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Lovers and Divers: Interpictorial Dialog in the Work of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg

He is like that butcher whose knife never becomes dull simply because he cut with it in such a way that it never encountered an obstacle.

John Cage on Robert Rauschenberg¹

I wanted something that wouldn't have to carry nature as part of its message.
Jasper Johns²

In their work of the 1950s, Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns repeatedly sought to denigrate the authorial „I“ in favor of the spectatorial „you“. They employed various diversions, games, codes, and, not least, silence in noteworthy counterpoint to the self-expression deemed essential to the integrity and authenticity of the Abstract Expressionist art of the time. Various called post-modernist, deconstructive, even feminist to flesh out its contrast with the Modernist ideology of many (but by no means all) of its forbearers, their new authorial voice is characterized by a parade of personae, roles and masquerades such that any stable, essentialist construction of authorial intention is always undercut. After all, before Rauschenberg's all-white canvases what is there to see but your own reflection, ideological and otherwise? As he once put it, „Meaning belongs to the people.“³

Yet, these carefully non-self identical and non-expressive artistic practices, in conjunction with statements such as the ones quoted above, had a corollary effect. Such a dutifully anti-expressive art – one that continuously articulated that it was *not* expressing or exposing the self – inevitably produced a sense of something missing, of identities deliberately repressed, of a self under siege. Especially in the immediately post-McCarthy American cultural context of policed consensus, a Cold War audience saw secrets here. What wasn't said was what *couldn't* be said. To cut, as Cage says of Rauschenberg, and not encounter an obstacle is to cut very warily indeed.

Today, we see post-Abstract Expressionist paintings differently. A triumphantly post-modernist cultural discourse recognizes these works as instead prescient exemplars of a now generalized suspicion of authorial presence. Today we celebrate the works decenteredness, sometimes even expressly correlating this art to the deconstructive methodologies of theorists such as Jacques Derrida.⁴ In their perceived refusal to write a singular, self-contained authorial presence, in their free acceptance of audience and interpretation, Johns and Rauschenberg often seem strikingly, familiarly, postmodernist.

But to a Cold War audience, what was not present here – expression, self-exposure – wasn't refused so much as sequestered. In the Cold War context of

policed consensus, the suspension of selfhood implicit in an anti-expressive art nonetheless led seemingly inexorably back to the authors themselves. As Fairfield Porter observed of Johns in one of the earliest reviews of his career, „What does he love, what does he hate?“⁵ This sense of an identity withheld or buried is both what sparked interest in their often complex gestural surfaces and served to produce these surfaces as ironic or other than as they appeared. Gesture, after all, was supposed to signal authorial presence, especially under Abstract Expressionism. Thus, to a Cold War audience, much was buried under the heavily worked paint and collage of these paintings – a discursive bivalence which thus signaled its own repressions.⁶ In contradistinction to contemporary critical tendencies, once upon a time, when the work of Johns and Rauschenberg was new, it was thought to be deeply expressive, deeply autobiographical, albeit complexly so.

William Rubin discussed these autobiographical elements in a 1960 review of Rauschenberg:

„Rauschenberg has developed this [autobiographical] dimension through the application of figurative collage elements within the framework of an abstract style of painting, rendering it even more personal, more particular, and sometimes almost embarrassingly private. Everything the eye delights in is eligible to enter the autobiographical poem. The iconography of the Rauschenberg pictures seems to reach back through time and consciousness, memory by memory.“⁷

As the artists' fame increased, a remarkable exegetical shift took place. The one-time maker of an „autobiographical poem“ became the arch Cagean of the canvas, the man who picked up Duchamp's mantle before it even hit the floor. Meaning, intention, expression were seen as having no place in this artist's work; instead, his art was understood, as he once put, as but an expression of a „random order.“⁸

Such strategic self-silencing has now been canonized within postmodernist thought; silence is, after all, the logical endgame of the death of the author. As a consequence, iconographic readings of Rauschenberg and Johns have acquired a bad name. As recently as this year's Rauschenberg retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum, Rosalind Krauss writes in the catalog, „This idea of the iconographic as the encoding of a relatively coherent text that underlies and explains the image is, of course, miles away from the complex theories of allegory ... It is precisely the message of uncertainty, of slippage, of unreadability, and fragmentation that allegory not only conveys but also...in itself becomes.“⁹

I am certainly not going to deny the self-evident slippages, unreadabilities and fragmentations in the work of Johns and Rauschenberg. But I am also going to insist that there is a relatively coherent text that underlies the images as well, that there is both iconography and allegory here, coherence and incoherence. Indeed, my central thesis is that the authorial voice proposed and interpellated through the works of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg cannot be so easily circumscribed according to such simple polarities. And I shall further argue that this bifurcated authorial voice, at once self-expressive and decentered, telling and

silent, is a very careful, self-conscious construction crafted to allow a modicum of self-exposure while appearing entirely impersonal and unexpressive. Here, in short, is a pictorial self characterized by a kind of doubleness or ambivalence, at once private and public, expressive and anti-expressive, conveying neither pure „interiority“ nor pure postmodern social construction or imbrication. It manifests a subject trapped within dominant cultural constructions and fully aware of being trapped, an existence both inside and outside the structuring ideologies through which the manifestation „self“ is realized in social life. In short, I agree with Cold War critics like Rubin: there is a form of self-expression here, a paradoxical secret, silent self-expression.

