"Rauschenberg was the man who in this century invented the most since Picasso," Jasper Johns told the *Village Voice* about his longtime friend and seven-year lover Robert Rauschenberg.\(^1\) This incredibly profound compliment is evidence of the deep respect Johns had for Rauschenberg and his work, but the respect was definitely mutual. Johns and Rauschenberg, who have been recognized at different times as being associated with Pop Art, with Neo-Dada, or Abstract Expressionism; the consensus remains, however, that both together are “jointly responsible...for a historic shift in the ambitions of art.”\(^2\) Some art historians would go as far as to say that, although “artistic movements generally involve more than two artists, theirs was confined to them alone.”\(^3\) The “historic shift” they created had everything to do with Johns and Rauschenberg’s unique relationship, which was indisputably influenced by their connection to Abstract Expressionism and the tension that connection generated. This paper will explore their relationship, from the year they met in New York, following their exploration of Abstract Expressionist ideas, their joint-development of new ideas, the importance of homosexuality in their art, and the culmination of all of this into some of the most important art American history has seen.

Jasper Johns (American, born 1930) and Robert Rauschenberg (American 1925-2008), met in the winter of 1953 while both artists were living in New York. Johns was visiting Black Mountain College, a progressive college in North Carolina that saw art as central to a liberal arts education, where he was introduced to Robert Rauschenberg through a mutual friend, Suzi Gablik. They met again later on at an artists party, where they “struck up a friendship.”\(^4\) Johns had moved

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\(^1\) Jerry Saltz, "Our Picasso?" *Village Voice*, 3 January 2006. 


\(^4\) Katz in Chadwick, 191-2.
to New York in 1949 in order to attend commercial art school. He was drafted into the military in 1950 and returned to New York in 1952. During the time that he met Rauschenberg, Johns had been working at Marboro bookstore and dabbling in painting, but he was unsure whether or not he wanted to become an artist. By 1953, Rauschenberg was already somewhat established as an artist. As a member of the Abstract Expressionists’ circle, he had already shown in a few shows on invitation of the Abstract Expressionists and individually in prestigious avant-garde galleries as well. He saw immense potential in Johns’ artwork and eventually convinced him to quit his job at the bookstore to pursue his art more seriously. They worked together designing window displays for department stores for extra cash and, after some vigorous encouragement by Rauschenberg, Johns moved into the same building in 1954. It was in this building that Leo Castelli (Rauschenberg’s dealer) would discover Johns’ work and throw Johns into the spotlight.

Perhaps the most prevalent factor in making the relationship between Johns and Rauschenberg so influential was the particular tension that surrounded male-male relationships of the time, especially within the Abstract Expressionist circle. In her essay, "Finishing School: John Cage and the Abstract Expressionist Ego," Caroline Jones sums up the Abstract Expressionist sentiment quintessentially:

Briefly put, the subjectivity of the New York school abstract expressionist was constructed in the American culture of the late 1940s and early 1950s as that of an isolated, autochthonic, angst-ridden male genius, alternating between bouts of melancholic depression and volcanic creativity.

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6 Katz in Chadwick, 191.
7 Johnston, 129.
For both men, the nature of their sexuality acted as a unique obstacle to their art. For Rauschenberg, the Abstract Expressionist circle provided an environment that was hostile to the idea of homosexuality. In a world where art was already not seen as the epitome of masculinity, many of the Abstract Expressionists felt that their masculinity was in particular need of defending. The idea of homosexuality was positively unwelcome. In addition, the promotion of individual truth and authenticity that was held so valuable among the Abstract Expressionists acted as a challenge to confront the artist’s inner self and present it on the canvas. However, “the intense male-bonding of this almost exclusively masculine art world, coupled with its generalized anxiety over the very act of art-making, created an atmosphere in which the merest suggestion of homosexuality was opposed.”

Johns felt the pressure of this homophobic environment as well. At the time he met Rauschenberg, Johns had been living with a good friend of burgeoning New York artists and faithful patron of both Rauschenberg and Johns, Rachel Rosenthal. Much the more reserved, introverted individual, Johns had more trouble coming to terms with his sexuality than Rauschenberg. According to Rosenthal, at an artists party both attended, Johns “‘kind of threw himself on [her],’” who would act as a “‘kind of Xenia role to Johns during Rauschenberg’s courtship of him.’” Rosenthal’s idea was that he was “‘trying to avoid a relationship with Bob, not because he wasn’t attracted to Bob, but because of the stigma, and the fact that in those days it was a real problem.’” This tension, coupled with Rauschenberg and Johns’ mutual awareness of the hostility, actually threw them together more profoundly. It isolated them from a community that would not have accepted their “individual truths,” and forced them to look for new ways of thinking.

