson and eventually – in order to provide a perhaps more contemporary spin – to Gilles Deleuze. This trajectory is repeated in subsequent chapters to varying degrees and with a variety of different interlocutors, some of whom are much less obvious than Cage. For example, in chapter three we are asked to consider Rauschenberg's approach to performance in the light of the writing of Antonin Artaud when all we are offered as evidence that validates this connection are the discussions of Artaud's *The Theatre and its Double* at Black Mountain College hosted by M. C. Richards at which Rauschenberg may have been present.⁴ Again, other than a comparison of certain statements made by Rauschenberg (in none of which Artaud is actually named) with passages by Artaud that seem to articulate similar ideas, the author's exploration in this area is shored up by Cage or more accurately his collaborator David Tudor. Earlier in the same chapter the absurdism of Rauschenberg's theatre pieces (particularly those made in collaboration with the Judson Dance Theatre) is related to what Joseph calls an 'idiosyncratic'



reading of Marcel Duchamp's *Large Glass* put forward by Michel Carrouges. In this, Carrouges focuses on the element of the *Large Glass* that is identified as 'the bachelor machine,' an entity that 'appears first of all as an impossible, useless, incomprehensible, delirious machine' but which can also be considered to illustrate a particular mode of behaviour as exemplified by certain arbitrary or more specifically destructive actions (p. 232). Thus the smashing of eggs in the Rauschenberg-choreographed *Spring Training* (1965) is linked to Carrouges' proposal that 'the bachelor machine's specific function is solitude and death' (p. 235). The prescriptive nature of this reference is curious since its symbolic tone contradicts not only Joseph's rejection elsewhere of understanding Rauschenberg's work in this way but also the artist's strident opposition when exactly these kinds of metaphorical associations were applied to his black paintings.⁵

The goal of Joseph's exegesis, as the book's title indicates, is primarily to locate Rauschenberg and Cage within a neo-avant-garde, one that mounts an assault upon conventional notions of art works as symbolic manifestations of an individual ego or a singular subject matter. As Joseph puts it in his introduction, Rauschenberg's position 'forms part of a distinct strain of avant-garde production heretofore unrecognised in its consistency, seriousness, and oppositional intent' (p. 5). The genealogy that Joseph attempts to instate has the effect of introducing the notion of a *post-modern* avant-garde, one that embraces plurality and difference as a norm and has little to do with more historical notions of transgressive art.⁶ Instead of the neo-avant-garde mounting a full frontal assault on the institution of art, in the work of Rauschenberg and Cage as it is presented in *Random Order*, the challenge is towards conventional (Western, in Cage's case) notions of subjectivity and its surrogate in the age of mass-media. Therefore, what Joseph sees Rauschenberg as putting into place in his early work is 'a positive, non-anthropocentric force of difference' (p. 195) in order to counteract firstly the illusion that subjectivity is unified and self-identical and secondly the simulacral 'spectacular representational presence' (p. 191) proposed by the television image. To Joseph's credit, it is clear that many of these views are inspired by observations deriving from the works themselves as well as accounts given by the artist and there are several detailed and lucid descriptions that serve to anchor Joseph's various theses. For example, chapter five is perhaps the only sustained attempt to date to understand Rauschenberg's approach to live performance; the exploration of key works such as *Collection* (1954) in chapter two exposes Rauschenberg's reflection on the status of painting in the mid-1950s, which informed his early Combine paintings and which perhaps represents his most profound contribution both to painting as a medium and to contemporary debates surrounding the art object. Substantiating the broader implications that Joseph detects in Rauschenberg's work is, however, more problematic and, as I have indicated, requires that he make connections that are distinctly equivocal.



