



Off the Wall: A Portrait of Robert Rauschenberg

Calvin Tomkins

[Download now](#)

[Read Online](#) 

Off the Wall: A Portrait of Robert Rauschenberg

Calvin Tomkins

Off the Wall: A Portrait of Robert Rauschenberg Calvin Tomkins

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 spirit 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 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.

Off the Wall: A Portrait of Robert Rauschenberg Details

Date : Published November 29th 2005 by Picador (first published 1980)

ISBN : 9780312425852

Author : Calvin Tomkins

Format : Paperback 352 pages

Genre : Art, Nonfiction, Biography, Biography Memoir, Art History

 [Download Off the Wall: A Portrait of Robert Rauschenberg ...pdf](#)

 [Read Online Off the Wall: A Portrait of Robert Rauschenberg ...pdf](#)

Download and Read Free Online Off the Wall: A Portrait of Robert Rauschenberg Calvin Tomkins

From Reader Review Off the Wall: A Portrait of Robert Rauschenberg for online ebook

RJ says

Off the Wall: A Portrait of Robert Rauschenberg by Calvin Tomkins (2005)

Katie says

After taking a liking to a particular untitled combine (with a rooster, a naked lady, and a found children's doodle that declares 'This is a picture I drew about playing away from traffic') at a Met exhibition a few years back, I was prepared to devour anything Rauschenberg related. It was tragic, then, that Calvin Tomkins's portrait of the man was so stale, uninspired and full of awkward sentences. There has to be a text that more effectively and poetically does the man justice.

Christine says

very well written. biographically interesting without being indescreeet. illustrates what was happening with and amongst many many historical heroes and dispels certain myths of unification, or rivalry by someone who was there. tells the story of how our contemporary "art world" came to be what it is.

AC says

Great book - for someone like myself who knew less than zero about modern art -- Tomkins managed to make the line of development that led from the Abstract Expressionists to Pop (via Duchamp) not only intelligible -- and the book is a great read -- but almost 'simpatico'.

Almost...

Anyway, fabulous book.

Ami says

I should make a shelf for all the art books I have read to try to school myself on the subject. Even though I know that's not the most effective way to learn, I find myself reading lots of artist bios because I feel terribly guilty that I know so little about art.

This one, though, turned out to be something different than the traditional bio. It's really more about the intersection of art (Robert Rauschenberg), music (John Cage), and dance (Merce Cunningham). It's like the biographical equivalent to my favorite quote--'Art doesn't happen in a vacuum.'

Glenn Russell says

Monogram by Robert Rauschenberg -- The title of this signature Rauschenberg art alludes to the union of the goat and the tire, which brought to mind for the artist the interweaving letters in a monogram.

Thank you, Calvin Tomkins! Such a clearly written exciting account of the art scene in 1950s and 1960s America where artist Robert Rauschenberg is the focus but certainly not the exclusive focus as many artists are covered including Abstract Expressionists Jackson Pollock, William de Kooning and Mark Rothko, Pop Artists Jasper Johns, Roy Liechtenstein and Claes Oldenburg, avant-garde composer John Cage, dance choreographer Merce Cunningham, along with the big players in the world of galleries and museums - Betty Parsons, Leo Castelli and Peggy Guggenheim. To provide a small taste to whet the appetite for anyone interested in this unique cultural and creative explosion, below are a number of Calvin Tomkins quotes along with my comments. Art lovers of the world unite and read this book!

On Robert Rauschenberg's childhood: "Nobody ever said much about his drawings. He drew all the time, in the margins of his schoolbooks and on scraps of paper and pieces of wood and any available surface, but, as he said, he thought anybody could do that." ----- What I love in this story about a lower middle-class boy growing up in Port Arthur, a small town along the east coast of Texas, is how his ability to draw required little effort, was so easy and natural, he considered it no big deal. Also, his innate talent for drawing and art was not particularly appreciated; actually his father wanted young Rauschenberg to be a hunter but the boy was such a klutz with a rifle his father simply shook his head and let his son take his own path.

On learning from Josef Albers at innovative Black Mountain College in North Carolina: "For Rauschenberg, who had come to the conclusion that discipline was what he needed most – that energy and emotion and an overpowering love of paint could not get him past the dead end of self-indulgence that he saw looming ahead of him – Albers seemed to embody the necessary next step. ----- Such a telling sign of a true artist – he had raw talent to express himself in art but instinctively knew he needed a teacher to instill skill and craftsmanship as well as a mental rigor to creating visual art.

