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Author

Graham, Cole J.

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Inefficient, Unsustainable, and Fragmentary: The Rauschenberg Combines as Disabled Bodies

Cole J. Graham

*I'm a trickster coyote in a gnarly-bone suit
I'm a fate worse than death in shit-kickin' boots*

*I'm the nightmare booga you fight with in dreams
'Cause I emphatically demonstrate: it ain't what it seems*

*I'm a whisper, I'm a heartbeat, I'm "that accident," and goodbye
One thing I'm not is a reason to die*

—"Cripple Lullaby," Cheryl Marie Wade, 1997

In February of 1960, MoMA curator William Rubin (1927 – 2006) accused American painter Robert Rauschenberg's (1925 – 2008) Combines of rendering the "inherently biographical style of Abstract Expressionism... even more personal, more particular, and sometimes almost *embarrassingly private*" (emphasis mine).¹ Rubin's choice of the word "embarrassingly" was telling. For the curator, Rauschenberg's new assemblage works were not just private, but *embarrassingly* so. In other words, the

¹ Quoted from Tom Folland, "Robert Rauschenberg's Queer Modernism: The Early Combines and Decoration," *The Art Bulletin* 92, no. 4 (December 2010): 359.

problem they presented was that they were not private when good sense and taste suggested they should be. Shameless in their resolutely personal nature, the Combines ushered in a public/private collapse that put Rauschenberg's innards on grisly-cum-ludicrous display. Thus, it makes sense that, in Rubin's account, the Combines' exhibition in the gallery space or museum—like pulling down one's pants next to a Jackson Pollock—became an act of (over)exposure.²

Rubin's criticism stuck, and in the decades since, Rauschenberg's de-pantsing of the modernist aesthetic—in other words, this slippage or spilling-over of the supposed-to-be-private into the embarrassingly deviant public—has been a wellspring of art historical discourse. Following the curator's assessment, the Combines have variously been read as an insistence on the work of art as both *in* its environment and *in communication* with it; as an attempt at the redress due feminine interiority; and relatedly, as a refusal of heteronormative subjectivity in the Cold War era.³ Reading these works through a lens of deviancy, then, is nothing new, nor is remarking upon the bodily sense—the feeling of lobeing-with-a-body—that encounters with such assemblages invoke.

I, however, find interfacing with the Combines with an eye toward corporeal deviance rooted in disability theory to be importantly different (if similarly connected to slippages between the public and private/internal and external), and it is just such an intervention this article suggests. Cultural-critical disability theory establishes disability as an always embodied category of human difference (or deviance), similar to race, gender, or sexuality. This mode of disability theory is importantly separate from the medical model, which locates the “problem” of disability within the individual, and the social model, which locates this “problem” within inaccessible communities, spaces, and societal frameworks.⁴ Similarly to the way queer theory imagines possibilities otherwise for sexuality, intimacy, bodily knowledge, and connection, cultural-critical

² While there is contention within Rauschenberg scholarship regarding what qualifies a Combine, this article takes under consideration those assemblage works produced between 1954-1964 that extend themselves from the wall and enter into a three-dimensional relationship with the body and surrounding gallery space.

³ Tom Folland proposes the first reading in “Robert Rauschenberg's Queer Modernism: The Early Combines and Decoration,” Helen Molesworth the second in “Before Bed,” and Jonathan D. Katz in “Committing the Perfect Crime: Sexuality, Assemblage, and the Postmodern Turn in American Art.” Tom Folland, “Robert Rauschenberg's Queer Modernism: The Early Combines and Decoration,” *The Art Bulletin* 92, no. 4 (December 2010): 348–65. Helen Molesworth, “Before Bed,” *October* 63 (Winter 1993): 68–82. Jonathan D. Katz, “Committing the Perfect Crime: Sexuality, Assemblage, and the Postmodern Turn in American Art,” *Art Journal* 67, no. 1 (2008): 38–53.

⁴ Difference becomes deviance when distance from the “norm” constitutes a defect rather than a benign variation.

disability theory opens onto a conception of human difference that radically rearranges ideas of and relations between “health, functioning, achievement, and beauty.”⁵

Rather than simply acknowledging the existence of disabled mind-bodies as pre-subjective fact, cultural-critical disability theory interrogates the historical construction of disability as inextricably bound to the construction of ability as a naturalized category. In doing so, it introduces the potential for new lives and new ways of living that do not center ability at all. It is for this reason that a reading of Rauschenberg’s *Combines*, made publicly-private through the application of cultural-critical disability, becomes so urgent. In fact, Rauschenberg was not unfamiliar with either the disabled experience or with the processes of care that disability requires. Just old enough to be caught up in the end of World War II, the artist received his draft notice in the spring of 1944.⁶ Having enlisted in the Navy hospital corps, he worked as a nurse attendant in San Diego, caring for men whose nerve damage made feeding themselves impossible. Relatedly, Rauschenberg himself struggled with learning difficulties that would eventually lead to the diagnosis of a learning disability (dyslexia).

