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Robert Rauschenberg's Queer Modernism:  
Decoration, Theatricality and Camp in the Combines, 1953-59

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy  
in Art History

by

Thomas Frederick Folland

2010

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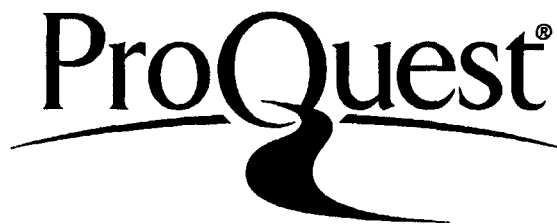
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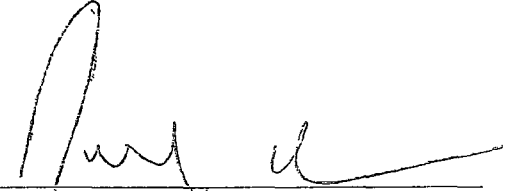
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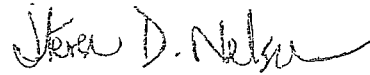
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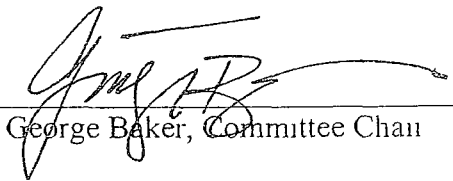
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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Rauschenberg's Queer Modernism:  
Decoration, Theatricality and Camp in the Combines, 1953-59

by

Thomas Frederick Folland

Doctor of Philosophy in Art History

University of California, Los Angeles, 2010

Professor George Baker, Chair

Robert Rauschenberg's painted, sculptural assemblages of found objects, photographic reproductions, print and fabric materials have troubled art history in their refusal to yield any coherency of form or meaning. *Monogram*, 1955-59, is one of the last of Robert Rauschenberg's significant "Combines," and it is no exception: it is an outlandish concoction that features a stuffed angora goat squeezed through a rubber tire and standing on a wood platform of collaged material. It seems to be, in fact, a joke. The paint-smearing snout of the goat is characteristic of the gestural abstraction of the New York school, but rather than flattened out onto an expanse of canvas, the brushwork is the outermost point of a very theatrical and heterogeneous assemblage of found objects. Could it not be argued, however, that this "joke" might in fact be part of a larger

challenge to modernism that constituted something far more serious? That challenge is argued in my dissertation to be a queer critique of the culture of modernism in the postwar decade of the 1950s.

The larger goal of this dissertation is to re-read mid-century modernism and its narratives that have coalesced around this period. Navigating through the two predominate strands of Rauschenberg scholarship, this dissertation seeks to problematize the largely postmodern reading of Rauschenberg, in which his work's seeming illegibility has long been seen as a critique of modernist representation. But it also questions the recent new wave of art history that has sought to locate fixed structures of gay identity in Rauschenberg's work through a traditional iconographical approach. Mobilizing both the questions of illegibility and identity, Rauschenberg's artistic practice is defined queerly as a form of resistance to dominant modes of subjectivity inaugurated through the painterly discourse of the New York school. Weaving the tropes of decorativeness, theatricality and a camp aesthetic through various and overlapping groupings of Combines produced during the 1950s, Rauschenberg's modernism is redefined as a queer one.



## Introduction

In Michael Warner's introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* he makes the case that "queer" is defined as "resistance to regimes of the normal."<sup>1</sup> This dissertation takes up that claim in relation to a body of work created by Robert Rauschenberg in the years 1953-1959, during which time Abstract Expressionism was at the helm of the ascendant movement of American modernism. Rauschenberg's challenge to the reigning discourse of the New York School—which encompassed both Abstract Expressionism and the later variant of post-painterly abstraction—is argued as a resistance to its regime of a heteronormative subjectivity. Postwar modernism posited such a seemingly unassailable link between a heteronormative subjectivity and the flat expanse of large abstract canvases that it took some 30 or more years for that connection to become the general intellectual terrain of the art historical literature. The study of gender and 1950s abstract art<sup>2</sup> was the subject of innumerable works on the postwar

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Warner, "Introduction," *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, ed. Michael Warner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xxvi.

