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Exploring Subjectivity Beyond the Dichotomy of Subject and Object: Rauschenberg and the 'Gap' Between Art and Life

The topic of this paper will be an exploration into a twentieth century American artist and the way in which he navigated what has come to be known as the subject/object dichotomy. Robert Rauschenberg approached objectivity and subjectivity in ways that question any inherent tension between the two. Rauschenberg's work, and his daring approach to life, suggests an extra-ordinary relationship with Being, which I will detail below.

In late 1959, while in conversation with Dorothy C. Miller, of New York's Museum of Modern Art, Rauschenberg made the comment that "painting relates to both art and life. Neither can be made. (I try to act in that gap between the two)" (Miller 58). Much has been made of this comment, and many interpretations have been suggested as to what Rauschenberg meant by it.

What could Rauschenberg have meant by the statement that he tried 'to act in that gap between art and life, and that neither can be made"? Furthermore, why has this statement been interpreted time and again to mean *bridging* these two worlds of art and life, or, equally unsatisfactorily, the merging of the one with the other, somehow; the question of how the dichotomy of subjectivity and objectivity could be erased remains.

I will argue that Rauschenberg was suggesting something altogether unique when he talked about living and working in that 'gap' between art and life, and that his views and experiences of the 'gap' were informed by his early years in New York City through his contact with Zen Buddhism via D.T. Suzuki and John Cage.

In Rauschenberg's gap, we see a departure from Descartes' '*Cogito*', and a movement more in the direction of the energetic indeterminacy of Bergson's *becoming.* However, Rauschenberg moves well beyond even Lacan's ideas about the indeterminate-ness of the subject in the subject-object relationship. Both subject *and* object shed their object-ness in Rauschenberg's 'gap'. We see Rauschenberg referring to a visceral *experience*, which for Merleau-Ponty, "happens among, or is caught in, things," in that place of homogeneous becoming, or as he says, "the undivided-ness of the sensing and the sensed" (Merleau-Ponty162-163).

By the time Rauschenberg made this statement about the 'gap', in 1959, he had known John Cage for nearly a decade, and had become well acquainted with the teachings of Japanese Zen Buddhism through both Cage and from public lectures he attended with Cage, Merce Cunningham, and Jasper Johns at Columbia University, given by the Japanese Zen Buddhist scholar, author, and translator, D.T. Suzuki, where the latter taught from 1952 to 1957. This statement about living in the 'gap' is, in fact, a wonderful Zen statement. This 'gap' is what is encountered when our endless stream of thoughts subside, if even momentarily. It is, in fact, the

very nature, or essence, of our mind, which can be seen and experienced in this very moment. Suzuki writes that it is "to be found in life itself, in its fulle[st] and free[st] expressions" (Suzuki 85).

This gap, sometimes called 'ordinary mind' in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, is synonymous with enlightened mind. Rauschenberg was surely familiar with this concept via D.T. Suzuki, and described his experience of 'ordinary mind' in relation to his art practice to John Gruen in an interview published in *ARTNews*, in February, 1977. Rauschenberg remarked,

> "I put my trust in the materials that confront me, because they put me in touch with the unknown. It is then that I begin to work, when I don't have the comfort of sureness and certainty. Sometimes Jack Daniels helps too. Another good trick is fatigue. I like to start working when it's almost too late, when nothing else helps, when my sense of efficiency is exhausted. It's then that I find myself in another state, quite outside myself, and when that happens there's such a joy! It's an incredible high, and things just start flowing and you have no idea of the source" (Gruen 48).

This is a perfect description of the experience of ordinary mind, or as Rauschenberg calls it, the *gap* one experiences between art and life and everything else, none of which can be fabricated.

At a Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) symposium in 1961, Rauschenberg added:

> "Every minute everything is different everywhere. It is all flowing…The duty or beauty of a painting is that there is no reason to do it nor any reason not to. It can be done as a direct act or contact with the moment, and that is the moment you are awake and moving. It all passes and is never true literally as the present again, leaving more work to be done" (Hunter 121).

The gap that Rauschenberg referred to has its basis not just in Zen Buddhism as he understood it via the lectures by D.T. Suzuki; this understanding of the nature of being can be traced back to its earliest recorded beginnings in the Ancient thought of Pyrrho in the early 4th Century BCE, as well as through Pyrrho to the philosophy of Sakyamuni Buddha as Pyrrho encountered it, in western India, about one hundred years after the death of the Buddha.

Khenchen Thrangu, a prominent contemporary Tibetan scholar in the Northern Buddhist Mahayana Madhyamaka and Mahamudra philosophical traditions, explains that the very existence of a 'subject' cannot be ascertained through examination. Failing the identification of an existent 'self', the concept of 'object' becomes no longer tenable. What is found, instead, is a "an aspect of unceasing clarity" (Thrangu 85).