Later, during the last decade of his life, Rauschenberg told an interviewer from *Vanity Fair* that the purpose of his retrospective was to “encourage people to see old work in light of the new, rather than the new in the light of the old.”⁷ The artist’s instructions are helpful here in the suggestion that we allow new meanings to inhabit and revitalize works through their relationships with the works (and the *work*) that come after. While the medical model was the sole model for disability discourse when Rauschenberg produced his *Combines*, disabled people were simultaneously living into and insisting on their own subjectivities nonetheless, often in ways that implicitly rejected medicalism, containment, and social acceptability. Indeed, if Rauschenberg’s *Combines* knowingly engaged sexuality/gender difference as *differences that make a difference*, they just as poignantly anticipated discourses that would frame disability as another such mode of difference.

Purity And Puritanism

Modernist critic Michael Fried (b. 1939) engaged neither with Rauschenberg nor with questions of ability in his 1967 article “Art and Objecthood.” Nonetheless, Fried’s essay, like Rubin’s accusation, evoked tensions that were already playing out in the *Combines* by the mid-1950s. What lay at the heart of Fried’s argument was a deep-seated fear that assemblages like Rauschenberg’s—in their lack of definition, their

⁵ Anne Waldschmidt, “Disability Goes Cultural: The Cultural Model of Disability as an Analytical Tool,” in *Culture—Theory—Disability*, ed. Anne Waldschmidt, Hanjo James Berressem, and Moritz Ingwersen (New York: Transcript Verlag, 2017), 26.

⁶ John Richardson, “Rauschenberg’s Epic Vision,” *Vanity Fair*, September 1997, 219.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 219.

constant toggling between mediums—might lose whatever it was that made them “art” altogether. Concerned with the slippery “concepts of *quality* and *value*... to the extent that these are central to... the concept of art itself,” Fried argued works could be “wholly meaningful only *within the individual arts*” (emphasis mine). Dubious as the critic was of the dangerous “illusion that the barriers between the arts [were] in the process of crumbling,” Fried championed an understanding of art that effectively excluded Rauschenberg’s Combines from consideration.⁸

That Rauschenberg’s work had moved into three dimensions was not necessarily the problem; nor was the place of sculpture within the landscape of the emerging New York art scene at issue. Fried himself praised the works of sculptors such as David Smith and Anthony Caro, while Clement Greenberg (1909 – 1994), that champion of modernism, readily gave synthetic cubism its due credit in shaping the current artistic moment.⁹ Rather, the danger Fried spoke of (and the specter that haunted Greenberg) was explicitly connected to the bodily engagement that assemblages in general—and the Combines in particular—provoked. Perhaps more important was Rauschenberg’s insistence that the Combines *remained paintings, while they were, at the same time, becoming something else as well*.¹⁰

Rauschenberg himself coined the term Combine for his assemblage works because of their inherently hybrid configurations. The creation and exhibition of the Combines thus directly threatened modernism’s ontological project as Clement Greenberg had constructed it: one seeking to establish the purity of each artistic medium, radically reducing what painting (and sculpture) could be. Indeed, though Fried couldn’t have known it, with the Combines, Rauschenberg would open Greenberg’s reduction of medium possibility into an equally radical expansion. When he did so, Rauschenberg would find that, in the words of art historian Branden W. Joseph:

...at the endpoint of one medium, when it is hunted or traced back to its essence, it is neither nothingness or purity, but the conditions of another media. Painting whittled to its core opens onto sculpture, environment, and cinema, not all at once and indiscriminately, but... in hybrid or heterogeneous articulations.¹¹

The concerns Fried laid out had been justified—the walls were crumbling, and today, in a post-atomic, post-9/11, pandemic-impacted future hardly imaginable in the 1960s, the boundaries delimiting the categories of the art world are less clear than

⁸ Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” *Artforum* 5 (June 1967): 164.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 167.

¹⁰ Note the verb tense here: not “became,” but “becoming.”

¹¹ Branden W. Joseph, “Rauschenberg’s Refusal,” in *Robert Rauschenberg: Combines* (Los Angeles, CA: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2005), 266.

ever. Evidence for this growing lack of clarity exists in the catalog for a winter 2010 show presented by the Gagosian Gallery in partnership with the Rauschenberg Foundation. Here, gallery owner Larry Gagosian (b. 1945) dubbed the medium of collage a “microcosm of the larger, messy world”—and, if there is a hallmark of collage, it may very well be this messiness.¹² This seems especially true for assemblage art that, like Rauschenberg’s, creeps out of two dimensions, refusing to forego its status as painting while simultaneously contaminating gallery space. (Fittingly, containment and its opposite, contamination, also rest on the success or failure of interior/exterior and personal/private divides, additionally suggesting the viral spread of debilitating life-long illnesses like HIV/AIDS, hepatitis and now, Long COVID.)

Modernism’s problems with the temporary, inefficient, unnecessary, and excessive cemented negative critical opinion of Rauschenberg’s work “in the minds of such critics as Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg.” But approached from a viewpoint looking back from and informed by cultural-critical disability theory, the Combines succeed in their “heterogeneous or hybrid articulations” in calling into question the possibility of unity-cum-purity at all.¹³ Similarly, the many disabled lives that are lived in resourceful and innovative ways unrecognizable and invisible to the medical state reflect Gagosian’s taste for a “larger, messy world.”¹⁴ In other words: if we tease out the thread asking what the modernist praise of and call for medium specificity implies for those living with disabled mind-bodies, we will find that these tendencies toward purity and efficiency reflect an ethic to which not only artistic practice is expected to aspire. Rather, the nexus of purity-efficiency-independence-productivity-profitability-social value undergirds modes of capitalist production and, in doing so, has played a substantial part in historically limiting possibilities for disabled mind-bodies—and indeed for *all* mind-bodies. Rauschenberg’s Combines, however, challenge the privileging of such modernistic tendencies above others—instead emphasizing collectivity, contingency, heterogeneity, and partiality, which modernism not only denounces, but excludes.