This kind of intellectual promiscuity shown by Joseph in *Random Order* can be understood on a number of different levels. Firstly, it might be seen as the output of an author who is handicapped by the absence of broadly intellectual discourse on the part of Rauschenberg with the result that any suggestion of a wider-reaching political or cultural agenda informing his work is bound to depend on a significant level of conjecture. Secondly, *Random Order* is far from being a unique instance of a writer's apparent exploitation of Rauschenberg's work in order to serve more ambitious intellectual ends: it would perhaps be more accurate to say that it is part of a distinct tendency in writings about this artist. From Leo Steinberg's epochal essay, *Other Criteria*, through Calvin Tomkins' *Off the Wall: Robert Rauschenberg and the Art World of Our Time*, to Douglas Crimp's *On the Museum's Ruins*, it seems that Rauschenberg is destined to provide an illustration for concepts or contexts that would otherwise lack an apposite visual equivalent. The third level on which we might approach Joseph's treatment of Rauschenberg's work demands that we turn our attention to our established expectations of theoretical writing concerning the visual arts.

Both Rosalind Krauss and Joseph have referred to the inappropriateness of any in-depth analysis of Rauschenberg's iconography.⁷ That said, the observation that analysis of any symbolic connotation in his work has often stopped short of a comprehensive explanation of the artist's repeated use of certain images and of enigmatic titles has been made by writers as far back as the 1970s when, for example, Charles Stuckey mounted a rather rigid analysis of Rauschenberg's *Rebus* (1955).⁸ A few years later Roger Cranshaw and Adrian Lewis took issue with what they saw as the predominance of writing about Rauschenberg's work that focused on 'decomposition rather than composition, discontinuity rather than continuity (both in individual works and between works).'⁹ Instead of a straightforward enunciation of the objects, images and formats used in his work, Cranshaw and Lewis explore the possible formal and semiotic operating of these elements in order to coax out the communicative function of his works. This kind of analysis has laid low until the late 1980s when the emergence of queer theory as a significant theoretical voice began to reconsider Rauschenberg's imagery in terms of the iconography of closeted homoeroticism. Significantly, in *Random Order* Joseph dwells neither on established iconographic analyses nor on the coded messages that writers such as Jonathan Katz have attempted to reveal.¹⁰ Rather, he states his belief that 'Rauschenberg pursued forms of aesthetic signification and spectatorial reception that *challenge* traditional signifying means' (p. 11, my italics).

It is important to note that due to the powerful impact in recent years of both linguistic theory and gender studies on writing about art the differing approaches to understanding Rauschenberg's use of imagery in terms of either unconventional or more broadly conventional modes of signification reveals a potentially powerful schism between deconstruction and queer theory. In considering why sexual difference is not apparently as valid as the philosophical readings of difference – à la Bergson or Deleuze – that the author



explores, Joseph concludes that a particular sexuality implies a stable subjectivism that is at odds with 'the radically individualized reception instigated by the *White Paintings*' (p. 67), a reception that changes for each viewer each separate moment in which they are confronted by the work. Although Joseph does not deny the validity of analysis of a work in terms of the artist's sexuality, and admits that Rauschenberg does at times 'traffic in signification' (p. 290, note 27), he does not resurrect this debate in reference to the combines or the silkscreen works despite these being far more appropriate places to do so. The neo-avant-garde challenge as presented by *Random Order* has something disingenuous in this refusal to permit sexuality its role in at least bracketing the experience of an artwork dealing with difference just as Bergson or Deleuze's philosophy is embedded in a certain 'historically effected consciousness,' to borrow a phrase from Hans Georg Gadamer.