Such a bifurcated account of identity – at once present and absent, telling and not telling – should not strike us as unusual. Indeed, it's been named in ordinary language; we call it the closet. Since Johns and Rauschenberg lived as gay men and lovers in the midst of what was probably the singular most homophobic decade in American history, the closet was a central fact of life. But to be in the closet is to be conscious of that doubleness, that pull, the doubled vision that is the inheritance of all who exist in two worlds. As we will see, what makes this closeted self so difficult to describe, so slippery, is its refusal to be written through either of the two predominant accounts of identity available to art historians, expressive or anti-expressive, partaking at the very same moment of aspects of both. In embodying both terms of our structuring binarisms, the closeted queer collapses our conceptual apparatus, and eludes our grasp. This is after all what it means to play a role or don a mask or be in the closet: to at once embody a doubleness of identity, to be both self and other. Johns and Rauschenberg inhabit both terms of the structuring oppositions that critics have mobilized to describe them, with works that are both random and coded, open and closed, public and private, silent and self-expressive.

Close examination of works produced when Johns and Rauschenberg were lovers, roughly between 1953 und 1961, reveal that many carried deeply personal or private meaning alongside, and in spite of, their celebrated decentering from artist to audience. These meanings were unauthorized in every sense of the term and their presence was not only a closely guarded secret, but subject to repeated denial and an ongoing conspiracy of silence. The fact that these „private“ meanings have largely gone undiscovered is indeed evidence of this works' discursive success. But we haven't discovered these meaning in part because we haven't thought to look, believing wholeheartedly in their promise of audience-centeredness. Yet this promise was perhaps at least in part strategic, a useful cover for other meanings and other purposes. In this light, an important moment of presumptively postmodernist practice can be re-viewed through the very particular problematic of making an expressive art within a culture of constraint, resulting in a very unpostmodernist account of authors in context.

Since the anti-expressive character of Johns and Rauschenberg's art has been well-established in the critical discourse for quite some time, and still dominates the art historical establishment today, I shall focus on the other side of the coin

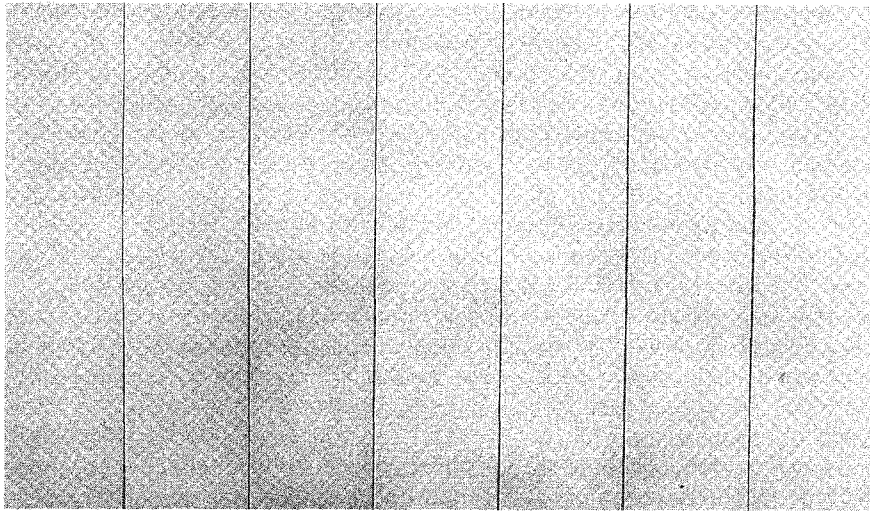
and discuss a very particular inter pictorial exchange between the two lovers that began shortly after they met and continued long after they broke up.¹⁰ But I again want to underscore that I do not hold that this inter pictorial conversation is the „real“ meaning or import of the paintings in question. It is but one facet of their meaning, worthy of consideration here simply because, in our uncritical acceptance of the anti-expressive dimension of this art, it has never been noticed before.

Well, not exactly unnoticed. As early as 1961, Jack Kroll, writing in *Artnews* has this to say about expression in Rauschenberg's work: „But Rauschenberg sometimes snags his sweater between the sanctum of private reference and the littered tundra of commemorative decay. A poof on incense disperses the bracing pungency of the urban miasma; the sharp punning weapons of the inscrutable ironist corrode gracefully with a lavender rust; a Firbankian frisson ripples the confident, humanly demoniac Baron Corvo incognito; we get too close to the artist in the wrong sense.“¹¹

From the lavender rust, to the Firbankian frisson, to the poofing incense, and Baron Corvo incognito, this litany of homophobic codes has been marshaled to bear witness to what Kroll later characterizes as Rauschenberg's „Capotean“ indulgence. From Kroll's perspective, we have indeed gotten „too close to the artist in the wrong sense,“ having uncovered his secrets: the expression of his ostensibly hidden homosexual life. What Kroll sneeringly refers to as the space „between the sanctum of private reference and the littered tundra of commemorative decay“ is precisely the territory I want to navigate in my attempt to get „close to the artist.“ It is in this space between authoritative usage and „private reference“ that the emergence of „other“ meanings – seductive implications both „public“ and „private“ – emerge into discursive promise.

