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Canyon: Robert Rauschenberg's Declaration of Independence

Jonathan Frederick Walz

In 1954, artist Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008) began a new body of work: hybrid painting-sculptures he called "Combines." Several of these works, like [Bed](#) (1955; Museum of Modern Art, New York) and [Monogram](#) (1955–59; Moderna Museet, Stockholm), have received more commentary than others, frequently appearing in art history textbooks or in large-scale retrospective exhibitions.¹ *Canyon* (fig. 1) has also enjoyed its fair share of attention, due, in part, to the conspicuous placement of a taxidermized (juvenile) American bald eagle at the bottom center of the composition.²

The bird's status as a symbol of authority and power predated the United States but evolved in tandem with the country's development. "The new nation appropriated many existing symbolic forms," art historian Amy Liebster avers, "but none were to become as pervasive as the eagle."³ By the time of Rauschenberg's intervention—more than 175 years after the official adoption of the [Great Seal of the United States](#), with its conspicuous bald eagle—the bird's close association with US hegemony was well ensconced, appearing ubiquitously on [postage stamps](#), household items, military uniforms, and government buildings.

Rauschenberg's Combines elicited strong reactions from art critics, tastemakers, and the public when they first appeared. Critiques included that the works were too ugly, too random, too materialist, too decorative, and too queer to be taken seriously. *Canyon* added insult to injury in its ostensibly blatant defacement of an actual bald eagle.⁴ This subversive act recapitulated Rauschenberg's disregard for any distinction between art and life. "A pair of socks," the artist declared, "is no less suitable to make a painting with than wood, nails, turpentine, oil, and fabric."⁵ At a time when the House Un-American Activities Committee remained active and conformity was considered a virtue (or survival strategy),

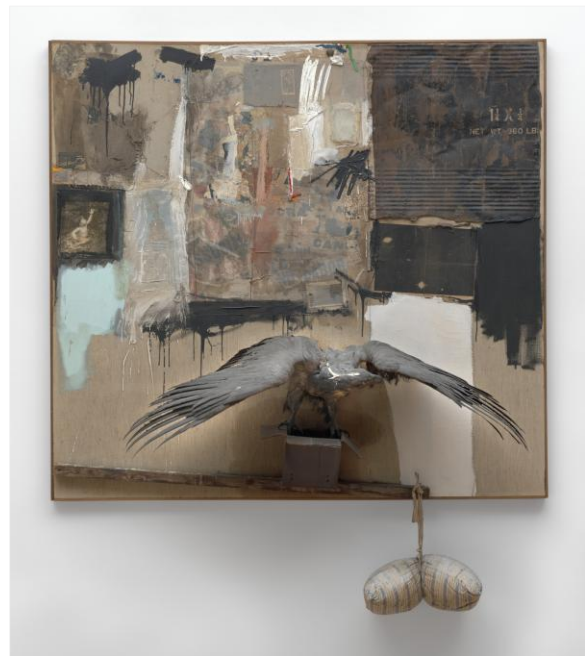


Fig. 1. Robert Rauschenberg, *Canyon*, 1959. Oil, pencil, paper, metal, photograph, fabric, wood, canvas, buttons, mirror, taxidermized eagle, cardboard, pillow, paint tube, and other materials, 81 3/4 x 70 x 24 in. Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of the family of Ileana Sonnabend

Rauschenberg's highly charged gesture demonstrated an oedipal willingness to puncture inflated master narratives and national symbols.⁶ In effect, smearing paint on an American bald eagle was tantamount to challenging the authority of the US government (and its minion, Abstract Expressionism). Surely Rauschenberg knew that this inclusion would provoke comment: only the year before, Jasper Johns, his partner at the time, had debuted his [American flag paintings at the Leo Castelli Gallery](#); assessments ranged from "unoriginal" to "unpatriotic."