On Josef Albers on art: "Albers had nothing but scorn for the excesses of self-expression; he believed that art's real role lay in the "training of consciousness" a process that involved learning to know the true nature of materials and of the relationship between them. Sometimes he had his students draw page after page of straight lines, training the hand to be steady." ----- And what did Albers think of having Robert Rauschenberg in his class? Calvin Tomkins writes: "Nothing that year, appeared to have displeased Albers so much as having to teach Rauschenberg." Yet Rauschenberg reflected back with admiration and gratitude on his time spent in learning from Albers, which speaks volumes about what it takes to be an authentic artist – a teacher can be unappealing as a person but what really counts is what the teacher teaches. Art transcends personalities.

Three Flags by Jasper Johns

Tomkins includes the following famous quote from New York art critic Harold Rosenberg: "At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act – rather than as a space in which to reproduce, redesign, analyze, or 'express' an object, actual or imagined." ----- Of course, the king of action painting was none other than Jackson Pollack. Calvin Tomkins writes lucidly

on the role and impact Abstract Expressionism had on the younger generation of American artists like Rauschenberg and Johns and Warhol.

“Andre Breton, himself a poet, had dragooned his followers into politics by attempting to ally the movement with the Communist Party in France, until it became depressingly clear that the Communists wanted no part of such undisciplined allies.” ----- Calvin Tomkins addresses how the great European art and artists had a decided influence on the American art scene right through the 1950s, 1960s and beyond, most especially those European artists like Andre Breton, Marcel Duchamp and Max Ernst who fled the war in Europe for New York City. And that quote about the Communist reaction to those surrealist artists is laugh-out-loud hilarious – no dandy dreamer artists in our party of comrades, thank you.

John Cage - Merce Cunningham - Robert Rauschenberg in 1960

“Cage was specifically encouraged about Rauschenberg’s work. In the year since his show at Betty Parsons, Rauschenberg had moved in the direction of austerity, toward emptiness.” ----- John Cage had an abiding interest in Zen Buddhism and the experience of emptiness. Influence by Cage, Rauschenberg also produced art in the spirit of Zen-like emptiness which underscores how he was continually creative and innovative, refusing to simply repeat himself no matter how successful his previous creations.

“Collage for Rauschenberg was a perpetual adventure. It was fun to search the beach or the city streets for objects he could use. He was always surprised by what he found, and the objects themselves never failed to suggest new possibilities, combinations he might never have thought of otherwise.” ----- It’s this sense of wonder and surprise, so much like the fresh eyes of a child, that in large measure accounts for why many critics judge Rauschenberg among the leading late twentieth century American artists. Art as a constantly expanding expression; art as a way of living that’s off the wall and running through all phases of culture and society.

Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns in New York City -- Looks like a 1950s version of Tom Sawyer with Huck Finn.

“Both Cunningham and Taylor (dance choreographer Paul Taylor) could see right away that Rauschenberg had that rare and indefinable quality, a sense of the theater. His costumes and his sets were always active participants in the on-stage drama, sometimes too active.” ----- Rauschenberg always enjoyed art and creation as a collaborative endeavor. The connection of the visual arts with theater and dance is one of the highlights of the book.

“At an opening at the Museum of Modern Art, a woman charmed by his elegance of manner said to him, “Jasper, you must be from the southern aristocracy.” “No,” he replied. “I’m just trash.” ----- Jasper Johns was a poor kid from Georgia. Just goes to show how the muse is not picky about an individual’s economic background or lack of culture. In many respects, a disadvantaged childhood and youth can serve to fuel and set fire to the creative juices of an artist all through the adult years.

Calvin Tomkins - art and cultural critic par excellence

Jennifer says

One of my favorites - a fascinating portrait of the artist Robert Rauschenberg

Josh Simpson says

rasuchenberg as an inspirational figure is hard to resist - he pretty much wins everybody over eventually, whether interested in avant garde art or not. tomkins traces rauschenberg's career beautifully by letting the artist(s) speak and by skillfully zooming in and out from anecdote to context in a way that situates that career within the story of the evolution of 20th century arts - especially mid-century NYC centered "advanced art". it's a much more exciting and approachable way to learn about the subject than any textbook or art history / criticism i've ever encountered.

Devin White says

This book is incredible. Calvin Tomkins' voice flows seamlessly through the history of Rauschenberg and the New York art scene. I can not believe it took me so long to find this book, seeing as though Rauschenberg is my favorite artist. It was so good I read it as slow as I possibly could to prolong to ending. I recommend this book to anyone interested in Abstract Expressionism and it's beginnings.