The Robert Rauschenberg who made art before meeting Jasper Johns was a very different artist from the one who made art after, as even a cursory examination of his work makes clear. And as far as Johns is concerned, there is good reason to wonder if he would ever have even become an artist had he never met Rauschenberg.¹² Compare, for example, one of Rauschenberg's pre-Johns *White Paintings* (Fig. 1) and his *Yoicks*, one of the first painting completed after they became seriously involved. The span between the empty all-white canvas and this lushly painted gestural work, replete with collaged comic strips and fabric, is a mere two and a half years. My point is that for both Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg the significance of this six year relationship is difficult to overstate. All the more remarkable, then, that it is rarely stated at all.

Not only will what follows proceed from taking that relationship seriously, it will also, rather tentatively, weave an argument for the consideration of gay relationships – at least in the closeted, pre-liberationist days before the Stonewall riots as, as it were, a special case, different from straight relationships not only in object choice and dynamics of course, but far more importantly, in terms of the work the relationship was called upon, and able, to do. As I hope to suggest in the



1 white painting

following few pages, Johns' and Rauschenberg's relationship was not only the crucible of their art making, but of significant aspects of their identity as well.

My premise is, you should excuse the term, straightforward. For gay and lesbian people, coupledom operates differently, as indeed it must within a policed social context that not only pathologizes queer people, but strenuously enforces their social isolation as its chief mechanism of repression and control. A host of strategies have been employed in order to keep queers from finding one another, everything from sodomy laws to bar raids to the surveillance of public toilets. Loneliness is the hallmark of the closet, as the early lesbian novel *The Well of Loneliness* makes clear even in its title. How freighted was the search for contact and how risky. Given this state of affairs, becoming a couple carried with it a significant range of new possibilities.

Social isolation enforced by law was and is an enormously effective strategy of containment, interfering not only with the formation of community, but concomitantly, with the formation of identity, and thus a politics of liberation as well. But the importance of community as perhaps the defining issue in the development of gay subjectivity is clear. Recent scholarship in lesbian and gay studies, for example, has revealed the importance of World War II in the development of lesbian and gay community in the United States precisely because it forced together individuals from diverse places and backgrounds, including lesbian and gay people, each thinking they were the only ones like themselves around. As they came to discover one another, they began to articulate their identity and develop communities of mutual support which continued, and in the face of countless repressive measures, even grew after the war.

Robert Rauschenberg, a member of that immediately post World War II war generation, is in his early work an artist of silence, refusal and negation, the very opposite of the image of garrulous possibility which we associate with him today. In this period before he met Johns, he is the maker of empty boxes, of erasures and of giant white empty canvases. At a time when the Abstract Expressionists were exploring the pyrotechnics of polychrome, Rauschenberg made work after work in black and white. Taken together, these diverse works – an erased De Kooning drawing, a series of all white and all black paintings, an automobile tire print on paper – are actively anti-expressive, seemingly carefully conceived to obscure and deny the artist's hand. If there was to be meaning in these expanses of blankness, it was transparently a function of the viewer's cognition, not the author's expression.

Repeatedly in these early works, Rauschenberg seeks to violate the Abstract Expressionist presumption of an equivalency between artist and work, wherein meaning in a work of art is a product of the expressive intentions of the artist. Indeed, in his first one person show at the Betty Parson's gallery, a number of works featured fragments of mirrors, reflecting the viewer's gaze back on itself and thereby literalizing Rauschenberg's refusal of authorial privilege. Given that Rauschenberg was deeply closeted at this time when the confessional became the watchword of American painting, this authorial reticence and anti-expressive aesthetic adds up. For a gay man, expression promised not success, but censure.

For example, in his *White Paintings*, he proffers enduringly silent images in what was certainly the most cacophonous period of American art, a silence that must be understood in the context of Jackson Pollock's rage, de Kooning's slashes and Kline's ponderous portents. These all white paintings seem to be antipodal to Abstract Expressionism, about the size and scale of a Pollock, but so without gesture or incident of any kind that Rauschenberg decreed that they could be painted by others using house paint and a roller. The Abstract Expressionist painters were, after all, his contemporaries, even colleagues. Rauschenberg knew them, and admired their work. And he seems to have tried to make an art that was in many respects the exact opposite of theirs. In a letter to Betty Parson, Rauschenberg attempted to convince his one-time dealer to show the *White Paintings* by arguing, „It is completely irrelevant that I am making them – Today is their creator“ thereby once again refusing authorial responsibility and inverting the Abstract Expressionism equation of self and painting.