For all these reasons, we should take seriously what Combines like *Monogram* and *Gold Standard* (the two case studies undertaken here) offer in response to modernism’s demands. Here I am talking about standpoint theory’s less-respectable

¹² Robert Rauschenberg, James Lawrence, John Richardson, and Larry Gagosian, *Robert Rauschenberg, Published on the Occasion of the Exhibition Held at the Gagosian Gallery, New York, 29 October - 18 December 2010* (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 2010), 9.

¹³ Walter Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg: The Early 1950s: Museum of Contemporary Art, February 8 through April 19, 1992* (Chicago, IL: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1992), 167.

¹⁴ Gagosian et al., *Robert Rauschenberg (Published on the Occasion of the Exhibition Held at the Gagosian Gallery, New York, 29 October)*, 9.

cousin, which I call *sitpoint theory*.¹⁵ While standpoint theory asks us to question what perspectives and possible solutions come from encountering the world from atypical vantage points, sitpoint theory—directed from the vantage point of rest and repose—instructs us not only to consider our own positionality, but also to *sit and take stock of* our bodies and minds. Sitpoint theory is not simply a methodology or epistemology; that is, it is not purely a mental exercise. It is instead an invitation to open oneself up to the manifold alternative corporeal ways of looking and seeing, especially those that reveal themselves when we allow our bodies to *stop*. In sitpoint theory, the instruction that one take up different points of view is as literal as it is figurative.

The Flatbed Picture Plane

When critic Leo Steinberg (1920 – 2001) invoked the phrase “the flatbed picture plane”—now synonymous with Rauschenberg’s work—he was describing the then-radical reorientation of a painting’s intended positionality: taking the painting down from where it hung (vertically) on the wall and laying it out horizontally. No longer was



Figure 1: Robert Rauschenberg, *Monogram* (front view), 1955-59, mixed media, 42 x 64 x 62 ½ inches. Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden. Courtesy of Rauschenberg Foundation.

the picture plane a window; its new orientation made it a workspace.¹⁶ Considering Rauschenberg’s later silkscreens, Steinberg called on the ubiquity of the printing press as one familiar arena of interaction with the flatbed.¹⁷ Although this made sense for the silkscreens, I would argue that the more immediate connotation of the flatbed as it pertains to the Combines is the flatbed *pallet*, the flatbed *truck*—surfaces onto which items are loaded for transport.

¹⁵ Here I am indebted to feminist scholar Sandra Harding, who coined the feminist theoretical framework and term standpoint theory.

¹⁶ Steinberg, “Reflections on the State of Criticism,” in *Robert Rauschenberg*, ed. Branden W. Joseph (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 27.

¹⁷ Rauschenberg’s interest in silkscreens began in 1962, his earliest works in the medium occurring concurrently with his final Combines (one of which is *Gold Standard*).

The Combine-as-flatbed would therefore imply something like *mobility* in addition to positionality.

This focus on mobility dictates that, if we are going to continue to mine Steinberg's overburdened reading, we do so in ways that come to bear on means of moving through and encountering the world; that is, ways that come to bear on the disabled mind-body. The first of these is to consider the flatbed picture plane as a compositional device directed toward the act of leveling. This function becomes clear when we consider the *kinds* of things



Figure 2: Robert Rauschenberg, *Monogram* (back view), 1955-59, mixed media, 42 x 64 x 62 ½ inches. Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden. Courtesy of Rauschenberg Foundation.

Rauschenberg was attaching to his picture planes in the late 1950s and early 1960s: used sheets, broken-down boots, empty cardboard boxes, the list goes on. Recognizing this, curator William Seitz (1914 – 1974), once referred to Rauschenberg's found materials as "urban refuse" that had been subjected to an "inversion from ugliness to beauty."¹⁸ Looking at the Combines, however, one must ask if any "inversion" of refuse has truly occurred; or, instead, this might be *the kind of refuse that refuses*—the kind that, in refusing Seitz's inversion and subsumption, refuses to be beautiful or legible, even to itself?

Take, for example, one of Rauschenberg's most oft-discussed Combines, *Monogram*, 1955-59, a taxidermied goat that stands on a rolling base made from one of Rauschenberg's earlier Black Paintings (figs. 1, 2). The stuffed Angora goat was purchased from a local furniture store, while a tire encircling its waist is *literal refuse*—trash taken straight out of the pile. Yet, in fixing the discarded tire around the similarly discarded goat's middle, Rauschenberg has treated his second-hand livestock with an excess of *care*. Though he may have initially haggled over the goat's fifteen dollar price tag, in dedicating four years to its consideration, Rauschenberg restored *dignity*—always a slippery concept, but especially so within the nexus of disability—to his thrift

¹⁸ William Seitz, *The Art of Assemblage* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1962), 76.



store find.¹⁹ In the artist's hands, the goat became *worthy of consideration*. This was a worth Rauschenberg demonstrated in carrying out intimate and physical acts of care: combing the goat's matted coat and repairing its damaged face (though with the application of brightly colored paints that simultaneously concealed and acknowledged the damage).