But what of the works themselves and how they manifest the 'challenge [to] traditional signifying means' claimed by Joseph? His understanding of Rauschenberg's transfer drawings and early photographic silkscreen prints as responses to the way in which television presents or represents images is telling. It is one thing to make a photographic screen print or a transfer drawing as a response to the phenomenon of television's role as 'instrument or agent of spectacle' (p. 183), as Joseph puts it, and another to work with the medium in which that broadcast is actually presented as artists were beginning to in the late 1960s. Instead of an engagement with the 'medium' of the television picture, which at its core is mobile, transient and immaterial, the traces Rauschenberg provides us with are more like a static version akin to the retinal after-image, caused by exposure to bright lights, but fixed subsequently onto a flat, tangible surface.¹¹ In other words, we seem to be witnessing a procedure that is an analogue of photography and not television. Even his experiments with technology appear to stubbornly resist television's rapid annexation of imagery throughout the period with which *Random Order* deals: Rauschenberg uses broadcast sound only – in *Broadcast* (1959) – and static images which change location – as in *Revolver* (1967) amongst others – but never deals directly with televisual equipment. Couple this with Rauschenberg's undoubted play with conventional pictorial, as well as linguistic,¹² signification from the early combines to his most recent work, and his insistence on the imagistic properties of all of his work (including his performances) might be seen to represent a repetition of standard practices of the original Dada groups, from photomontage, absurdist cabaret and the machine imagery of Duchamp and Francis Picabia. That is not to say that Rauschenberg has not been supremely innovative in much of his work but rather that this innovation is undoubtedly bracketed by the specific means through which he chose to operate and that these have artistic precedents. In this respect, the pejorative connotations of the term neo-avant-garde put forward by commentators such as Peter Bürger are not dispelled by Rauschenberg.¹³



Joseph makes it clear from the outset that his is a partial account and to imply anything else would contradict the departure that he is trying to effect from any totalising or hermetic definition of Rauschenberg's early work. However, it might be worth considering the effects of accounts of Rauschenberg's work that are uncritical or open-ended, or divide their focus between his practice and the art historical phenomena of which it is a symptom. How, for instance, does this help us interpret Rauschenberg's early work in relation to his career as a whole, bearing in mind the general consensus that he has produced little of significance from the 1970s onwards? In *Random Order*, Joseph cites both Rauschenberg's disenchantment at the failure of the radical political movements of the 1960s and his growing stature in the art establishment as the reason for the dilution of the critical effect of his work. However, Joseph simply does not provide enough compelling evidence for Rauschenberg's immersion in radical politics here, and the reader whose sympathies lie with identity politics are left asking the question of why, if the neo-avant-garde are to be seen as an effective political as well as aesthetic voice, didn't sexual difference at least become a factor in his work? Whilst Katz might cite *Random Order* as another example of 'an insistent and damaging homophobia' that has underpinned writing on Rauschenberg, others might give their criticism a different gloss.¹⁴ Cranshaw and Lewis, for example, would regard the use Joseph makes of the heterogeneity of Rauschenberg's imagery as further evidence of the persistent absence of confrontation by many writers of the *manner* in which plurality appears in Rauschenberg's work. Their view is that Rauschenberg's work manifests an openness that begs a dialogue both inside and outside the art world; this has not been forthcoming. As Cranshaw and Lewis observe, an unwillingness to engage Rauschenberg's work in a conventional formal or semiotic manner when the works themselves are clearly referencing established art forms or to merely admit that they 'traffic in signification' without exploring this avenue is to fail to connect with it on a sufficient number of levels. They insist that 'no other body of critics was prepared to consider seriously Rauschenberg's semiological ability, his capacity, that is, to manipulate and transmute the signs and meanings that were available to him.'¹⁵ This plea seems finally to have found a response in the re-inscription of Rauschenberg's work by queer theory. In *Random Order*, this response is made to appear reactionary, and yet whilst contemporary art theory might demand of its 'operatives' an attempt to define an artist's work outside the tradition of the monograph, and within the 'perpetually flowing stream of writing' as Roland Barthes would have it, this 'stream' now includes the powerful attempt by writers such as Katz at reintegrating iconographic analysis into writing about art.



Random Order can be rightly heralded as a significant attempt to approach, using current ideas, an artist whose career has long deserved such an in-depth reappraisal. Yet in the end we are left in the dark as to precisely what Rauschenberg's true legacy is. With over thirty years of largely ineffective work as the net result of the period under discussion in this book, and no reference to his neo-avant-garde successors in later generations, the significance of 'the distinct strain of avant-garde production' to which Joseph refers in *Random Order* is hard to fathom. As such, the broader question of the relevance of the term avant-garde in the post-war as well as the post-modern era remain – perhaps deliberately – unanswered.