But there is one image produced during this early period in Rauschenberg's career that breaks this pattern of negation and refusal. Indeed, it seems almost traditionally expressive, although „written“ in a kind of code. Called *Should Love Come First?* and now destroyed, it was painted in 1951 and exhibited at Rauschenberg's first one person show at the Betty Parson's gallery that same year. *Should Love Come First?* draws its title from a collaged fragment of a magazine that appears in the upper left corner and reads „my problem: Should love come first.“ The problematic stated in the title certainly achieves new poignancy considering the fact that the picture was painted shortly after Rauschenberg had

met and become involved with Cy Twombly, while still married to his then pregnant wife, Susan Weil. Their son Christopher was born in July that year, while Rauschenberg and Twombly were together at Black Mountain College.

In a letter that winter, Charles Olson, poet and director of the college, wrote to fellow poet Robert Creeley giving us some insight into the situation perhaps inspiring *Should Love Come First?* and its bittersweet title:

„(I had noticed, a few nights ago, Twombly's concern for this boy when we were all talking in the study building entrance, and Rauschenberg was sitting too carelessly on the railings over the wall's edge – that sort of attention, and warning one takes as feminine, guarding the beloved:) ... he is in the black, just now, his marriage smashing, probably over the affair with Twombly, his contract with the gallery not renewed, and – I'd also bet as an added hidden factor – the terrible pressure on him of the clear genius of this lad, Twombly, the success of his year and the total defeat of Bob's.“¹³

Rauschenberg and his wife Susan Weil separated almost as soon as she arrived at Black Mountain with their baby. They divorced the following year.

In addition to the charged question asked in the title *Should Love Come First?* also contains the imprint of Rauschenberg's foot contiguous with a male position Arthur Murray waltz diagram – a male/male dance.¹⁴ When, shortly after meeting Rauschenberg, Johns completed a painting entitled *Tango* (1955), which featured a music box set into the canvas with the title stenciled across the upper left, could it have been a tribute to his new lover inspired by the precedent of Rauschenberg's earlier tribute to Twombly? A waltz with Twombly had become a tango with Johns.

And what does it mean that *Should Love Come First?* was overpainted and transformed into one of the *Black Paintings* in 1953, following Rauschenberg's break with Twombly in Europe and subsequent return to the U.S.?

The dense web of autobiographical expression buried in *Should Love Come First?* was not to be repeated until after Rauschenberg met Johns in the winter of 1953. The cool, largely black and white images he produced until then would give way to color, mostly lush shades of red. The rigorous formality of the work would be replaced by drips and splashes, drawn hearts and found fabrics. While Rauschenberg largely stopped titling works after the Parsons show in 1951, he resumed after he met Johns. Indeed, pre-Johns and post-Johns Rauschenberg seem to be two very different artists.

Shortly after they met, Rauschenberg began the wholesale cultural appropriation that made him famous – „letting the world in again,“ as Johns once put it. The artist's hand returned in a range of autographic gestures henceforth immediately identifiable as Rauschenberg's. And the work of this period seems if anything almost conventionally romantic (*Untitled* and *Red Import*, both circa 1954, have drawn of collaged hearts as key elements in the painting). All the customary Abstract Expressionist signs of emotional engagement so rigorously excluded from Rauschenberg's art – dripped paint, saturated color, gestural brushstrokes – reemerge all at once. After image upon image of largely empty black and white paintings, the replete redness of these works dense with collage

and fabric is almost a shock. The Rauschenberg beloved today, the Rauschenberg of the combines, of the big, colorful, baroque excesses, of boundless confidence and expansive vision, emerges only after the beginning of his relationship with Johns. As a female character says to her boyfriend in a comic strip collaged into the upper right corner of Rauschenberg's *Collection* (1954), the largest painting completed just after Rauschenberg and Johns met, „How depressing life would be, if our lucky stars hadn't introduced you to me.“

Johns and Rauschenberg met in the winter of 1953-54, and shortly thereafter Rauschenberg completed a painting, *Untitled*, which may very well stand as an index of his feelings at the time. The surface of *Untitled* is busy with collaged fragments of comic strips, overpainted but sometimes with their speech balloons intact. One reads „Darling, you're here, thank goodness.“ Another, „And I now pronounce you man and wife.“ My point, of course, is that Rauschenberg selected out, employed and „misread“ comic strips in his paintings to signify what he wanted them to signify. Like the comic strip in *Collection* quoted above, these strips had the ability to speak directly to Johns about Rauschenberg's love while appearing to be nothing more significant than random collage. Of course, the readings I'm offering for Rauschenberg's selection of these comic strips were doubtless not intended by their original authors. But the other side of Rauschenberg's mistrust of his own authorial intention was his freedom to find meanings without reference to another's authorial intention as well.

Here we witness among the earliest examples of what would become a repeated thematic in Johns' and Rauschenberg's art, the careful pictorial accumulation of comic strips and other pop cultural materials which are capable of bifurcated signification. Following the precedent of *Should Love Come First?*, Rauschenberg here appropriates a wide range of public texts, and causes them to bear private codes and personal meanings alongside their „public“ ones. The resulting compositions elegantly combine both public and private „meanings“, such that in Rauschenberg's hands, a collage fragment can be both a comic strip and an expression of joy at new love. Their double edged comics also offered the advantage of camouflage, as they proved unreadable to anyone outside the intended audience. Couplodrom provided Rauschenberg with precisely the discursive matrix (a private language he could share with his lover) from which to remake the stuff of dominant culture in his own image. Silence, therefore, was no longer necessary.