In reference to another Combine, *Kickback*, 1959 (fig. 3), painter Carroll Dunham (b. 1949) reads a spray of black paint across the work's surface as the shit stain that evidences "a total loss of sphincter control, a collapse of the most basic boundaries of the individual."²⁰ Dunham suggests that the intimate embarrassment of this moment in *Kickback* is "tragicomic," when the most private bodily function becomes the most public in a laying low of the body's corporeality.²¹ At once flippant and achingly poignant, *Kickback* shares in this with *Monogram*, a work whose presence also feels decidedly playful. *Monogram's* picture plane resembles Rauschenberg's Black Paintings in its palette of tar and crude oil, evoking

Figure 3: Robert Rauschenberg, *Kickback*, 1959, mixed media, 76 ½ x 33 ¼ x 5 inches. The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, The Panza Collection. Courtesy of Rauschenberg Foundation.

¹⁹ Rauschenberg worked intermittently on *Monogram* from the years 1955-59, conceiving multiple iterations of its composition (some of which are recorded in images of Rauschenberg's studio from those years) before settling on the one that is in now on view at the Moderna Museet in Sweden.

²⁰ Carroll Dunham, "All or Nothing," *Artforum* 44, no. 7 (March 2006): 251.

²¹ *Ibid*, 249

similar scatological associations. Near the goat's back end, a dirtied tennis ball (widely recognized as a reference to a Jasper Johns work, and thus to Rauschenberg's sexuality) begs to be read as a turd.²² Here is the mark of the artist in its "crudest, and literally lowest, form": the shit stain.²³ Indeed, for the person publicly experiencing "a total loss of sphincter control," there is no "inversion from ugliness to beauty"; there is only and instead the dark humor necessary if one is to live with and in the public/private collapse of disability.

If this loss of sphincter control is the comic element of *Monogram*, its tragic element is that the goat is dead, *rigor mortis* having long since set in. It will not (without Rauschenberg's help) be going anywhere, its strange, glass-eyed stare fixed somewhere beyond our gaze. We look, and the goat, in return, refuses to look back. It does not acknowledge the (sighted) person's primary mode of interfacing with our fellow beings in the world. But for this we cannot blame Rauschenberg's taxidermied goat: the animal is not only glassy-eyed, *but actually glass-eyed*. It sees nothing. We know this for two reasons. One is that the eye provides one of the earliest visible signs of decomposition. Between two and five hours after biological death, the cornea begins to cloud over as the breakdown of cells releases an excess of potassium.²⁴ The second is the process of taxidermy itself. Coming from the Greek **τάξις** (*taxis*), meaning arrangement, and **δερμῖς** (*dermis*), meaning skin, taxidermy is quite literally the arrangement of skin. To break the process down to its essentials: the only part of *Monogram's* goat original to its body is its skin, which, having been removed, cleaned, and tanned for preservation, has been stretched over a goat-shaped frame. As it turns out, *Monogram's* goat is hardly a goat at all; it is, at best, the *evidence* of one.

While Rauschenberg's taxidermied goat asks that we squirm in uncomfortable but ultimately humorous acknowledgement of our bodily functions, it simultaneously activates grim anxieties surrounding literal biological death. The goat's glass eyes ask, "What is the edge of personhood?" Thinking not only of glass eyes, but of prosthetics and artificial larynx speech aids, the question becomes: what happens when part of the organic body is replaced with something foreign? How much of the body can be removed before who and what one is changes fundamentally? What must we retain if we are to retain *ourselves*? (The 3D-printed limb is one thing, but what of the proverbial science-fiction head in a jar?)

With its horizontal arrangement, *Monogram's* "flatbed" nature demands that we consider what constitutes such "undesired differences" (glass eyes, cybernetic

²² Johns and Rauschenberg maintained an intellectual and sexual relationship until 1961. Neither artist was above including references to same-sex anal pleasure in their work.

²³ Graham Bader, "Rauschenberg's Skin," *Grey Room* 27 (2007): 113.

²⁴ Fatima Abbas, et al., "Revival of Light Signaling in the Postmortem Mouse and Human Retina." *Nature* 606, no. 7913 (2022): 351–57.