<sup>2</sup> See Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), and Marcia Brennan, *Modernism's Masculine Subjects: Matisse, the New York School, and Post-Painterly Abstraction* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2004). See also Ann Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 1997 and Lisa Saltzman, "Reconsidering the Stain: On Gender, Identity and New York School Painting," in *Reading Abstract Expressionism: Criticism and Context*, ed., Ellen G. Landau (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 560-580.

modern period during the 1990s, replacing both the paradigms of Greenbergian modernism and “Cold-War” modernism.<sup>3</sup>

*Rauschenberg’s Queer Modernism* builds on the literature that explored gendered modernism in the larger socio-historical context of American society during the 1950s. Rauschenberg’s challenge to the normative discourse of Abstract Expressionism during these postwar years is defined in what follows as a queer resistance to concepts of masculinity put into place in the culture at large, and reiterated through the discursive construction of the New York School, a mostly male, mostly white group of painters whose gestural and painterly abstractions sought to manage the postwar crisis of masculine identity through a resolution of its inherent contradictions.<sup>4</sup> Simply stated, I enact a queer analysis of Rauschenberg’s Combines—painted, sculptural assemblages of found objects, photographic reproductions, print and fabric materials—that have troubled art history in their refusal to yield any coherency of form or meaning. I foreground that ambiguity and refusal to signify, however, as purposeful strategy and as germane to my definition of queerness.

My dissertation therefore focuses on the Combine’s problematization of Abstract Expressionism’s embodied formal properties secured through both the discourse surrounding abstract art as well its performance—the act of painting upon canvas. While

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<sup>3</sup> See Max Kozloff, “American Painting during the Cold War,” *Artforum* 11, no.9 (May 1973), 43-54; Eva Cockcroft, “Abstract Expressionism: Weapon of the Cold War,” *Artforum* 12, no.10 (June 1974), 39-41; and Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983).

<sup>4</sup> In Leja and Brennan’s work particularly, Abstract Expressionism is characterized in terms of, sometimes unstable, attempts to construct a coherent male subject. I will be drawing upon these works in my analysis of that movement.

previous literature on this topic has focused on the decoding of homosexual identity through iconographic readings of specific elements within the Combines, my dissertation departs from this method. Rather than work through iconography, I follow a deconstructive line of thinking that holds such sureties of meaning suspect, and that, more importantly, is parallel to queer theory's "resistance to regimes of the normal." I use the term "queer" to distinguish my own approach from the iconographical one that has characterized the work of Jonathan Katz and Laura Auricchio, for example, who have argued that Rauschenberg's work of the 1950s contained coded signifiers of gay subculture.<sup>5</sup> Rather than argue that Rauschenberg's work "directly alludes to his identification as a gay man,"<sup>6</sup> as Katz has asserted, I maintain that his work was both "identity affirming" and "identity eradicating," as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has defined the performative nature of a queer politics of identity:

an open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning where the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically.<sup>7</sup>

Fundamentally incompatible with iconography, queer, in this sense, corresponds more closely to the radical instability of meaning that Rauschenberg's art proposes.

Indeed, I argue, as many postmodern accounts of Rauschenberg have, for an

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<sup>5</sup> Laura Auricchio, "Lifting the Veil: Robert Rauschenberg's Thirty-four Drawings for Dante's Inferno and the Commercial Homoerotic Imagery of 1950s America," in "The Gay 90s: Disciplinary and Interdisciplinary Formation in Queer Studies," ed. Thomas Foster, Carol Siegel, and Ellen E. Berry, *Genders* 26 (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 119-154.