Like *Untitled*, *Yoicks* (1954) was completed shortly after Johns and Rauschenberg became involved. It contains a *Terry and the Pirates* comic strip reading in part „In view of the circumstances, I imagine your request to delay en route at Hawaii for a honeymoon will be granted, Capt. and Lt. Charles.“ Note how the address to „Capt. and Lt. Charles“ in the context of a honeymoon not only seems to signify a male/male relationship, but resonates with the strips in *Untitled* and *Collection* alluding to the beginning of a love affair. Generally, the comic strips in *Yoicks* are so completely overpainted that their speech balloons are illegible, but emerging out of the murkiness one phrase is strikingly clear, „...five

foot ten, hair sandy, eyes blue, 160 lbs. You're not as guilty as you think." – a fairly precise description, physical and psychological, of Jasper Johns at the time.

Titled by an exclamation taken from a comic strip, *Yoicks* is not only much lighter and more celebratory than his previous painting, it also references not only Johns himself, but his artwork, inaugurating what would turn out to be a long term inter pictorial dialog between the two men. One of the green dots in *Yoicks* is surrounded by a series of concentric pencil lines, evoking Johns' *Green Target*, then under completion in a studio one floor below Rauschenberg's, while the stripes of *Yoicks* evoke one of Johns' now famous *Flag paintings*, especially as the canvas is divided into two flag-shaped sections, the lower one with a collage of comics precisely where the dense field of blue stars would be on an American flag. In place of the rigorous negation of impulses so characteristic of Rauschenberg's pre-Johns work, there is here a multiplicity of effects, a result of this picture's use of fabric and collage, and that very messiness which connotes passion and emotion, so familiar from Ab Ex and up till now in Rauschenberg's work so strenuously avoided.

The point is that Rauschenberg finally turns away from 'anti-expressiveness' after he has something to express and more importantly, someone to express it to. For all of Rauschenberg's assertions of randomness in his artmaking, the fact is that there is little that is random about these works, as even a cursory reading of their surfaces makes clear. But given the content of their references, and the McCarthyite cultural context of the time, it's no wonder that Rauschenberg sought to camouflage his intentions. Queer artists, not surprisingly, did what queers have always done, because it was all they could do, constructing distinctions through the recontextualization of the extant codes of culture in such a way as to carry affections unrecognized under the very nose of dominant homophobic culture.

In 1951, the queer poet and essayist Paul Goodman offered a window into this culture of encoded interpersonal artistic creation. Expressing grave reservations about the possibility of the survival of an avant-garde in what he called his „shell shocked“ Cold War society, he opined that if art was to stay alive, it would have to concentrate on a community of like-minded friends, create specifically for them, and through this safe-guard its potential for resistance and individuality in a culture of constraint. Goodman defined this so-called personal style thus:

„In literary terms, this means: to write for them about them personally. But such personal writing about the audience itself can occur only in a small community of acquaintances ... As soon as the intimate community does exist – whether geographically or not is relevant but not essential – and the artist writes about it for its members, the advance-guard at once becomes a genre of the highest integrated art, namely occasional poetry.“

Such so-called occasional poetry became a means through which gay artists established culture, commonality, indeed community in the face of an explicitly homophobic culture organized around the erasure of queerness. In contrast to the

community of the Abstract Expressionists which was public, articulated, and theorized, the friendship networks of Johns, Rauschenberg and company were private, untheorized and highly personalized. The Abstract Expressionist embraced a communal but not cooperative practice in formalized spaces like The Club or the Cedar Tavern, while these post Abstract Expressionist artists pursued a much more cooperative practice in informal and highly privatized locales. These differences, of course, mirrored the differences governing their respective „sexual“ cultures during the Cold War era.

Rauschenberg's 1954 *Collection* offers a vision of these new possibilities for occasional poetry most acutely actualized on its cluttered surface. *Collection*, the largest and most complex painting Rauschenberg completed immediately after becoming involved with Jasper Johns, is in some sense exactly that – a collection of material, some of which stands in a complex relationship with his new lover. On its richly collaged surface, fragments of comic strips and old master reproductions vie for attention with swatches of fabric, their identity often nearly obliterated with paint. Nonetheless, many of the collage elements betray a curious consistence, repeatedly referencing two general themes: the beach and two boys in various forms of interaction. For example, *Collection* contains a collaged Moon Mullins comic strip, so obscured by paint that only a bit of its dialog balloon is visible. This snippet, the only legible speech in the entire strip, contains the following conversation „And I bet you can swim like a fish. Yeh, better, I can swim on my back.“

Rauschenberg may have left this exchange legible as a coded aside to his new lover, for the dialog between the two boys, when read through gay slang of the period, references the pleasures of anal sex. Swimming like a fish, ie, in gay argot, a woman, is unfavorably compared to swimming on your back, which is to say in the male receptive posture.