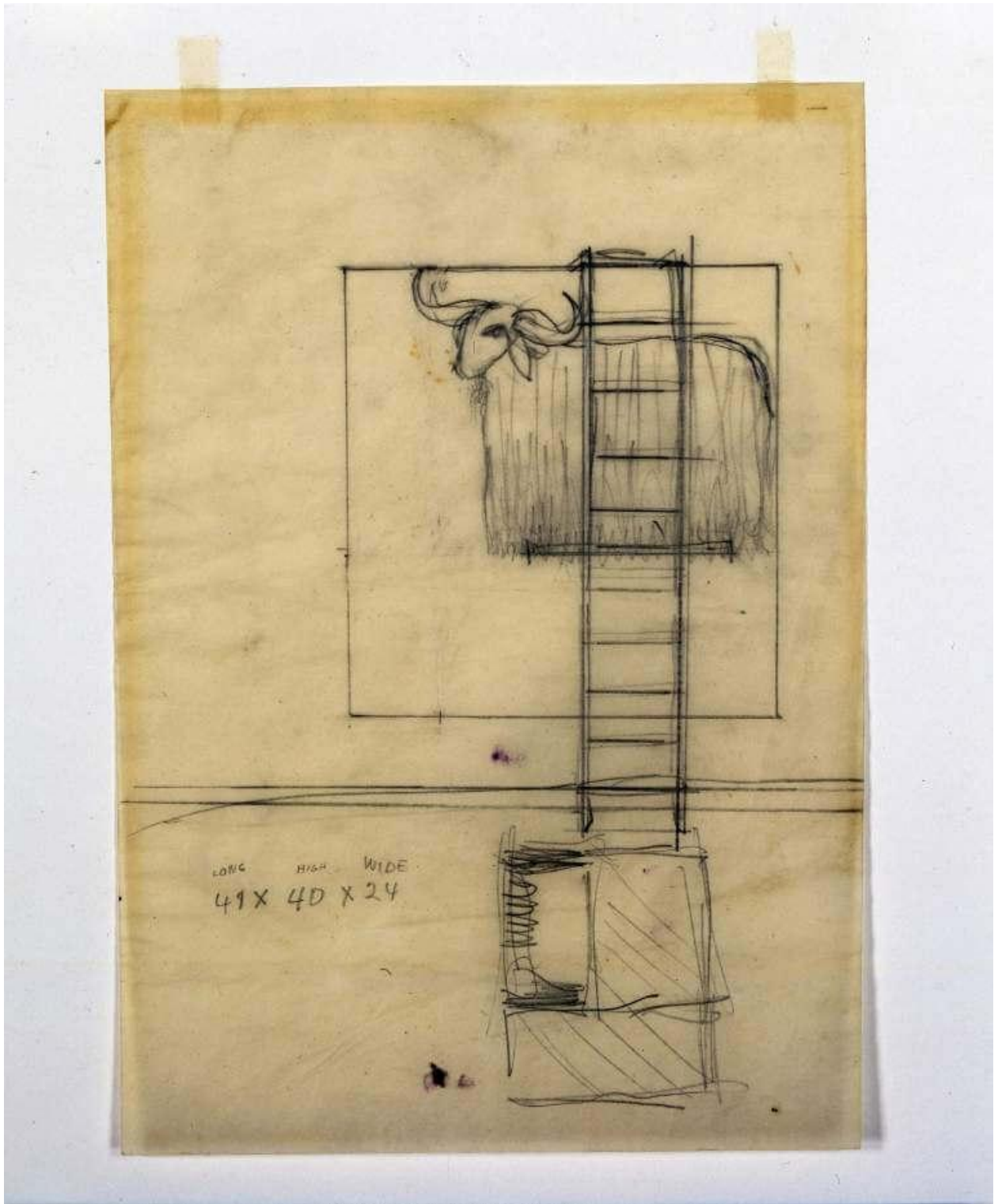


Figure 4: Robert Rauschenberg, preliminary sketch for Monogram, ca. 1955. Collection of Jasper Johns. Courtesy of Rauschenberg Foundation.

limbs, artificial voice boxes. Furthermore, it jostles the assumed viewing positionalities of the bodies that interact with it. Steinberg speaks to the “normal erect posture” of most paintings from at least as early as the Renaissance. Hung on the wall, both the traditional easel painting and Pollock’s “all-over” drip paintings are best viewed in a fully upright standing position that allows us to come “face to face” with the image—or so Steinberg asserts.²⁵ This is not so for the stuffed goat of *Monogram*, who, situated well below our standing line of sight, “placidly bears witness to the transformation of the visual surface into—as Rauschenberg called it—‘pasture.’”²⁶

Yet a preliminary sketch given to Jasper Johns (fig. 4) reveals that Rauschenberg once considered arranging the Combine vertically. In Rauschenberg’s drawing, the goat projects sidelong from a rectangular vertical surface. The placement of the ladder suggests the goat might have hovered well above our standing line of sight, rather than below it. If Rauschenberg ever actually arranged *Monogram* this way, however, there is no further documentation of the experiment. Although the careful viewer can spot the goat taking up an array of positions in photographs of Rauschenberg’s studio, this drawing (now held in the Johns collection) is the only remnant of this compositional possibility. What this tells us is that *Monogram*’s horizontality is no accident. Rauschenberg’s goat did not stumble onto its pasture by chance. *Monogram*’s arrangement—one knowingly chosen by the artist in full awareness of the alternatives—could easily have assumed the usual able-bodied, standing viewer. Indeed, it could have gone further still, denying the satisfaction of the goat’s gaze to any viewer incapable of physically climbing. Pointedly, though, it does not. Instead, there is nothing to say that the work might not best be viewed in a sitting position. Indeed, just as *Monogram* can roll around on its wheeled base, so too might a wheelchair user roll around to view the sculpture, the viewer’s gaze comfortably meeting the goat’s. Perhaps the viewer could even lie prostrate, stretched out on the floor, had Rauschenberg retained an interest in looking up at the goat from below.