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Katz, "The Art of Code," in *Significant Others: Creativity and Intimate Partnership*, ed. Whitney Chadwick and Isabelle de Courtivron (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 201.

<sup>7</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1993), 8.

indeterminacy of meaning in Rauschenberg's art, but I resituate that indeterminacy not as a proleptic foreboding of postmodern concerns with media spectacle or technologies of reproduction, but as a response to, and an engagement with, 1950s discourses of subjectivity and modernist painting. Through an engagement with the ways in which Rauschenberg's work destabilized the anchoring of identity in form—whether heterosexual or homosexual—I locate a critical queerness for the Combines which acted as a refusal but equally a recognition of the reconstruction of male identity in the postwar years following the devastations that followed in the wake of the war's conclusion (the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki) and, in a specifically American context, the postindustrial era of the 1950s that saw an economic re-organization shifting the forces of capital from production to (mass) consumption.

It is argued here that Rauschenberg's Combines cannot be reduced to an encoding of identity if he was invested in a queerly deconstructive approach to the question of identity itself. Somewhat analogous to his eponymous "gap between art and life"<sup>8</sup> that Rauschenberg once asserted he wanted to operate in, in this gap between a project of negation and affirmation suggested by Sedgwick's terms, "identity affirming" and "identity eradicating," lies the operation of a queer logic. In refusing the Abstract Expressionist model of a bourgeois, male, heterosexual identity—wrought through the embodied form of modernist aesthetics—the Combines queer the logic of that identity. In doing so they put into question the entire enterprise of 1950s modernism. This

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<sup>8</sup> "Painting related to both art and life. Neither can be made. (I try to operate in the gap between the two)." Robert Rauschenberg, "Artist Statement," in *Sixteen Americans*, ed. Dorothy C. Miller (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1959), 58.

argument is put forth in this dissertation through three central tropes that comprise the chapters of *Rauschenberg's Queer Modernism*: decoration, theatricality and camp.

While organized through these terms, my analysis of Rauschenberg's Combines is roughly chronological; Chapters One and Two cover the same period through different focal points. Major Combines such as *Charlene* and *Collection* (both 1954), for example, are discussed in both chapters. Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the general context of post World War II abstraction, an extended discussion of the term "queer" and the historical context for 1950s homosexuality through an examination of the theme of decoration in Rauschenberg's work. My argument in Chapter 1, "The Early Combines and Decoration," pertains to the "specter of decoration," in Greenberg's infamous statement that haunted 1950s modernism. Rauschenberg's embrace of the decorative was pronounced but is seldom discussed in the literature. I pose his invocation of the representational system of the decorative in a group of Combines produced during the mid 1950s as a "return of the repressed." The New York School painters of the postwar period had to navigate away from the ornamental implications of abstraction, particularly at a period of renewed crisis for masculine identity. The postwar American painter was reconstructed as a heroically male figure. Yet with Rauschenberg, the decorative reemerges in readymade form as a ghostly palimpsest of modernism's repressed other.

Having established the general context of Rauschenberg's queer relationship to the New York School, I focus on a specific exhibition in Chapter 2, "'Gorgeous Theatrical Objects': The Red Paintings, Queerly." Rauschenberg's 1954 show at the Charles Egan Gallery, New York, quickly became known as the "Red Show" by virtue of

the predominant palette of red in these large works. They were also decried as theatrical save but by a few of Rauschenberg's close friends, one of whom offered the admiring appellation "gorgeous theatrical objects." Rauschenberg's engagement with theatricality is explored in this chapter as a queering of the heroic discourse of "action painting," particularly as espoused by the art critic Harold Rosenberg. The vaunted gestural marks that were seen to guarantee an authentic and masculine subjectivity are repositioned, in the Red Paintings, as a theatrical objectness that renders suspect the surety of male identity.