Another comic continues the beach theme: „I can't get over him going to Belmont Beach.“ This intertextual richness in *Collection* is further evidenced by the inclusion of a Macy's ad containing the dialog, „I could have gone anywhere. But I've come to Jones Beach because is has everything I need for my vacation.“ Not only is the beach theme amplified here, but in the fifties, Jones beach had an celebrated gay section, the largest in the area.

Nearly seven feet off the ground and far from easy to see in the upper right of the canvas, there is that remarkable fragment of a comic strip reading, „How gruesome life would be if our guiding stars hadn't introduced you to me and...“ Below it, in a fragmentary *Timmy* comic, the narrative concerns two boys trying to set up house in a pup tent in the most inappropriate places. After numerous rejections, they ultimately erect the tent in the only open space available, the dangerous middle of the street. Could this be an allusion to Johns and Rauschenberg setting up their domestic household together, the rejection and perhaps even the dangers therein confronted?

On the left side, Rauschenberg signed the image, as it were, with a large „R“ cut out from a magazine. The three sections of the composition are differentiated at

the bottom as predominantly red, yellow and blue, a compositional device Johns will shortly embrace (as he would, too, the tripartite division of the image). Finally, it seems that Cy Twombly may have executed some of his characteristic scrawls over the center mid section.

The very next painting Rauschenberg completed, *Charlene*, 1954, remarkably contains the same exact Moon Mullins strip as *Collection*, this time largely free of overpainting. Here we can now contextualize the fragment from *Collection* through reference to the entire strip. Beginning at the lower left of the widest panel, we can follow the narrative, which presents Moon Mullins and his brother taking a bus to the beach, talking along the way about a newspaper story that said most accidents on the beach occurred because „guys“ like to show off to „pretty girls.“ Moon’s brother points out that the same thing happened to Moon the year before for the same reason. The brother then tries to impress two of the girls with his swimming prowess and dives into the water. It is here that we find the section Rauschenberg left unpainted in *Collection* about swimming like a fish. Moon, seeking to keep up with his show-off brother, then ups the ante with a daring back flip while shouting „Alley.“

Rauschenberg then sharply cuts the frame, repeating the backflip once again further to the right with yet another copy of the comic, and then finally continuing it on the leftmost panel to the left of the light bulb with the concluding exclamation „Oop“ as Moon painfully lands with his chin on the diving board. The careful repetition and division of this strip at the same dividing point, along with the fact that at least three copies of the same comic were purchased and employed, surely signals a shared significance beyond the frame of the actual narrative, perhaps something about showing off heterosexually (in front of the girls) but falling, painfully, on your face. Rachel Rosenthal reports that she was an occasional lover of Johns’ at this point.¹⁵ Could it be – and this is no more than speculation – such „failed“ heterosexual activity that Rauschenberg is referencing?

Nonetheless, *Charlene* is certainly larded with many other points of private reference: it contains a handwritten, personal letter from Rauschenberg’s mother describing his sister’s participation in the Louisiana Yam Queen competition, and an ad for the Texas Utilities Co. taken from the *New York Times* (Rauschenberg’s father worked for Gulf State Utilities Co. of Port Arthur, TX) among others. The point is that under cover of a seemingly random aggregation of objects, Rauschenberg’s collection of artifacts is, at least for him, distinctly emotionally resonant.

Let us assume Johns, a frequent visitor to Rauschenberg’s studio even before they moved in to the same building, understood these baroque chains of association. Johns reported a sense of competency in his lover’s discursive modes, „I thought I understood what went into his paintings, so I could do one.“¹⁶ And in a certain sense he did, because four years later, Johns resurrected the same Moon Mullins thematic in his painting *Alley Oop*, 1958, which is, moreover, still in Rauschenberg’s personal collection. Tellingly, the title of the painting is derived

from the exact scene Rauschenberg divided and repeated three times in *Charlene*, the scene of the diving and crashing Moon Mullins. Johns’ version, too, employs an overpainted comic strip, although now the comic appears to be from a strip called *Alley Oop* popular in the fifties (clearly referenced in the punch line of the Moon Mullins comic four years before). The comic in *Alley Oop* is completely overpainted in thick, blocky strokes that at once trace and obscure the underlying narrative, with the exception of one small unpainted detail: a man’s necktie remains visible. At around the same time Johns was completing *Alley Oop*, Rauschenberg was finishing *Kickback*, which features an actual necktie, bracketed by the collaged, barely coded camp phrases, „you want“ and „King size.“ As Rauschenberg once paid coded pictorial tribute to Johns’ art in Yoicks, Johns here returns the compliment through an obscure reference to *Kickback*.

In a profound sense, the key to understanding Johns’ enigmatic *Alley Oop* may lie in Rauschenberg’s *Collection*, just as the painting itself is in his collection. The complicated dialectic between these paintings can stand as a metaphor for the shadowy chains of influence between the two artists. Clearly, none of this careful inter pictorial punning was intended for the casual viewer, and Johns, when queried about *Alley Oop*, responded in typically obscurantist formal terms, „I was trying to find some way to apply color in an arbitrary fashion, to incorporate the image within a color field.“¹⁷ But the fact remains that Johns not only returned four years later to an inter pictorial thematic in dialog with Rauschenberg, but did so yet again, yet another four years later in 1962, almost immediately after they broke up.