In bringing all of this to a point, we find ourselves again in the territory of sitpoint theory. When we consider that it was Jasper Johns who suggested Rauschenberg roll *Monogram*’s goat “out to pasture” (and that Rauschenberg used this language), we may be tempted by the phrase’s all-too-ready connotations with the treatment of the very old and the no longer useful. Sitpoint theory, however, would ask that we pause and consider whether the goat on its placid pasture might not only retain dignity and value, but instead (and more radically) interrogate understandings of production, value, and usefulness from the point of view of previously unseen/unheard, cast-off, or ignored subjects. The Combines, Steinberg wrote, “kept referring back to

²⁵ Steinberg, “Reflections on the State of Criticism,” 27.

²⁶ Rosalind E. Krauss, *Perpetual Inventory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 94.

the horizontals on which we walk and sit, work and sleep."²⁷ In doing so, they rejected assumptions about the body's ability and the kinds of positions required for viewing subjectivity. Further, sitpoint theory reminds us of the preliminary sketch of *Monogram*, which evidences Rauschenberg's decision not to ask the viewer to stand at all. *Monogram* itself is an invitation to sit alongside of and with it.

The Gold Standard (Of American Individualism)

A decade before Rauschenberg's work on *Monogram*, the United States—faced with a stream of returning WWII veterans, pant legs knotted up at the knee and shirt sleeves dangling uselessly—needed something like sitpoint theory perhaps more than ever. The country was filled with thousands of the newly disabled, their scars mental-emotional as much as physical (something that would not change but only intensify with the Korean and Vietnam Wars). Yet, when WPA photographer Walker Evans (1903 – 1975) was tasked with assembling a series of portraits of the American labor force for the November 1946 issue of *Fortune Magazine*, there was no mention of this new reality.²⁸ Rather, the caption running alongside the photographs reflects a growing dedication to the (abled-enough-to-work) individual as necessary to capitalist production:

The American worker, as he passes here, generally unaware of Walker Evans' camera, is a decidedly various fellow. His blood flows from many sources. His features tend now toward the peasant and now toward the patrician... It is this variety, perhaps, that makes him, in the mass, the most resourceful and versatile *body of labor* in the world... Most of the men on these pages would seem to have a solid degree of self-possession. By the grace of providence and the efforts of millions, including themselves, they are citizens of a victorious and powerful nation, and they appear to have preserved a sense of themselves as *individuals* (emphasis mine).²⁹

According to this spread in *Fortune Magazine*, to be American was to be physically virile, capable of caring for oneself (that is, individualistic) without the help of community, family, or charity. In other words: *to be American was to be able-minded and able-bodied*, while to be anything else was by implication suspicious, unpatriotic,

²⁷ Steinberg, "Reflections on the State of Criticism," 29.

²⁸ See various portraits, now at held by the Walker Evans Archives at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, here: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/281889>

²⁹ Quoted from David Serlin, "The Other Arms Race," in *The Disability Studies Reader* (second edition), ed. Lennard J. Davis (New York: Routledge Publishing, 2006), 49.



Figure 5: Robert Rauschenberg, *Gold Standard* (created during the 1964 performance *20 Questions to Bob Rauschenberg*), 1964, mixed media, 84 ¼ x 142 x 51 ¼ inches. The Glenstone Foundation. Courtesy of Rauschenberg Foundation.

and anti-American (even Communist).³⁰ Indeed, scholar of disability and deafness Lennard J. Davis firmly links the establishment of the norm with the rise of modern capitalism under industrialization and the solidification of the working body as laborer and producer.³¹ Put simply: the norm as a psychophysical ideal grew out of this connection between expected bodily production and industry that enabled reliable supply and demand in an economy now dedicated to the profitability of war.

It should come as no surprise that some of the first statisticians—men practicing what would essentially become the *science of the norm*—were prominent industrialists.³² What this mathematical-scientific project introduced was *the ideal's equation with the average* through which arrangements of power make the unremarkable the desirable. (Plastic surgeons straighten noses; they don't bend them.

³⁰ Even Evans' "body of labor" relegated these working men to self-contained rectangles that emphasized their self-determination and reliance, rather than depicting them on the job, where they would have looked more like a collective labor force.

³¹ Lennard J. Davis, "Constructing Normalcy: The Bell Curve, the Novel, and the Invention of the Disabled Body in the Nineteenth Century," in *The Disability Studies Reader (second edition)*, ed. Lennard J. Davis (New York: Routledge Publishing, 2006), 3.

³² *Ibid.*, 4.

Speech therapists teach patients how to speak without a lisp; they don't introduce one.) Using this equation—especially with the victory (and losses) of the Second World War still fresh and now on the eve of a new “Cold” War—wary Americans heard in any call for collectivity a dog-whistle for Communist sympathizers.³³ It was in this climate of suspicion that Americanness itself came to be marked through and on the (individual) masculine body. This was especially true of the fragmented veteran body, which haunted newspaper racks and television broadcasts. During the continuous for-profit reproduction of war that characterized the 1960s and 1970s, that body was taken up as a visual and rhetorical symbol for resilience and perseverance.

