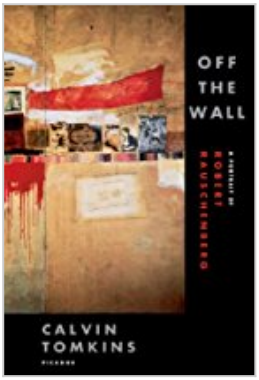

Off the Wall: A Portrait of Robert Rauschenberg

By Calvin Tomkins

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Calvin Tomkins first discovered the work of Robert Rauschenberg in the late 1950s, when he began to look seriously at contemporary art. While gazing at Rauschenberg's painting *Double Feature*, Tomkins felt compelled to make some kind of literal connection to the work, and it is in that sprit that "for the last forty years it's been [his] ambition to write about contemporary art not as a critic or a judge, but as a participant." Tomkins has spent many of those years writing about Robert Rauschenberg, whom he rapidly came to see as "one of the most inventive and influential artists of his generation." So it seemed natural to make Rauschenberg the focus of *Off the Wall*, which deals with the radical changes that have made advanced visual art such a powerful force in the world.

Off the Wall chronicles the astonishingly creative period of the 1950s and 1960s, a high point in American art. In his in his collaborations with Merce Cunningham and John Cage, and as a pivotal figure linking abstract expressionism and pop art, Rauschenberg was part of a revolution during which artists moved art off the walls of museums and galleries and into the center of the social scene. Rauschenberg's vitally important and productive career spans this revolution, reaching beyond it to the present day. Featuring the artists and the art world surrounding Rauschenberg--from Jackson Pollock, and Willem de Kooning to Jasper Johns, Frank Stella, and Andy Warhol, together with dealers Betty Parsons, and Leo Castelli, and the patron Peggy Guggenheim--Tomkins's stylish and witty portrait of one of America's most original and inspiring artists is fascinating, enlightening, and very entertaining.

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Editorial Review

Review

“I commend Calvin Tomkins, as Bernard Berenson did Vasari, for 'being a singularly warm, generous, and appreciative critic.'” ?*The New York Times Book Review*

“As chronicler of the avant-garde for *The New Yorker,* Calvin Tomkins has specialized in rendering the esoteric doings of artists comprehensible.” ?*The Washington Post Book World*

About the Author

Calvin Tomkins, a staff writer for *The New Yorker* since 1960, has written more than a dozen books, including the bestseller *Living Well Is the Best Revenge*, *Merchants and Masterpieces: The Story of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Bride and the Bachelors,* and his highly acclaimed biography *Duchamp.* He lives in New York city with his wife Dodie Kazanjian.

Chapter One

Venice, 1964

More than once during the chaotic week before the opening, Alan Solomon, the United States Commissioner for the 1964 Venice Biennale, had the distinct impression that too many people were trying in too many languages to tell him what to do. Some of them, like Alice Denney, his outspoken Vice-Commissioner, thought he was being too aggressive, too demanding. Leo Castelli seemed to think he was not being aggressive enough. Castelli’s New York gallery represented both Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, which gave him a certain leverage. All the same it was annoying for Solomon to hear the rumors that Castelli was really running the American show at the Biennale this time, with the canny assistance of his ex-wife, the Paris dealer Ileana Sonnabend, a mano fina if ever there was one. The worst of it was that Rauschenberg, a strong contender for the Biennale’s grand international prize in painting (a prize no American artist had yet won), was suddenly in danger of being disqualified through a series of mistakes that could be attributed to his, Solomon’s, inexperience, or his aggressiveness, or both.

The problem was that only one of the twenty-two Rauschenberg works on exhibition was hanging in the official United States pavilion at the Biennale; the rest were installed in the former United States Consulate on the Grand Canal. Solomon thought this had all been worked out months before.1 The U.S. pavilion was a joke, an imitation-Georgian house with ridiculously oversized columns and hardly any space inside. Americans who visited the Biennale, the oldest and most prestigious of the great European art fairs, were nearly always surprised and chagrined to find that the U.S. pavilion was so much smaller than those of France, Britain, Germany, or even the Scandinavian countries. It had been erected in 1929 by the Grand Central Art Galleries, a private New York art firm that sponsored American participation in the Biennale until the Museum of Modern Art took over that function in 1948. When the museum dropped its sponsorship in 1962, pleading inadequate funds, the federal government stepped in at long last (all the other national exhibitions are government-sponsored), and entrusted the responsibility to the United States Information

Agency, whose director at the time happened to be Edward R. Murrow. Instead of simply shouldering the financial end and asking the Museum of Modern Art to continue putting together exhibitions every two years, as had been anticipated, the USIA made inquiries around the art world and then offered the job of assembling the 1964 exhibition to Solomon, a gifted art scholar who had proved, during his previous year as director of the Jewish Museum in New York, to have a genius for installation and a lively sympathy for the latest currents in American art. (His opening show at the Jewish Museum was a major Rauschenberg retrospective, which helped to establish that artist as a hero to the younger generation; in 1964 he would devote an equally influential show to Johns.) Solomon asked for and was promised an entirely free hand in putting together the exhibition, and, pleased by the competence of the USIA people he talked with and by what he considered the new cultural tone of the Kennedy administration, he accepted the job.