Chapter 3, "Camp and an Aesthetics of Failure in the Later Combines," addresses Rauschenberg's last major Combines, exhibited in his landmark exhibition at the Leo Castelli Gallery, New York in 1958. Many of them were the product of a period of five years' work and, as such, a summation of his preoccupations with the discourse of painting that defined modernist culture throughout the decade. Summarily dismissed at the time in critical reviews, Rauschenberg's turn to narrative in such works as *Odalisk*, 1955-58, *Canyon*, 1959, and *Monogram*, 1955-59, is argued to be a camp critique of the high-minded seriousness of the New York School, arising precisely at the moment of its demise.

#### Methodological Approach

Scholarship has tended to focus on the Combines as a whole—as a term that describes a generically hybrid form—and as continuous with his work of the 1960s. Roni Feinstein's oft-cited dissertation "Random Order: The First Fifteen Years of Rauschenberg's Art 1949-1964," the 1977 survey exhibition of Rauschenberg at the National Collection of

Fine Arts in Washington, D.C., and the more recent Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles 2005 exhibition *Robert Rauschenberg: The Combines* follow the conventional trajectory of 1953 through 1964. Prying the work of the 1950s apart from the 1960s has only recently begun. In a 2006 review, Yve-Alain Bois suggested that the later Combines (made after 1959) abandoned the “slow process of accumulation” that marked the Combines from the period of the Red Paintings:

Once the support is nothing more than a neutral surface of projection and the moving brush nothing more than the prolongation of one’s arm, no heterogeneous, imported element can have enough weight to materially destabilize the unity of the picture plane. This is why I find all the objects grafted on the late Combines, no matter how protruding, strangely inactive...<sup>9</sup>

I depart from conventional periodization, contending, as does Bois that the 1959 period may be seen as a terminal point. For my own purposes however, it has to do with the death of the New York School, increasingly discussed as such during the late 1950s, and celebrated as I argue in Chapter 3 in a series of works where objects—dead, stuffed animals particularly—are argued to be a campy celebration of the New York School’s demise. The larger movement of Abstract Expressionism, with which Rauschenberg’s Combines were dialectically, queerly intertwined, had itself become “strangely inactive” at the terminal point that Bois identifies. Moving back beyond that moment, a fully sustained analysis of the radical *queerness* of the 1950s Combines and their assault upon the picture plane takes up the overall indeterminacy of these works—first recognized in a postmodernist context as an assault upon modernism—as central to that queerness. In an

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<sup>9</sup> Yves-Alain Bois, “Eye to the Ground,” in “Robert Rauschenberg: Two Views,” *Artforum* 44 no. 7 (March 2006), 317.

examination of particular groupings of the Combines produced during the 1950s I make the case that there are specific instances during which strategies can be discerned that relate to an overall project of a queered modernism.

Queer theory allows for an approach to Rauschenberg that avoids re-privileging authorial intention and, as well, displaces the rather limited approach to Rauschenberg that would only seek to confirm his sexual identity. Queer, as a term that challenges understandings of identity and sexual desire as fixed, works as a system of relations, a process rather than an object that constructs a critical relationship to heterosexual normativity. My use of the term is not ahistorical but, as described throughout this dissertation, runs parallel to the much more unstable definitions of homosexual identities as they were themselves formed and contested in the 1950s prior to the civil rights era of the 1960s during which time the more contemporary nomenclature around “closeted” and “out” identities emerged. Queer allows for a more historically focused discussion of subjectivity particularly in relation to how Abstract Expressionism was formulated through narratives of self-expression.

The romantic notion of a sole, heroic avant-garde artist produced through the “action painting” of the New York School and conceptually defined through the writings of Harold Rosenberg is undone in the Combines in a number of ways, one of which is through collaged invocations of a private self that never add up. Rauschenberg famously denied any aspect of self-expression in his work, stating to an interviewer in 1968, “if you do anything where an idea shows up, particularly in those years when an act of painting was considered pure self-expression, then it was assumed that the painting was a



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sample content of Robert Rauschenberg's Queer Modernism: Decoration, Theatricality and Camp in the Combines, 1953--59

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