The post break-up series, too, concerns the Moon Mullins strip and its account of a failed diver – a reference point keyed to the origins of a relationship now eight

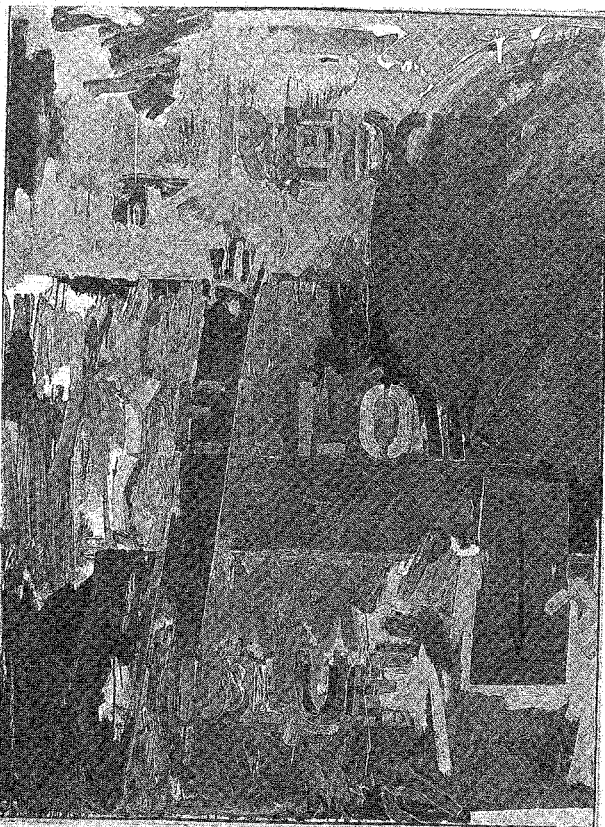


2 Diver

years old, testimony to the power and persistence of such encoded thematics in Johns and Rauschenberg's work. The central images in this most enigmatic series of post break-up paintings are the magisterial *Diver* of 1962 (fig. 2) (then Johns' largest canvas to date), and the related paintings which follow it in 1963 like *Periscope (Hart Crane)* and *Land's End* (fig. 3), as well as the monumental drawing *Diver* (fig. 4). While the elegiac quality of these images has long been noted, along with their multiple references to the gay American poet Hart Crane and his tragic shipboard suicide by drowning, the specific terms of Johns' engagement with this theme has remained unclear.

Periscope (Hart Crane) offers a clue as to Johns' particular interest in Crane at this time. The „Cape Hatteras“ section of Crane's most famous long poem *The Bridge* is referenced in the title and concerns the subtle changes memory undergoes over time. Crane writes:

„... Relapsing into silence, time clears
Our lenses, lifts a focus, resurrects
A periscope to glimpse what joys or pain



3 Lands End



Our eyes can share or answer – then deflects
Us, shunting to a labyrinth submersed

Where each sees only his dim past reversed...“

A complicated poetic elaboration on the cliché that „Time heals all wounds,“ this section of the poem analogizes the passage of time to the erection of a periscope. Here time, like a periscope trained on our wake, allows us to re-view the events that had become muddled in the presentness of passion. Having cleared our lenses, however, time shares another quality with periscopes: a tendency to reverse the image in order to make it visible – „then deflects/Us, shunting to a labyrinth submersed/Where each sees only his dim past reversed...“ As Johns earlier sought salve for his post break-up pain through pictorial reference to Frank O' Hara's meditation on lost love. In *Memory of My Feelings* (see *In Memory of My Feelings – Frank O'Hara 1961*), Johns now appropriated the work of another gay poet also concerned with loss and memory in an effort to „resurrect a periscope“ on his own past.

Moreover, perhaps Johns felt that Crane had personal experience with such feelings of deprivation and loss, for, upon returning to the United States from Mexico, the poet dived off the ship and killed himself. His suicide was presumably in part motivated by a self-loathing despair which followed a beating delivered by some sailors he had propositioned while nonetheless engaged to be married. Johns, who knew Crane's poetry well – Rauschenberg reports that Johns would read him Hart Crane in bed – surely knew the tale of the poet's suicide and its associations with loss and frustrated love.

We are, perhaps, now in a better position to engage the imaging of the diver that regularly crops up, again and again in various ways in these works – even well after the relationship with Rauschenberg is over. Perhaps this

overdetermined comic strip of the diving Moon Mullins may help specify the utility of the diver thematic and its rich associative heritage for Johns. An image which earlier had seemed so keyed to Johns and Rauschenberg's life together, to shared intimacies and joys, now reemerges after the break up with a very different purpose in mind. Crane's suicidal dive merges with Rauschenberg's diving Moon Mullins to produce a complicated associative node; *Diver* and related images is at once a drowning leap; a sardonic commentary to Rauschenberg on love lost, an intimate correspondence concluded; an evocation of the „labyrinth submersed“ that is memory; even perhaps a statement of Johns' own suicidal feelings. While we can probably never lock down a singular significance for the diver here, his reemergence after years in absentia testifies to his importance for Johns at this critical juncture in his association with Rauschenberg. Something in this diver, shifted from partner to partner, painting to painting, is shared; his meanings perhaps altered but his utility to the artists' unchanged. This diver signifies, powerfully for Johns, an association with Rauschenberg – and in a voice unheard by outsiders, which is his chief strength.