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10 Katz in Chadwick, 193.
11 Johnston, 128.
12 Johnston, 128.
about art. Johns remarked, “‘Our world was very limited. I think we were very dependent on one another. There was that business of triggering energies, other people fed into that, but it was basically a two way operation.’”13 Together they started a new life, a separate circle in which, as Rauschenberg put it, “‘Jasper and I used to start each day by [moving] out from Abstract Expressionism.’”14

The methods in which both artists moved out from Abstract Expressionism were deeply entwined. Rauschenberg’s ideas about the role of the artist were obvious. “‘I don’t want my personality to come out through the pieces,’” he said. “‘That’s why I keep the TV on all the time….And I keep the windows open. I want my paintings to be reflections of life,’” whereas Johns had said, “‘In my early work I tried to hide my personality, my psychological state, my emotions. This was partly to do with feelings about painting at the time.’”15

These “feelings” had everything to do with the unique situation these two artists had found themselves in. Much of Rauschenberg’s earlier work reflected the painterly drips and gestural strokes of the Abstract Expressionists’ individualism. However, in the early 1950s, he began to employ media that showed “a restless, reactive, inventive, and autonomous personality.”16 He began to explore the possibility that art was not always about the individual feelings of the painter, but about what the viewer might bring to the piece. His series

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13 Katz in Chadwick, 200.
14 Ibid., 197.
15 Johnston, 136.
16 Johnston., 134.
White Paintings (1951) [Figure 1], which consisted of seven white canvases painted flat white (no gestural strokes, no texture), was indicative of these feelings of silence of the artist, a reaction to the Abstract Expressionist movement, and the beginning of the idea he would explore most with Jasper Johns through the use of culturally familiar imagery in order to involve the viewer.

Johns’ work explored this idea of silence as well. Beginning with his solemn, “silent” works such as Target with Plaster Casts (1955) [Figure 2], Johns presents work that is laboriously manifested in encaustic, a temperamental mix of pigment suspended in beeswax. The composition consists of fragmented pieces of a plaster-cast male body enclosed in compartments above an encaustic target. Johns describes the painting in a sketchbook as “an object that tells of the loss, destructions, disappearance of objects. Does not speak of itself. Tells of others.”

This passage sums up the essence of the work perfectly. Target is in opposition to the idea of personal revelation through painting, and in the same spirit as Rauschenberg’s White Paintings. Both works, essentially, are about silence.

On top of this reaction to the soul-bearing individualism of Abstract Expressionism, both Rauschenberg and Johns move into a humorous parody of Abstract Expressionist style. Together they explored methods of creating seemingly original, expressionist works in styles that make the

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perceived sincerity practically impossible. The exploration of this idea is evident in

Rauschenberg’s *Factum I and Factum II* (1957) [Figure 3], and Johns’ *False Start* (1959) [Figure 4]. In Rauschenberg’s *Factum I* and *Factum II* (1957), this fabricated sincerity is executed in the duplication of strokes and gestures, making their spontaneity obviously impossible. The same sort of impossible sincerity is evident in Johns’ *False Start* (1959), an “Abstract Expressionist color field labeled with unmatched color names.”

The field itself is seemingly expressionist and spur-of-the-moment, but the carefully stenciled words, discordant to their respective colors, mock “emotional authenticity,” and create “an Abstract Expressionist picture that is manifestly untrue.”

The almost camp-like humor of this brave confrontation of Abstract Expressionism is highly Rauschenberg, the older artist being the more outgoing, humorous individual. Rauschenberg and Johns, having “moved out of Abstract Expressionism” together, began their departure with a rejection of the representation of the artist’s

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19 Katz in Chadwick, 204.
20 Ibid.
“inner truth” and continued it with a good-natured mockery of content and parody of style.

The two not only parodied Abstract Expressionism aesthetically, but they also used it as a means to explore the concept of homosexuality. This topic, rendered in a mockery of Abstract Expressionist style as well, was an example of how Johns and Rauschenberg (according to Rauschenberg), “‘gave each other permission,’” both artistically as well as sexually. Rauschenberg’s *Bed* (1955) [Figure 5] has been connected with sexuality in that it is a reconfiguration of the Abstract Expressionist linking of aesthetics and sexual politics. Reviews of *Bed* “claimed that the piece resembled nothing so much as the sight of a rape, or maybe even a murder.”

Johns’ *Painting with Two Balls* (1960) [Figure 6], is a little more overt in its assertion of homoeroticism. The “two balls” of the title refer to actual wooden balls inserted into the structure of the piece and recall the essence of maleness. The piece is painted in Abstract Expressionist gestures, as if directly confronting the Abstract Expressionist hostility toward homosexuality.