There was some talk at this time (1963) of enlarging the American pavilion in Venice. The architect Philip Johnson had volunteered to design the addition free of charge, and the USIA had expressed interest. John F. Kennedy's assassination, which happened while Solomon was on his way to Venice that fall to make preliminary arrangements, put an end to this plan; appropriations would be held up indefinitely during the transition period in Washington, and with only six months left until the Biennale opening, there would not be enough time to do anything. Shaken by the news from Dallas, uncertain whether to proceed with his mission or just turn around and go home, Solomon arrived in Venice and met the Biennale officials. He went out to the Giardini, the green park toward the Lido end of the island that serves as a permanent exhibition area, and inspected the United States pavilion. It struck him as hopelessly inadequate for the kind of exhibition he had in mind. Solomon had heard that other countries were sometimes given extra space to exhibit in the large Italian pavilion, but when he asked about this he was told that too many such requests had already been made. He then inquired whether it would be all right to show some of the American work in a building outside the Biennale grounds. This was a possibility, he was told. After looking at several spaces, Solomon was shown the former United States Consulate, directly across the Grand Canal from the Gritti Palace Hotel and adjoining the squat, rather ugly palazzo of Peggy Guggenheim. Officially closed a month earlier&mdash-one of a series of such closings in a State Department economy drive&mdash-the building still belonged to the U.S. Government, and its cool, graceful salons seemed made to order for exhibition purposes. After receiving from the president of the Biennale, Professor Mario Marcazzan, what he took to be adequate assurances that any paintings hanging there would be part of the official U.S. exhibit, he carefully measured the downstairs rooms and flew back to New York to start planning his show.

His plans, as they evolved, were characteristically ambitious. Solomon wanted to put on an exhibition that would wake the Europeans up to what American art had become in the last ten years&mdash-that would do for Europe, in a sense, what the 1913 Armory Show had done for America. Since the first, pioneer generation of New York Abstract Expressionists had already received some exposure at previous Biennales&mdash-Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning and others in a group show in 1950; a one-man de Kooning show in 1952&mdash-Solomon decided to focus on the two major developments since Abstract Expressionism, as he saw them: the pure chromatic abstraction of Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland, and the highly complex paintings and assemblages of Rauschenberg and Johns, in which Abstract Expressionist techniques were brought to bear on subject matter taken straight from everyday life. In addition to these four germinal artists, Solomon was including the work of four younger men: Claes Oldenburg, Jim Dine, Frank Stella, and John Chamberlain.

In Europe, at least, Rauschenberg was already known. Still something of a bête noire in America, where his more outrageous constructions incorporating such flotsam as a stuffed chicken, a goat with a tire around its middle, and the artist's own quilt used as a canvas, were considered rather bad jokes by the older generation of Abstract Expressionists as well as by most art critics, the youthful, Texas-born artist recently had excited considerable attention in Paris, where Ileana Sonnabend had given him two shows in 1963, and also in

London, where his retrospective exhibition at the White-chapel Gallery the preceding February had broken all attendance records, and had led the *Sunday Telegraph*'s critic to call him the most important American artist since Jackson Pollock. Rauschenberg's rapidly escalating reputation in Europe, among other factors, had helped Solomon decide that he could become the first American painter to win the Biennale.

The system of prize-giving at the Biennale traditionally gave rise to intense political in-fighting among the nations.* There were two major international awards, one of which usually went to a painter and the other to a sculptor (in 1964, each included a payment of $3,200). The City of Venice also gave prizes to outstanding Italian artists, and there were a number of other awards as well, but the two international prizes were the important ones, and only one American artist had ever taken one of those&mdash-Alexander Calder, for sculpture, in 1952. In fact, the only two Americans to win painting prizes of any kind at the Venice Biennale had been Mark Tobey in 1958 and James Abbott McNeill Whistler in 1895, the year the Biennale was inaugurated. Since the Second World War, the grand prize for painting had gone almost without exception to School of Paris artists with long-established reputations: Georges Braque in 1948, Henri Matisse in 1950, Raoul Dufy in 1952 (the year America was represented by de Kooning), Max Ernst in 1954, Jacques Villon in 1956, Jean Fautrier and Hans Hartung in 1960 (no sculpture prize that year), and Alfred Manessier in 1962. The spectacular rise of the New York School, which since the late forties had produced the strongest body of painting in contemporary art, which had helped to make New York the new capital of the international art world, and whose influence was now so widespread that a great many of the paintings on view at the 1964 Biennale, in pavilion after pavilion, looked like weak imitations of Pollock or de Kooning&mdash-all this had not received as yet the slightest notice from the juries of the Biennale.

The opportunity to change this situation was at hand, Solomon felt, except that part of the jury wanted to disqualify Rauschenberg because his work was not hanging on the Biennale grounds. Solomon had assembled a small Rauschenberg retrospective&mdash-twenty-two paintings and assemblages&mdash-and installed it magnificently in the Consulate, together with paintings by Johns, Stella, and Dine and sculptures by Oldenburg and Chamberlain. Noland's targets and chevron paintings and Louis's poured veils of color were hanging in the pavilion in the Giardini. Nearly everyone agreed that Solomon had done a brilliant job of installation, but now Professor Marcazzan was insisting that when he had told Solomon it would be all right to exhibit works outside the Biennale grounds, he had not meant to imply that such works would be eligible for prizes.

Marcazzan's duties included the selection of the seven Biennale judges, an exercise in finesse that was supposed to leave no nation feeling that its vital interes...

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