

The Invasion of Photography into
Rauschenberg's Art and into the
Museum

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Museums and Galleries: Framing Art

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My chosen book for this essay is *On the Museum's Ruins* by Douglas Crimp. What interested me about this book was the ideas of the museum, and what was accepted into it, especially when concerning photography. Another idea that came up when reading the chapter I chose to concentrate on also named, "On the Museum's Ruins", was the idea of Robert Rauschenberg's work as being almost an analogy for the museum, where both are made up of diverse elements. The author of the chapter and of the whole book, Douglas Crimp, displays these notions well, also looking into the work of Leo Steinberg, Michel Foucault, Andre Malraux and Hilton Kramer.

Douglas Crimp's criticism displays this idea that photography being accepted as a valid artistic medium took over, or at least disrupted the discourse of modernism in the art world. He uses the example of Robert Rauschenberg who can be described as *post-modern*. By putting together photomechanical images with, or covered by, brushstrokes of paint, Rauschenberg intensifies awareness of what was constituted as the essence of high art culture—texture of paint deposited by brush strokes, material evidence on the artist's hand/brushstroke. With the inclusion of photography into the art world, alongside the museum's valuation system, the art world was suddenly de-stabilized.

The chapter which I have chosen to concentrate on is *On the Museum's Ruins*. This chapter starts off with Crimp telling us about Hilton Kramer's critical view on the inclusion of salon art in an installation of nineteenth century art in the Metropolitan Museum's new Andre Meyer Galleries. There is the general view that museums should be homogenous, in what they present. And at the time that Kramer is writing in the eighties, he points out that there had been a powerful subdivision of people who specialised in salon art, as he describes 'lugubrious disinterments'¹. Kramer also was alarmed by the fact that with the death of modernism there seemed to be no criteria to determine the order of aesthetic objects, 'anything goes'².

On page 54, of *On the Museum's Ruins* Crimp describes how the history of museology is a history of different attempts to deny the heterogeneity of the museum, to reduce it to a homogenous series.³ This seems to make the whole idea of the museum seem quite boring, that it should be made up of similar elements, and not of things that are diverse and different. Though the idea that Kramer writes about is very different, "What kind of

¹ Hilton Kramer, "Does Gerome Belong with Goya and Monet?"

² Hilton Kramer, "Does Gerome Belong with Goya and Monet?"

³ Douglas Crimp, *On the Museum's Ruins*

taste is it-or what standard of values-that can so easily accommodate such glaring opposites?"⁴

Crimp goes on later to mention Andre Malraux's *Museum without Walls*, in which we hear that through photography, the notion of homogeneity becomes apparent. Photography ensures the admittance of all types of objects which gives a vaster heterogeneity. (I.e. photography makes everything homogeneous, as it gives objects that common factor, by placing them in the same photograph, and in this way we have a larger variety of diverse elements).

Though another problem crops up on page 55, when Malraux reminds us, that in reproduction, figures can lose their original significance or function. For example, an altar piece in reproduction, i.e. a photograph of it, it can not be used as an altar piece. Going on from this idea, it seemed to Walter Benjamin who was the first to see that photography would have a profound effect on art, and that art may even disappear because of it, having lost all importance through mechanical reproduction.⁵

Robert Rauschenberg appears in the text near the beginning in relation to Leo Steinberg's *Other Criteria*.

⁴ Hilton Kramer, "Does Gerome Belong with Goya and Monet?"

⁵ Douglas Crimp, *On the Museum's Ruins*

With Rauschenberg, photography began to act together with painting in its own destruction. Rauschenberg was called a painter throughout the first decade of his career as an artist, although when he took on photography in the early sixties you couldn't really describe his art as painting. He seemed to form a hybrid form of printing. He moved from production, which were combines and assemblages, to re-production: silk screens and transfer drawings, which make us see his work as post-modernist.⁶

Rauschenberg approaches his work by building up and stripping away elements. The idea of combining different materials, objects and images has remained at the core of his work. As Pop art enveloped the sixties, Rauschenberg used images of current events he found in magazines to make silk screens. By transferring familiar images such as of John F Kennedy and baseball games, Rauschenberg found that he could make a commentary on society using the very images that helped create it. He put these silk screens onto canvas and painted brushstrokes over them. From a distance they did look rather abstract, although close up you can see how the images relate to one another. In these works, he found he could bring together

⁶ Douglas Crimp, *On the Museum's Ruins*

the inventiveness of his combines with his love for painting. Notions of originality, authenticity and presence are undermined in Rauschenberg's work. His combination of diverse elements is seen throughout the surface of his work.

In Rauschenberg's Red Paintings, collage played a significant role and he worked on them between 1953 to 1954. He chose a colour which he found most difficult to work with. His use of diverse elements on the surface is seen here with newsprint, comic strips, fabrics, nails and wood. And he used different techniques to apply the paint: drips, splatters, washes, impasto, horizontal strokes and even pigment directly from the tube.⁷

1962 was the first time Rauschenberg used commercially produced silk screens to make large format paintings using his own photography and media images which he found. In using silkscreens he was able to enlarge photographs so he was free of scale restrictions. "Began silk screen paintings to escape familiarity of objects and collage."⁸

⁷ Joan Young, Guggenheim Museum Collection A to Z

⁸ Text written on the print *Autobiography* (1968)

Barge of 1963 is a single canvas measuring thirty feet long and was the largest silk screens paintings. The colours used are black, white and grey and the motifs he included were urban environment, athletes, space exploration and flight, modes of transport and examples from art history. Another example of the heterogeneity in Rauschenberg's work is displayed in *Odalisk* (1955-1958), which is made up of "oil, watercolour, pencil, crayon, paper, fabric, photographs, printed reproductions, miniature blueprint, metal, newspaper, glass, dried grass and steel wool, with pillow, wood post, electric lights and Plymouth Rock rooster, on wood structure mounted on four casts."⁹

Displayed here are just a few examples of how art and the museum don't have to be homogenous. In the case of the museum, in some ways what Kramer said was right, in that it is unsuitable to place such glaring opposites together in a museum. Although when you look at photography, and of what kind of things are included ion the frame, anything can go together. This idea also applies to art works themselves. As we have seen with Rauschenberg's art, it is possible to combine different elements, anything from photography to silk screens, from glass, to fabric. In doing this type of *combing* in his art

⁹ Luc Sante, *Game Theory*

Rauschenberg managed to breach the discourse of modernism and rebel against the rules and regulations of the then, art world.

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