The joyous accumulation of details that once accompanied the evocation of this diver in works like *Charlene* and *Alley Oop* is replaced by an oft-noted brooding quality after the break-up. In comparison to the light palette and giddy arrangement of the earlier images, the post break-up diver pictures are largely dark and somber. They can be understood as tracing a narrative of desperation, from the diving figure in the drawing *Diver* to the hands cresting the surface of the water in the painting *Diver*, to the downward pointing arrow submerged in watery depths in *Land's End* to the restored equilibrium, in *Periscope* (Hart Crane), wrought through the passage of time.

As far as I can tell, Rauschenberg in turn would evoke the diver theme just once more after his original use of it in the mid-fifties. In 1959, Rauschenberg began work on a suite of drawings intended as illustrations of Dante's *Inferno*. In the 15th Canto, Dante meets his former teacher Ser Brunetto. He finds Brunetto among a group of sodomites cursed to run barefoot over hell's hot sand, presumably a reference to the placelessness of sodomites in the culture of the time and their life of continual flight.

In *Dante Drawing XV*, Rauschenberg outlined his own foot in red, placing it over a transfer drawing of the two men embracing – actually two superimposed photos of divers from a *Sports Illustrated* magazine. To the left, there is clearly visible the alternating red and white stripes of an American flag, connected to the image of the foot by a series of finely delineated footsteps. The flag, obviously referencing Jasper Johns, implicates his then lover in this scene of subjective identification with Dante's long suffering sodomites.

Here a medieval Italian classic, a modern American sports magazine, divers, footsteps and flags meet on unexpected pictorial terrain. Their conjunction is carefully orchestrated and stage managed, and richly expressive of an entire complex of themes and identifications by a gay male artist amidst the Cold War.

Expressive, that is, if you know the code, otherwise the work is ambiguous, resistant, enduringly silent. Johns and Rauschenberg found a way to speak to one another in mid-century American art, while leaving that silence unbroken.

- 1 John Cage, „On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and his Work,“ Metro (May 1961) reprinted in Silence: Lectures and Writings by John Cage: 101.
- 2 Jasper Johns in Peter Fuller, „Jasper Johns interviewed“ part 1, Art Monthly 18 (July-August 1978): 9.
- 3 Rauschenberg in unpublished 1961 transcript of the Symposium on Assemblage organized by William Seitz following the The Art of Assemblage exhibition at MOMA, MOMA Archives: 23.
- 4 See Fred Orton, „On Being Bent 'Blue' (Second State): An Introduction to Jacques Derrida/A Footnote of Jasper Johns.“ Oxford Art Journal 12: 1 1989: 35-46.
- 5 Fairfield Porter, „The Education of Jasper Johns,“ Art News (February 1964), 44.
- 6 For an account of the synch between Cold War era consensus culture and this anti-expressive aesthetic see my „Passive Resistance: On the Success of Queer Artists in Cold War American Art,“ Image # 3 (December 1996): 119-142.
- 7 William Rubin, „Some Younger Artists“ Art International, Vol. 4, no. 1 (1960): 26.
- 8 Robert Rauschenberg, „Random Order“ Location 1, (Spring 1963): 27-31.
- 9 Rosalind Krauss, „Perpetual Inventory“ in Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective, exh. cat. New York: Guggenheim Museum: 223.
- 10 All the leading American art magazines and journals refused to consider publishing an iconographic reading of the work of Johns and Rauschenberg. Even the gay and lesbian monthly, OUT, refused to run a commissioned piece, expressing concern about analyzing gay content in the work of a closeted artist.
- 11 J. K. (Jack Kroll) „Reviews and Previews“ Artnews 60 (December 1961): 12. The quote is, of course, luxuriantly homophobic, a veritable catalog of mid century queer references points, marshaled so that the actual word itself need not be uttered and offend polite society: Firbank was perhaps the leading camp novelist of this century (Warhol has illustrated three of his novels); poof, is a homophobic slur, as was the reference to snagging his sweater; Corvo is of course a Proustian reference; and lavender has long been the color associated with homosexuality.
- 12 Johns reports that he was unsure whether he wished to become a painter or a poet.
- 13 Charles Olson and Robert Creeley, The Complete Correspondence, ed. by Richard Blevins, Vol. 9, Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1990: 61. My thanks to John Yau for this reference.
- 14 Rauschenberg would repeatedly print feet, his and others, in his work – perhaps as a sardonic commentary on cliches of the artists' hand and the autographic nature of much then current Abstract Expressionist painting.
- 15 Interview with Rachel Rosenthal, 6/26/91.
- 16 Calvin Tomkins, Off The Wall: Robert Rauschenberg and the Art World of Our Time, New York: Penguin, 1980: 119.
- 17 Michael Crichton, Jasper Johns. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1977: 34.