Poy Born says

Reductive, sort of basic, fawning. Gives an adequate if a little dated background of all the major art currents surrounding Rauschenberg's career. For example, rotely espouses the whole "camera liberates artist from role as producer of visual documentation" schtick, which I feel isn't really even fashionable anymore. Doesn't really adequately address Rauschenberg's homosexuality (compare treatment of relationship with Susan Weil with relationship with Johns) or much of the real meat of the art, in my opinion. Quick read though, would recommend it to my mom but maybe not anyone more acquainted with contemporary art.

Ryan Chapman says

Tomkins writes such clean and compelling prose, I'd read anything by him. An excellent look at Rauschenberg, the Abstract Expressionists, Pop Art, and the early careers of John Cage and Merce Cunningham. One criticism: there's heaps of praise on the artist's life and career, but nary a mention of his personal life. It's as if after his move to New York the man became a eunuch.

Brendan says

Was a time in my life I didn't "get" art. I wasn't particularly talented as a kid, couldn't draw pictures or do anything clever with paper mache. Being forced to sit through an "art appreciation" class in college, where we looked at slide after slide while the professor dryly intoned . . . something. I don't know. I wasn't listening.

At any rate, for most of my life, being able to tell the difference between abstract expressionism and

expressionism and impressionism came about as naturally to me as being able to tell the difference between sedimentary and igneous and metamorphic rocks (I wasn't a particularly talented geologist either.)

And then, I read this book.

I'm telling you, no matter how bad your art education was, or how much you think you "don't care" about art or just don't get it, this book will change all that. If you're anything like me, this book will change your life. It did mine.

I think what makes the book so readable is that it uses as its starting point the very approachable artist Robert Rauschenberg. You've seen works by Rauschenberg, whether you know it or not. In later years, he did Time Magazine's Deng Xiaoping "Man of the Year" cover, as well as Time's one-year 9/11 anniversary cover. You might also have seen collages with JFK and astronauts in them. That was Rauscheberg too.

But before that, he turned his bed into a work of art. He turned a chicken into a work of art. He turned a sheep with a tire around it into a work of art, along the way inventing a new art form called "combines."

That's what makes both Rauschenberg and this book approachable, because you learn while reading it that anything can be art. Anything at all. Indeed, for an entire year, Rauschenberg (who got his start designing displays in store windows) used nothing in his art that he couldn't find discarded within a block of his house (explaining the sheep with the tire around it, by the way.)

Because Rauschenberg arrived in New York just as newer, younger artists like him (and Jasper Johns, Claes Oldenberg, Frank Stella, Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol, et al) were just beginning to make their mark, turning the art world upon its head, we become present at a time of seismic shift.

But Tomkins also goes backward in time, truly making us understand what foreign-sounding (and highfalutin) terms such as "expressionism" and "impressionism" mean, in readable and understandable prose. Believe me when I say that after reading it, you too will be able to tell the difference.

At any rate, I could go on and on about this book, so I'll just stop here and say if you have ever been intimidated by "art" and just don't "get it" -- but think you might want to -- this is the book for you. As previously noted, if you're anything like me, it just might change your life.

Now, if only there were a book that made geology just as approachable . . .

Carole says

A great read about the NYC art scene in the 1950s and 1960s. Includes Marcel DuChamp's influence on Rauschenberg and Johns and touches upon Andy Warhol's rise to fame.

Diane says

This is the story of the New York art scene in the 1950's through the 1960's, especially the story of Robert Rauschenberg and his contemporaries such as Jasper Johns, John Cage and Merce Cunningham. I have always enjoyed the art and now feel a bit closer to understanding the artists. It was a fortunate time to read

the book. Right after finishing I was able to attend the new NC Museum of Art and see a number of works by artists mentioned in the book: e.g. Stella, Nevelson, Motherwell. Next week I will also be in Washington DC and have a chance to see other pieces.

Haunted by the information that Rauschenberg came home from the army and found that his parents had moved away without telling him or leaving any way for him to easily find him.

Book was first published in 1980 and parts appeared in the New Yorker. Occasionally it is evident that the book was built from a series of articles. The last chapter updates to 2005 - obviously an article unrelated to the book and somewhat startling to see information repeated.

Vickie says

I enjoyed this book, lots of interesting information in here. It does get a little bogged down with all the exhibits and pieces of art and the descriptions of The Happenings. However, even though I've read it, I'm not finished with it. I'm going to go through and google pieces of art I haven't seen to further my education of Rauschenberg. I wish it had been updated since his death too.