Johns’ works of this time are much more vocal than his earlier work. We begin to see him adopt more “Rauschenberg ways of doing things” as their relationship

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21 Katz in Chadwick, 205.  
22 Ibid., 203.
progresses.\textsuperscript{23} With its purposefully weak attempts at mimicking Abstract Expressionist brush-strokes as well as its desecration of the integrity of the field (the title is scrawled across the front of the work), \textit{Painting with Two Balls} is what John Loughery in the \textit{Hudson Review} calls “good old-fashioned sass.”\textsuperscript{24}

Arguably the most influential works of Rauschenberg and Johns, however, were the works that ultimately influenced Pop Art through the use of culturally familiar media. These works (Rauschenberg’s Combines, specifically \textit{Untitled} (1955) [Figure 7] and Johns \textit{Flag} (1954-55) [Figure 8]) are truly the culmination of the artists’ shared ideas about the silence of the artist, the reactions to Abstract Expressionism, and the handling of political sexualized imagery.

Rauschenberg’s Combines are perhaps some of his best-known works, and the time in which he was making them correlates to the time he was in a relationship with Johns. They were ultimately about what the viewer can bring to the piece, and Rauschenberg dedicated his first combine to Johns, perhaps as “a sign of his determining role in its development.”\textsuperscript{25} One Combine in particular, \textit{Untitled} (1955) is unmistakably soaked in Johns. It not only contains a photograph of Johns that Rauschenberg referred to as “gorgeous,” but also torn up letters from Johns, as well as a small drawing of an American flag – an homage to Johns’ art.\textsuperscript{26}

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\textsuperscript{25} Katz in Chadwick, 199.

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 201.
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the somewhat intimate content of the piece, it also encompasses the idea of using culturally familiar objects such as post-cards, printed-paper (which would have been available to any and everyone), as well as text. Rauschenberg’s combines “are an accurate reflection of the historical situation of a society everywhere totalized by the forces of commodification and mass media.”²⁷ This appeal to the role of the viewer is mirrored in Johns’ Flag (1955), done the same year. The subject of the painting seems to be the American flag, however, the true subject is the neutrality of the object. A flag was “nobody’s preference; not even his own.”²⁸ The fact that the subject is familiar makes the viewer an active participant in the artwork – a very Johns-Rauschenberg concept. In addition, \textit{Flag} is painted over scraps of newspaper and other pieces of print, so that one can almost read them. Yet another example of familiarized objects.

Rauschenberg and Johns’ mutual influence on each other is undeniably apparent in the work they produced during the time they were together, however, this influence continued long after they split up in 1961. The break-up devastated both artists. It was so painful, in fact, that the artists severed all contact for some time. Johns returned to his native South Carolina and retracted into the

“highly coded and idiosyncratic imagery” of his earlier work.\textsuperscript{29} He created images that spoke of the break-up, including \textit{In Memory of My Feelings – Frank O’Hara} (1961) [Figure 9], in which he echoes earlier work about silence and concealment by painting an envelope shut.\textsuperscript{30} The painting even aesthetically suggests the work he did during his relationship with Rauschenberg; its shape quite resembles a flag.

Rauschenberg, on his part, created a combine entitled \textit{Slow or South Carolina Fall} (1961) [Figure 10], the title, of course, alluding to Johns’ home state to which he had returned. Besides creating cathartic works, however, both artists began to explore each other’s favorite elements, as if the distance allowed them to toy with each other’s ideas and styles. Rauschenberg left his characteristic style of using found objects and elaborate assemblage to explore the two dimensional medium of silkscreen while Johns began to create larger, more eclectic works consisting of painting as well as collage and assemblage with found objects.\textsuperscript{31}

It is impossible to deny the deep connection Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg had together and the mutual influence they had on each other. They not only admired each other as fellow artists, but also lovingly as human beings. Rauschenberg was once said, “I have photos of

\textsuperscript{30} Frank O’Hara was the author of a poem called “In Memory of My Feelings,” a poem about gay love.
\textsuperscript{31} Katz in Chadwick, 206.
him that would break your heart. Jasper was soft, beautiful, lean, and poetic. He looked almost ill.”

The tenderness they felt for each other and each other’s work came through in their own work, as well as the ways in which they have spoken of each other. Both artists created within the time they knew each other arguably their best work to date, and the influence of Abstract Expressionism in creating the time of crisis and environment of tension that encouraged their exploration of new ideas is glaringly apparent. As gay artists in the 1950s, Rauschenberg and Johns were extremely fortunate to find in each other lovers, mentors, fellow artists with which to share ideas, and most importantly, “some semblance of the kind of community that the Abstract Expressionists took for granted.”

Indeed, Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns’ relationship was unique and influential, not only on each other, but on the art world as a whole.

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32 Johnston, 128.
33 Katz in Chadwick, 196.
Bibliography


