

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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A Portrait of the Artist as Exuberant Collector  
By Roberta Smith



From left, “Untitled” (1962), by Jean Tinguely; “Power Object,” from Mali, artist unknown; and two Amazonian fertility suits.

“Selections From the Private Collection of Robert Rauschenberg” at the Gagosian Gallery is a kind of mash note to the art world. Wending through spaces on three floors and numbering 130 items, it testifies both to the loose constellations of artists and to the congeries of artworks, objects and memorabilia that often form just in the process of living around artists, especially important, instinctively generous ones.

Everything here was once owned by Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008), whose forays into mixed media, performance and deft recycling of objects and photographs did so much to set the course of postwar art. There is nothing by Rauschenberg himself on view, just works that he bought, traded with other artists or received as gifts from them, as well as various notes and scraps that he deliberately saved.

Missing are several major works by Rauschenberg’s closest contemporaries — Jasper Johns, Cy Twombly and Andy Warhol — that he sold in the late 1980s to finance his Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Interchange, or ROCI, an early instance of global outreach that involved his traveling the world, collaborating with local artists and using indigenous techniques to make work.

Yet what remains is vivid proof that one of the most interesting ways to explore artists’ lives and sensibilities is through the art and related materials that they owned but did not make. Such accumulations show them at a remove, outside their own work, which is in some ways more exposed.



“Untitled,” a painting from 1953 by Cy Twombly.

The material here ranges from images by early photographers like Eugène Atget and Karl Blossfeldt; to a pair of extraordinary Amazonian fertility suits (one for each sex), in variously decorated or accessorized bark cloth; to a compact relief of painted scraps of wood that Damien Hirst made in 1985 when he was an unknown student at Goldsmiths College in London. A gift to Rauschenberg from Mr. Hirst in 2002, it looks remarkably like something by Kurt Schwitters, whose assemblages of the 1920s and '30s were precedents for Rauschenberg's own forays into the genre.

Such strange circlings of meaning and association are typical of the show. For rings-within-rings of sexual difference, including Rauschenberg's homosexuality, it is hard to beat Carl Van Vechten's 1935 photograph of Gertrude Stein posing with an American flag, warmly dedicated by Stein to the actress Katharine Cornell.

There are works from generations past: a meticulous drawing of a man's trousered leg and shod foot by René Magritte; a Marcel Duchamp ready-made (the bottle rack); a blunt ink image of a chicken by Alexander Calder from 1925; and small drawings by Matisse, Morandi and Picabia.

But the heart of the show lies in the works by artists Rauschenberg knew well. This includes those slightly younger (some of whom worked for him in various capacities), like Brice Marden, Dorothea Rockburne, Al Taylor, Ed Ruscha and Bruce Nauman, and an impressive number of his contemporaries, among them John Chamberlain and Oyvind Fahlstrom, who both are represented by especially fine, emblematic works.

There is ample evidence of Rauschenberg's involvement with artists whose efforts were primarily time-based: musical scores, dance notations and drawings by the composers John Cage and Morton Feldman and the choreographers Merce Cunningham, Trisha Brown and Steve Paxton, as well as paintings by Alex Hay, active as a dancer in the 1960s. An exceptionally beautiful study by Jean Tinguely for his self-destructing sculpture “Homage to New York” testifies to Rauschenberg's enthusiasm for that work and its great flame-out, in the Museum of Modern Art's garden, in 1960.

Since artists' collections usually begin with works by the artists they are closest to early in their careers, it is hardly surprising that Mr. Johns, an intimate during the second half of the 1950s, makes recurring appearances. An envelope on which Mr. Johns made some indecipherable marks, and a small, quick pencil outline of a flag from 1955 seem to have been preserved largely for personal reasons, which is to say that they attest to an important emotional bond.

A small all-black graphite drawing from 1954 startlingly evokes the closed-off gray works that became especially plentiful in Mr. Johns's art, starting around 1961, after he and Rauschenberg had separated. (A face and two ball-like orbs seem to lurk within its darkness.) In contrast, its neighbor is completely transparent: a close-up, casual sketch of Rauschenberg that Mr. Johns seemingly drew from life.

Twombly, who remained close to Rauschenberg throughout their lives, is represented here by two garrulous early black and white paintings, from 1951 and 1953, that have something in common with Dubuffet's scarified paintings of figures from the late 1940s. More surprising are a series of drawings in vibrant tones of crayon, from 1954, and

another in pencil, from 1955. Both are flooded with dense, elegant scribbled marks that are striking for their abstractness and exuberant confidence and for how potently they encapsulate Twombly's future as an artist.

Twombly, a periodic guest of Rauschenberg's, sometimes left drawings of flowers as gifts. A large one thanks his host for his "friendship," "love" and "warm house." A smaller one might almost be a sketch by Bonnard.

As befits an artist who made history by piecing things together, this exhibition is a kind of self-portrait collage. Nearly every item here is a glimpse of a connection between Rauschenberg and the artists he felt close to, as well as the various aesthetic ancestors from past generations and across cultures that he wanted present in his life in some way.

Many of these works are for sale, with the proceeds to support the philanthropic endeavors of the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation. It is unfortunate that a collective document like this will not remain intact. But even its dissolution seems consistent with its creator's generosity and the faith in the future that his art and his life exemplified.