David Jeffreys
Savannah College of Art and Design

¹ As Joseph notes, the volume of writing on Rauschenberg has expanded considerably in the last ten years; other seminal essays which predate this period are Rosalind Krauss's 'Rauschenberg and the Materialized Image,' *Artforum*, 13, December 1974, 36–43, and Leo Steinberg's 'Other Criteria,' in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth Century Art*, New York, 1972 (the relevant parts of this essay also appear in 'Reflections on the State of Criticism,' *Artforum*, 10, March 1972, 37–49). A number of these have been collected in Branden W. Joseph, ed., *Rauschenberg*, Cambridge, MA and London, 2002. A few other notable contributions to a more complex understanding of Rauschenberg's work will be referred to below.

² The debate surrounding the origins of an authentic avant-garde in the post-war era, which is one of the main issues in this book, has also been dealt with by Hal Foster in *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, Cambridge, MA and London, 1996. In this, Foster asserts a minimalist genealogy for the neo-avant-garde; Joseph, therefore, situates the neo-avant-garde shift earlier than Foster. Benjamin Buchloh also dwells on this issue in his *Neo avant-garde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975*, Cambridge MA, and London, 2000.

³ The first explanation by Rauschenberg of these works was given in a letter written to the gallery owner Betty Parsons dated 18 October 1951. The letter is reprinted in extracted form throughout chapter one.

⁴ The evidence is restricted to a page reference in Mary Emma Harris' *The Arts at Black Mountain College*, Cambridge, MA and London, 1987.

⁵ In 1966 Rauschenberg expressed frustration in the critical perception of these works. He recalled: 'they couldn't see black as pigment. They moved immediately into association with "burned-out," "tearing," "nihilism" and "destruction."' Quoted in *Random Order*, 86.

⁶ The debate concerning the relevance of a neo-avant-garde first set in place by Peter Bürger in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Michael Shaw trans., Manchester, 1984 is taken up both by Hal Foster in *The Return of the Real* and here by Joseph.

⁷ Krauss, like other writers such as Benjamin Buchloh, prefers to consider the ambiguous or unstable relationship between imagery in terms of allegory as opposed to iconography. See Rosalind Krauss, 'Perpetual Inventory,' in Walter Hopps and Susan Davidson, eds, *Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective*, Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1997, 223, note 60, and Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, 'Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art,' *Artforum*, 21: 1, September 1982, 43–56.



⁸ Charles Stuckey, 'Reading Rauschenberg,' *Art in America*, 65: 2, March/April 1977, 74–84. Stuckey was later to back down from this approach when he wrote an essay for the exhibition catalogue *Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective*, under the absurdly pluralistic title, 'Rauschenberg's Everything Everywhere Era.' In Hopps and Davidson, eds, *Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective*, 31–41.

⁹ Roger Cranshaw and Adrian Lewis, 'Re-reading Rauschenberg,' *Artscribe*, 29, June 1981, 44.

¹⁰ These views were first expressed in Katz's Ph.D. thesis, *Opposition Inc.: The Homosexualization of Postwar American Art*, Northwestern University, 1995. His 'The Art of Code: Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg,' in Whitney Chadwick and Isabelle de Courtivron, eds, *Significant Others: Creativity and Intimate Partnership*, London, 1993, 189–207 is a summarised version of aspects of Katz's thesis.

¹¹ Rosalind Krauss identified this aspect of Rauschenberg's work in 'Rauschenberg and the Materialised Image,' *Artforum*, 13, December 1974, 36–43, where she states 'that images themselves, within the medium of Rauschenberg's art are material substances' (39).

¹² By this I mean both his use of text in the works themselves and titles that seem to lead our understanding of the works in a particular direction.

¹³ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*.

¹⁴ Jonathan Katz, 'The Art of Code: Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg,' in Chadwick and de Courtivron, eds, *Significant Others*, 189.

¹⁵ Roger Cranshaw and Adrian Lewis, 'Re-reading Rauschenberg,' *Artscribe*, 29, June 1981, 50.