To function, symbols such as flags require a one-to-one semantic relationship, universal acceptance, and long-term reinscription. Linguist Ferdinand de Saussure theorizes that languages and symbols only work when "all the individuals linguistically linked [socially]" agree to reproduce "the same signs linked to the same concepts."⁷ Rauschenberg's inclusion and manipulation of the taxidermized eagle points to the arbitrary nature of symbols: that "bald eagle" equates to the "United States" is arbitrary; "bald eagle" could just as well signify "zoo" or "humility," as long as we all agree.⁸ *Canyon's* title underscores this communication "gap" between signifier and signified, object and viewer.⁹

Rauschenberg's refusal to agree that the bald eagle only and always means the United States or a handful of patriotically inflected aspirational values attempted to destabilize and separate the symbol from its usual imputed meanings. If the artist selected the taxidermy specimen with a Duchampian aesthetic indifference, then it possesses the same value as the Combine's other components; it is equivalent to a suspended pillow or a deconstructed dress shirt or a flattened metal barrel, collapsing received notions of meaning. Indeed, things—like a cardboard box or a flattened paint tube or a stuffed bird—have no inherent meaning; everything is, in fact, meaningless. Rauschenberg's assemblage of free-floating signifiers, including an American bald eagle liberated from its entrenched nationalistic connotations, opened up room for new propositions to emerge and new meanings to coalesce. Ultimately, these objects are *not* meaningless, but their meaning is, in actuality, contingent, contextual, and created in community. A bald eagle at the top of a [Tlingit totem pole](#) means something much different than a bald eagle in an [architectural tondo](#) designed by John Singer Sargent or in Andy Warhol's [Endangered Species](#) portfolio of prints.

The values that Euro-Americans settlers have traditionally attributed to the bald eagle include strength, dominion, independence, and freedom. In *Canyon*, Rauschenberg called all these connotations into question. In the "material and visual culture turn" of the late twentieth century, the field of American art has already lived into Rauschenberg's questioning of what counts as "art" and leaned into how "high" and "low" aspects of human output do not exist in separate realms but are, in fact, in constant dialogue.

So, what else can we as curators and art historians struggling with how to redefine the field of American art learn from the prominent national symbol that *Canyon* features? If nothing else, Rauschenberg's Combines make plain that received notions, established customs, and time-honored expectations are legitimate sites of interrogation; just because "we've always done it that way" does not mean we have to keep doing it that way.¹⁰ In this sense, Rauschenberg's bald eagle actually *does* stand for freedom—but in more ways than the circumscribed nationalistic connotations that the artist had inherited. Rauschenberg's revolutionary act empowers us to reimagine arbitrary, culturally constructed symbols, borders, silos, and definitions; to embrace ugliness, messiness, and complexity as well as

beauty and order; and to create space for new horizons, ideas, voices, and objects of inquiry.

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Notes

¹ For example, H. H. Arnason illustrates both objects in his *History of Modern Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, Photography* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), 512–13.

² *Canyon* became legendary in the art world for embodying a paradox: it was worth millions of dollars while being unable to be monetized because of the 1940 Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act and the 1918 Migratory Bird Treaty Act, which prohibit the trafficking of bald eagles, dead or alive.

³ Amy Liebster, "Eagles after the American Revolution," June 2012, in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–), http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/eagl/hd_eagl.htm.

⁴ The bald eagle, in general, is a symbol of the United States. This particular specimen enjoyed an even closer relationship with the federal government: Rauschenberg retrieved the bird from the trash, but its prior owner was one of the last of President Theodore Roosevelt's Rough Riders, the First US Volunteer Cavalry. Leah Dickerman and Robert Rauschenberg, *Rauschenberg: "Canyon"* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2013), 3.

⁵ Robert Rauschenberg, quoted in D.C. Miller, ed., *Sixteen Americans*, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art) 1959, 58.

⁶ At center left, the Combine also features a postcard of yet another national symbol: the Statue of Liberty.

⁷ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Roy Harris (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 15, <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10788128>.

⁸ An example: "Fox" in Old French was *goupil* (from the Latin *vulpēs*), but during the medieval period—and because "everyone agreed"—the word metamorphosed into *renard*, appropriated from the title character of an immensely popular story cycle, *Le roman de Renart*. Among other texts, see Harano Noboru, "De Renart à renard," in *Qui tant savoit d'engin et d'art*, ed. Claudio Galderisi and Jean Maurice (Poitiers: Centre d'études supérieures de civilisation médiévale, 2006), 151.

⁹ It is interesting to note that several of the Combines possess titles with associations to communication: such as *Interview* (1955; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles), *Rebus* (1955; Museum of Modern Art, New York), and *Broadcast* (1959; Powers Art Center, Ryobi Foundation, Colorado).

¹⁰ Some Native American artists are currently recovering the "whirling log" motif, intervening in an almost century-long association with the Nazi empire. For example, see Sháńdíń Brown and Zach Feuer, "Why Native Artists Are Reclaiming the Whirling Log," *Hyperallergic*, July 17, 2024, <https://hyperallergic.com/933272/why-native-artists-are-reclaiming-the-whirling-log>.