One of Rauschenberg's last Combines troubles this marking, though the viewer who finds this reading counterintuitive upon their first encounter with *Gold Standard* can easily be forgiven. Completed as a part of the 1964 performance *Twenty Questions to Bob Rauschenberg*, the Combine *Gold Standard* (fig. 5) dates to nearly two decades after Evans' photographic project. The year 1964, however, sits comfortably in the middle of the twenty years during which the Vietnam War dragged on. *Gold Standard* is a Combine that explicitly evokes physical labor—particularly physically hardy construction work, with its “men-at-work” color (the result of Rauschenberg's use of real industrial paint) and inclusion of a road barrier. It is, perhaps most damningly, the product of Rauschenberg's own physical labor, which was and is, in its performance, itself part of the work.³⁴

Yet to see in *Gold Standard* an uncritical celebration of American workingman virility is to ignore the true nature of the garish yellow industrial paint, whose purpose is to suggest a need for caution, reflecting the caution tape found at crime scenes and construction sites, as well as the materiality of the paint itself. After all, what is the purpose of *Gold Standard's* road barrier if there is no calamity lurking beyond the bend? The work's title is relevant here, asking whether it is the gold standard itself that represents the danger, and correspondingly, if our bodies and minds might be what we should approach with caution (and care)?³⁵ In other words: might *Gold Standard* function as an admonition of the standardization of expectation for performance across the spectrum of bodies and minds? Similarly, if not as an instruction to stop, then at least to *slow* and take stock of the wear and tear our mind-bodies experience in adhering to such standards?

Considered against the backdrop of such questions, *Gold Standard* becomes a proponent of/argument for sitpoint theory. After all, *Gold Standard*

³³ The equation I am speaking of here is one that seeks to reproduce the unmarked through eugenics and anti-Black racism as the ultimate seat of privilege.

³⁴ Here, work is *part of* the work.

³⁵ What I mean here when I speak of “gold” is the capitalistic need to always acquire more—more wealth, more things, simply *more*.

urges us to take seriously the danger suggested by its proceed-with-caution yellow. This danger, the potential for physical and mental violence, is real in the corporeal sense; throughout the composition of *Gold Standard*, “saws...replaced scissors as the artist’s tool of choice,” and the folding-screen format suggests an area cordoned off, perhaps for purposes of safety.³⁶ Putting it up is indeed an architectural move. Doing so changes the room it inhabits and engages with concepts of boundary-making, of property and ownership if we return to the title (remembering it is a *gold* standard rather than a *yellow* one), the financial means property ownership requires and the ways in which the body’s labor *becomes* that means. The necktie spray painted in gold and then knotted around the traffic blockade indicates that perhaps even the newly synthesized figure of the middle management office worker is not outside this mind-body exchange.

Because what can be known can be put to ideological and fiscal use, cataloging and serializing mind-bodies—especially those considered marked in some way, whether that be by race, (dis)ability, or gender—carries great weight. The lived, real-world implications of what disability scholar Sharon Snyder has dubbed an “insatiable cultural fascination” with the disabled body are not elusive.³⁷ One need only turn to arrangements like Britain’s Disability Living Allowance and the United States’ Supplemental Security Income to recognize that the disabled are not allowed anonymity. Rather than trusting the disabled mind-body’s account of its own experience, abilities, and ailments, the machine that operates via such technologies places the disabled at the mercy of healthcare providers with whom they share in a deeply unbalanced power dynamic. In the interest of smoking out the malingerer, those applying for such programs are required to disclose the “most minute experiences of pain, disruptions of menstrual cycle, lapses of fatigue, and difficulty in operating household appliances” in what Shelley Tremain calls a “performance of textual confession.”³⁸ Here, the public/private divide breaks—or is torn down entirely—with the disabled being given two choices: aid (or at least the chance of it) or privacy (or at least the chance of it). One cannot have both and often receives neither.

For those who are capable of it, as in the case of those with invisible disabilities or those outfitted with real-looking prosthetic limbs/glass eyes/etc., the opportunity of “passing” as able-bodied and able-minded, of assimilating (at least temporarily) into an

³⁶ Frances Colpitt, “Compound Pleasures [Robert Rauschenberg],” *Art in America* (December 2006): 105.

³⁷ Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell, “Narrative Prosthesis and the Materiality of Metaphor,” in *The Disability Studies Reader (second edition)*, ed. Lennard J. Davis (New York: Routledge Publishing, 2006), 213.

³⁸ Shelley Tremain, “On the Government of Disability: Foucault, Power, and the Subject of Impairment,” in *The Disability Studies Reader (second edition)*, ed. Lennard J. Davis (New York: Routledge Publishing, 2006), 193.

abled homogeneity, relies on the constant interplay of (hyper) visibility and (total) invisibility. It is, says museology expert Marquard Smith, like a particularly high-stakes game of hide-and-seek—one there is no hope of winning.³⁹ The ruse cannot be upheld forever. Like the Japanese folding screen of Rauschenberg's *Gold Standard*—which comes in a form meant for convenient transport, being easily folded and packed away, or for being set up across the width of a room, concealing half of the space—"passing" temporarily obscures what lies behind the prosthetic or pretended and temporary ability. But as soon as the screen is accordioned back in on itself, the jig is up. (Prosthetic limbs are removed at night for comfort; medications wear off and pain returns, etc.)

