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Celebrating 175: Correspondence, Rauschenberg, Robert, 1969-1973, 1980-1985

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For Rauschenberg, an overdue celebration

The good news is that Robert Rauschenberg's new works at Castelli (420 West Broadway) are splendid, not only in the context of all the other art being shown, not only in the context of his oeuvre, considerable in size and of continuing import, but also because as art they are refreshing, complicated, inventive, tough, poetic, and all the other positive adjectives I can conjure up, and yet make sense, since they are so often misapplied, by myself as well as others. If gushing will make you go and see them, then gush I must.

What has happened is that Rauschenberg has moved from the recent cardboard box wall construction—in the current show are some reminders—into full-blown sculptures as up-to-date as all the works, indirectly or not, influenced by his Combines of the '50s. Like the Combines, the new works appear to have been made of whatever was at hand: scraps of wood and metal, jugs, cloth, pillows, tires, rope, chairs. The materials and objects used in the new works often refer to those in the classical Combine paintings, but the new feeling the artist has opened the cellar door, a modern and yet primordial cellar or sub-cellar containing things and feelings I don't remember ever having looked at before in precisely this way.

One of my favorite pieces is just some cheesy cloth stretched between two chairs but holding two empty glass jugs. Another has a section of wood paneling, perhaps from a door, standing upright but flanked on either side by pillows attached by cord so that it looks as if the pillows were holding up the wood in a clearly impossible way. Another is a grimy, water-filled bathtub with a floating glass jug connected to a floating cloud of metal scraps overhead. Another joins two wooden H's by a strip of rubber tire, the treads alluding to snakeskin. Where's the goat, the goat stuck through the tire in the famous "Monogram" of 1959? All the leaning and hanging going on causes a doubletake.

Rauschenberg, at least temporarily, has abandoned his peculiar relationship to art and technology and re-affirmed his talent for worn and funky materials and startling juxtapositions, casual connections, and casual forms. At first glance, it may look as if he has taken a good hard look at what any number of younger artists are up to; perhaps he has.

art

by John Perreault

Given the innovation of his Combines, done in the '50s, it's his privilege. The new works are entirely without the drips and splashes of paint that made even the free-standing Combines always relate, more or less, to painting, but it is largely because of these Combines and work influenced by them that we have come to see assemblage and painterly use of three dimensional materials as sculpture, soft, stuffed, hung, leaning, falling, or otherwise, and Rauschenberg has picked up the ball. A young artist I know, whose works are not at all like Rauschenberg's, was as enthusiastic as I was. Beyond the works themselves, he was pleased, he said, with the dialogue between the generations that the show seemed to represent. It is as if Rauschenberg were being influenced by those he influenced, his self coming back, learning in a way from those he taught and yet reaffirming his place and his sensibility with generosity, confirming his progeny as much as himself. I agree.

The gloating that happens at anyone's temporary slump is sadder than the slump. The lack of celebration when an established artist pulls it all together again is sadder still. Rauschenberg, in his late 40s, one-time winner of the Venice Biennale, and not exactly unknown, has re-



established his place, his history, and his continuing talents. Younger superstars, please take note. Art is something you do your whole life, and Rauschenberg has managed to survive his fame and, even better yet, to survive it to make art that can compete with all his own very best efforts in the past.

I WAS ALSO MUCH taken this week, but in a slightly different way, with Will Insley's work, on display at Fischbach in a double show at 29 West 57th Street and at 489 Broome. Uptown are three models and diagrams and other references to his future city called Onecity, and downtown are "paintings" that are really fragments from the fictional (?) Opaque Library at the center of this future city.

Although I am familiar with Insley's work, I don't think I've ever quite understood it until now. It's all future-tense and imaginative, and much more visionary and frightening than a casual glance at all those neat diagrams and architectural models will allow. Insley's works are the result of what he calls the archeology [[archaeology]] of a future civilization, a civilization in which living space has been condensed and rationalized into the 400 square miles of Onecity itself, a square spiral, close to the ground, that houses the entire population of some future USA. But there are ceremonial spaces as well, out-posts that indicate time-travel and travel through and beyond death and back again. It will take some time and effort to understand this vision, that to me, for one, is more than faintly horrific, as I grow increasingly suspicious of the architect as master-builder. Onecity is a world in which the architects as master-builders have won. The conceit is Borgesian and extremely ambiguous. Once one is able to grasp Insley's whiff of the future, the extremely handsome "paintings," utilizing grids, become much more than they seem: ominous icons of some future religion, comments on the present.

BOOKS: BEYOND WORDS & ENCOUNTER Continued from preceding page

of participants showed positive changes." But when the control groups were compared, "regardless of the measure of change used, the control came off better than the encounter groupers."

Maliver is concerned with the differences between conventional psychotherapy and encounter, and blames the high casualty rate partly on three principles of encounter: (1) that the group leader is not responsible for his groupers either during the group or for after-effects—everyone is assumed to be responsible for himself; (2) that psychological diagnosis has no validity and that screening of group subjects is not useful; and (3) that knowledge of psychodynamics and their application is of no value.

Maliver is disturbed that complete amateurs are being trained—often in a few group sessions—to practice potentially dangerous encounter techniques on the public. At one point he suggested that "if encounterists were licensed professionals their behavior would be subject to the control of state licensing agencies and professional peer groups." But Maliver knows this would be scant protection, and points out, elsewhere, that almost all the leaders of the movement are licensed psychologists, or psychiatrists, as is the case with Bill Schutz, Paul Bindrin, Harold Streifeld, Martin Shepherd, Daniel Casriel, and especially Carl Rogers, one of the most honored psychologists in America, and past president of the American Psychological Association. Maliver points out that only about five per cent of psychotherapists in America are graduates of advanced training institutes in psychotherapy, and adds that "to my knowledge, not one of the current encounter game stars holds a certificate from a program specializing in conventional psychotherapy."

But that's just the point, none of these people believes in conventional psychotherapy, and any effort to regulate or discipline any of them would be met with powerful political opposition based on the defense of the right to ideological diversity and freedom of scientific thought. Yet if we take Maliver (and also Back) seriously, the entire encounter group movement is profoundly anti-intellectual and ant-scientific (Maliver reports that Schutz even advocated the use of astrology and tarot cards).

Although both Maliver and Back see the encounter movement as answering a social need in our chaotic and fragmented society, I don't think they adequately see how deeply psychology has also experienced a crisis of identity. Since World War II clinical psychology programs have mushroomed in the universities throughout America. Thousands of graduates from such programs went into psychotherapy practice in the '50s and '60s, sometimes with inadequate training. Some of them had little confidence in themselves and sometimes became discouraged by their lack of understanding of their patients, and the slowness and uncertainty of the process at best. Their dissatisfactions made them open to new radical approaches that promised faster and more certain results.

Carl Rogers was one of the first psychologists to provide such an answer, with his "non-directive psychotherapy" of the 1940s. It was based on many simple-minded premises that later were to be the foundation of the encounter movement, including the notion that you didn't have to know very much to deal with emotionally disturbed people. Every graduate student could become an instant "counselor." And, of course, it implied that other leading therapies were "directive," whether they were or not. The sensitivity movement was naturally attractive to such practitioners. The intensity of the emotional forces unleashed in the
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