Chögyam Trungpa, a twentieth century Tibetan Buddhist scholar, artist, poet, and meditation master, in writing about the gap that Rauschenberg refers to, says that

> "such an experience takes place with everybody, all the time. From that experience you can cultivate your potential artistic talent, your visual

> appreciation. Behind that whole thing, there is a space of nothing actually happening." (41-42).

It is worth examining this experience of the gap in the context of Kant's idea of the universal judgement of beauty. Trungpa says that,

> "we can look at a beautiful rose with its gentle petals. It is so delicate and beautiful, like an infant's tongue. In looking at that rose, there is exactly the same perspective of empty mind that takes place in [suddenly coming upon a] dead dog, bleeding, its teeth showing and somewhat dirty, its fur covered with dust, and its innards slowly coming out, skin torn, and blood running onto the ground. It is blank mind that projects the vision of the dead dog lying on the ground" (42), and also that which projects the vision of the beautiful rose.

Trungpa concludes by saying that "We are talking about the [very] principles of perception. In order to appreciate the empty gap of our state of mind, we begin to project ourselves into that non-reference point" (42-43).

Both Henri Bergson and Maurice Merleau-Ponty have a lot to say on the distinctions amongst and between subject and object. They each come very close, looking through the *seemingly* apparent differentiation between the two. However, in their philosophies, neither one is comfortable in stepping into *the empty gap of non-reference point.*

For Merleau-Ponty, subject and object take on altogether different significations than those which exist for Kant; the object for Merleau-Ponty is but a paradox which exists within a *field of perception*, and which itself is paradoxical, because the object within this field "exists only in so far as someone can perceive it" (Merleau-Ponty 16). There is, for Merleau-Ponty a *dynamic* inter-subjectivity to this field of manifold perception as being, or duration; an inter-subjectivity which is perpetually in flux with the fields of culture and nature and others.

In his essay *Eye and Mind* (from 1961), Merleau-Ponty explains that "the enigma is that my body simultaneously sees and is seen. That which looks at all things can also look at itself and recognise, in what it sees, the 'other side' of its power of looking. It sees itself seeing; it touches itself touching; it is visible and sensitive for itself. It is not a self through transparence, like thought, which only thinks its object by assimilating it, by constituting it, by transforming it into thought." (162-163).

Despite this 'undivided-ness', and an 'inherence of sensing in the sensed', Merleau-Ponty does not step off into 'outer space without a space suit', and thus there is no experience of 'gap' in his philosophy.

Turning to the French philosopher, Henri Bergson, we find the subject-object dilemma, or tension, addressed as an explication that all consciousness "includes potentialities without number which interpenetrate and to which, consequently, neither the category of unity nor that of multiplicity is appropriate, made as both [categories] are for inert matter" (Bergson 137). This

state of becoming, which Bergson suggests is without boundaries commonly thought to encapsulate subject and object, and without fixed points of reference. “Consciousness is essentially free; it is freedom itself” (137), Bergson says. This would seem to coincide very closely with Rauschenberg’s ‘gap’; and yet, again, as we saw with Merleau-Ponty, there is no *experience* of gap from which Bergson’s philosophy springs. We never hear Bergson exclaim, as did Rauschenberg, that in his philosophy he has found such joy!

Finally, I would like to turn to a consideration of a recent commentary on Rauschenberg and his iconic statement by the scholar and curator Kristine Stiles, professor of Art, Art History & Visual Studies at Duke University. This is illustrative, I believe, of how Rauschenberg’s remark has been misconstrued. In the catalogue for the 2014-2015 exhibition, *“Rauschenberg, Looking Long and Thinking Hard”*, at the Duke University Art Gallery, Stiles writes that “Rauschenberg’s ‘act in the gap’ had unsettled the idea of either the unity or the dualism of art and life, fundamentally exposing the claim for unity as utopian, and for dualism as falsely oppositional and potentially hierarchical” (Stiles 4), which situates the remark as a call for a bridge between unity and dualism. Furthermore, Stiles suggests that Rauschenberg’s remark had, in fact, “become a maxim for experimental art, from assemblage, happenings, Fluxus, body and process art, to art and technology in the 1960s, and from performance and installation to pluralism in the 1970s” (2). In light of Rauschenberg’s explications above, as well as those by Thrangu and Trungpa, this is a mis-reading of the context and the implications behind his remarks, as it is clearly not a *maxim* for any activity which Stiles lists, or otherwise. Stiles

maintains that “in other words, to become fully conscious, Rauschenberg lost himself in any number of techniques, from inebriation and exhaustion to the prudent abandonment of the arrogance of self ‘efficiency’ and ‘sureness and certainty.’ He claimed that by becoming ‘quite outside’ himself he could open his consciousness to the “unknown” (17-18). However, Rauschenberg never spoke of the ‘unknown’, but did speak about being ‘awake’, saying “I work very hard to be acted on by as many things as I can. That’s what I call being awake” (Hunter 134).