"Screen" is a generous and variable word. It invites instances of meaning-twisting and wordplay. When subject to processes of numbering, categorization, medical testing, and surveillance, one is "screened," yet one might also erect a "screen" to shield themselves from such prying eyes and ears. In its ambiguity, then, the screen becomes a tool of ambivalence. This is apparent in the folding screen Rauschenberg has appropriated for his uses in *Gold Standard*; a bare-faced electric bulb affixed to the top of the assemblage throws its light on whatever lies beyond the screen, promising there is always more to see, while the box on the leftmost panel reads "Soni-Tape Type-7." A product of Sony (then Sony Tape), today the most cash-rich company in Japan, Soni-Tape reel-to-reel recording devices began to be used in archival work three years after Evans' project, in 1949. The inclusion of this box, when taken in with the clocks (both literal-physical and diagrammatic) that share the panel it occupies, suggests the temporal and temporary nature of surveillance evasion.

It is in this refusal of easy categorization—in refusing to be known or understood—that the Combines as a body of work upset the role of surveillance as cataloguer and sense-maker. The screen in *Gold Standard* has a former life: its purpose was once to offer privacy, respite from the public gaze. Yet it has failed, and violently so, reborn out of dismemberment into the Frankenstein-like construction of elements that become, when drawn into the network of the composition, ridiculous in their lack of use. The ceramic dog tilting forward on a bicycle seat, the lead an umbilical cord connecting it to the center panel, is, for example, a reproduction of a campaign originally created for RCA (Radio Corporation of America) advertising Victor Records.⁴⁰ The recognizably curious tilt of the dog's head once indicated his interest in the voice

³⁹ Marquard Smith, "The Vulnerable Articulate: James Gillingham, Aimee Mullins, and Matthew Barney," in *The Disability Studies Reader (second edition)*, ed. Lennard J. Davis (New York: Routledge Publishing, 2006), 312.

⁴⁰ The Victor Talking Machine Company was purchased by the Radio Corporation of America in 1929; this same dog later would later inspire the official mascot of the Target corporation, the English bull terrier "Bullseye."

of his master as it emanated from a gramophone. He was an attentive and obedient dog, a *good dog*. But, with the gramophone embodying his master's voice conspicuously absent, the tilt of the dog's head fails to read as inquisitive. Eyes cast to the ground, he has been tied up outside and left to wait. If he no longer pulls at the leash, it is because he recognizes that this mode of resistance fails to produce results. His usefulness has been stymied by his refusal not only to hear, but to follow, orders. The dog may not be deaf, but neither is he *listening*—and to his master, the two are equally frustrating.

Conclusion, Or: What Works

The disabled mind-body's use value is similarly stymied. Not resilient or efficient—and, most notably, not independent or independently productive—it retains the marks of its hurts. Having been scarred and warped, disabled mind-bodies need assistance more than they are ready and waiting to follow orders. Indeed, there *are* orders in *Gold Standard* (for construction, no less) found on the instruction manual that has been affixed to the same panel where we encounter the clocks and Soni-Tape box. In this way, like the stubborn ceramic dog who refuses to listen, or the goat put out to pasture, these disabled mind-bodies refute not only productivity but notions of traditional American masculinity. They whisper: what if purposeful activity did *not* equal work? What would a world look like in which rest was an equally valuable in(activity)? How would it change how we do—or *don't do*—things? Would efficiency still rule the day? If not through directly asking these questions, then by at least implying them, *Gold Standard* exposes the hierarchy that holds ideas like work, activity, and efficiency above those like rest, moderation, and care. To turn this hierarchy on its head is precisely the promise sitpoint theory presents.

From all of this, the Combines reveal themselves as fragmentary, piecemeal constructions of abject materials. If disability is, as bioethicist Rosemarie Garland-Thomson asserts, "the unorthodox made flesh, refusing to be normalized, neutralized, or homogenized," then this description might be as easily read alongside Rauschenberg's early assemblage work.⁴¹ When efficiency is a pipe dream and resilience refuses to pay off in a lessening of pain, what it means to function in the world is radically transformed. Nothing "works"—yet anything might "work." A yardstick becomes a tool for the wheelchair-user who needs to retrieve something from a high shelf. The bed-bound person keeps floss on their nightstand because they cannot brush when their caretaker is not there to assist them to the bathroom. An

⁴¹ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Re-shaping, Re-thinking, Re-Defining: Feminist Disability Studies* (Washington, DC: Center for Woman Policy Studies, 2001), 263.

ostomy bag that collects the body's waste can be clipped to a belt loop. It is not pretty. It is often inefficient, unsustainable, and fragmentary—all words applicable to both *Monogram* and *Gold Standard*—but perhaps this is the kind of functioning most fit for our surveilled, transitory world. If we must throw open the doors to—and sit among—the *embarrassingly private*, then so be it.⁴²

⁴² This seems fitting, considering that Rauschenberg liked doors quite a lot, including them in some of his most well-known Combines, such as *Pink Door* (1954).

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