Perhaps Stiles’ most telling mis-reading of Rauschenberg is in her commentary about a pamphlet John Cage made and then distributed during the opening to Rauschenberg’s 1953 exhibition at the Stable Gallery in New York. The pamphlet reads:

> *To Whom*
>
> *No subject*
> *No image*
> *No taste*
> *No object*
> *No beauty*
> *No message*
> *No talent*
> *No technique (no why)*
> *No idea*
> *No intention*
> *No art*
> *No feeling*
> *No black*
> *No white (no and)*

> *After careful consideration, I have come to the conclusion that there is nothing in these paintings that could not be changed, that they can be seen in any light and are not destroyed by the action of shadows.*
> *JOHN CAGE*
> *Hallelujah! The blind can see again: the water's fine.* (23-24)

This is nothing short of a wonderful Zen poem, which Cage turned into a performative piece by distributing it to those attending the opening. But Stiles reads it as a 'snide' and 'competitive' rebuke, saying "it is hard to overlook Cage's pervasive pejorative tone or his disparagement" of Rauschenberg's work (24). Stiles continues, remarking that "as Cage's list includes '*No message'* and '*No intention',* these terms imply that Rauschenberg's art had none" (24).

There is another well-known list of six negations in a similar vein, attributed to Tilopa, a tenth century Indian Buddhist mahasiddha. His 'Six Precepts' are: "No thought, No reflection, No analysis, No cultivation, No intention; Let it settle itself" (Powell 72).

Stiles' incomprehension of the profound influence of D.T. Suzuki and Zen Buddhism on both Cage and Rauschenberg, and how this manifested in both men, personally and artistically, is firmly based in her insistence in the (completely unsubstantiated) idea that Rauschenberg was, from the very beginning, a man of Christian faith. And in her criticism of Cage's 1961 essay "On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and His Works" (Cage 98), she writes that,

> "Cage continued in the vein of the 1953 leaflet, describing the 'gap' as '*the nothingness in between . . .where for no reason at all every practical thing that one actually takes the time to do so stirs up the dregs that they're no longer sitting as we thought on the bottom.'"* Stiles concludes, "Given Cage's deprecation of Rauschenberg's reverent approach to art and life, Rauschenberg must have suppressed his spiritualism in the composer's (and other's) company" (25).

Stiles' final parry, which she undoubtedly expects will crown her argument for Rauschenberg's inherent Christian piety, recounts that, in 1965, Rauschenberg purchased an abandoned orphanage at 381 Lafayette Street, in New York, "and made its chapel his studio" (25).

One may encounter other art historians and/or critics who assert that Rauschenberg wanted to *bridge* a supposed gap between art and life, without ever enquiring into the philosophical basis of his comment. But clearly, in examining his complete statement, and subsequent ones, it is logical to conclude that he is not talking about *bridging* some imaginary chasm between two distinct activities, but rather that he is talking about an immediate experience of awake-ness, or awareness, in which he creates art free of the fetters of subjectivity and objectivity, of self and other; a point of view which is strongly represented within the philosophy of Zen Buddhism.

Robert Rauschenberg points us in the direction of the possibility of stepping beyond the subject-object dichotomy which has puzzled, perplexed, and confounded philosophers for millennia. The Kantian universal judgement of the beauty of a rose is also, Trungpa tells us, the empty mind which is ever cognizant and knowing. Thrangu says that within this empty mind there is "unceasing clarity".

There are striking similarities between this 'gap' and the ideas of Merleau-Ponty, Bergson, and Pyrrho of Elis, as have been outlined above. Bergson says that potentialities without number interpenetrate, eclipsing a clear subject-object boundary. Merleau-Ponty says that it is vision which facilitates a transcendence of singularity between the one and the other. And Pyrrho holds that through a suspension of judgement on ethical matters, an *ataraxia*, or experience of undisturbedness proceeds.

What is clear is that the reasoning mind is not the pinnacle of the evolution of humanity. Rather, there is a gap of non-thought which exists, which cannot be made or fabricated, and from which we can manifest awake-ness, awareness, and unceasing clarity, and from which springs the true genius of the artist. Isn't this what a 'lover of wisdom', the artist-philosopher, seeks to discover?

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