LEO STEINBERG (1920)

I borrow the term from the flatbed printing press—'a horizontal bed on which a horizontal printing surface rests' (Webster). And I propose to use the word to describe the characteristic picture plane of the 1960s—a pictorial surface whose angulation with respect to the human posture is the precondition of its changed content.

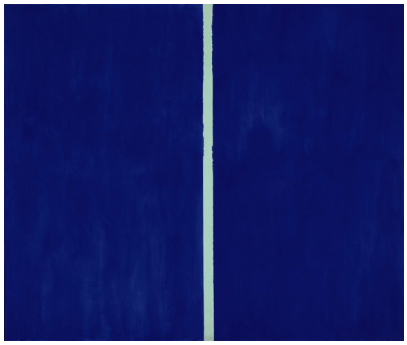
It was suggested earlier that the Old Masters had three ways of conceiving the picture plane. But one axiom was shared by all three interpretations, and it remained operative in the succeeding centuries, even through Cubism and Abstract Expressionism: the conception of the picture as representing a world, some sort of worldspace which reads on the picture plane in correspondence with the erect human posture. The top of the picture corresponds to where we hold our heads aloft; while its lower edge gravitates to where we place our feet. Even in Picasso's Cubist collages, where the Renaissance worldspace concept almost breaks down, there is still a harking back to implied acts of vision, to something that was once actually seen.

A picture that harks back to the natural world evokes sense data which are experienced in the normal erect posture. Therefore the Renaissance picture plane affirms verticality as its essential condition. And the concept of the picture plane as an upright surface survives the most drastic changes of style. Pictures by Rothko, Still, Newman, de Kooning, and Kline are still addressed to us head to foot—as are those of Matisse and Miró. They are revelations to which we relate visually as from the top of a columnar body; and this applies no less to Pollock's drip paintings and the poured and *Unfurls* of Morris Louis. Pollock indeed poured and dripped his pigment upon canvases laid on the ground, but this was an expedient. After the first color skeins had gone down, he would tack the canvas on to a wall—to get acquainted with it, he used to say; to see where it wanted to go. He lived with the painting in its uprighted state, as with a world confronting his human posture. It is in this sense I think, that the Abstract Expressionists were still nature painters. Pollock's drip paintings cannot escape being read as thickets; Louis' Veils acknowledge the same gravitational force to which our being in nature is subject.

But something happened in painting around 1950—most conspicuously (at least within my experience) in the work of Robert Rauschenberg and Dubuffet. We can still hang their pictures—just as we tack up maps and architectural plans, or nail a horseshoe to the wall for good luck. Yet these pictures no longer simulate vertical fields, but opaque flatbed horizontals. They no more depend on a headtotoe correspondence with human posture than a newspaper does. 'The flatbed picture plane makes its symbolic allusion to hard surfaces such as tabletops, studio floors, charts, bulletin boards—any receptor surface on which objects are scattered, on which data is entered, on which information may be received, printed, impressed—whether coherently or in confusion. The pictures of the last fifteen to twenty years insist on a radically new orientation, in which the painted surface is no longer the analogue of a visual experience of nature but of operational processes.

P. Bruegel
The Hunters in the snow (1959)

M. Rothko
Orange and tan (1959)



B. Newman
Onement VI (1949)

Du Kooning
Excavation (1950)

F. Kline
Painting No. 11 (1951)

To repeat: it is not the actual physical placement of the image that counts. There is no law against hanging a rug on a wall, or reproducing a narrative picture as a mosaic floor. What I have in mind is the psychic address of the image, its special mode of imaginative confrontation, and I tend to regard the tilt of the picture plane from vertical to horizontal as expressive of the most radical shift in the subject matter of art, the shift from nature to culture.

A shift of such magnitude does not come overnight, nor as the feat of one artist alone. Portents and antecedents become increasingly recognizable in retrospect— Monet's *Nymphéas* or Mondrian's transmutation of sea and sky into signs plus and minus. And the picture planes of a Synthetic Cubist still life or a Schwitters collage suggest likeminded reorientations. But these last were small objects; the 'thingness' of them was appropriate to their size. Whereas the event of the 1950s was the expansion of the worksurface picture plane to the mansized environmental scale of Abstract Expressionism. Perhaps Duchamp was the most vital source. His *Large Glass* begun in 1915, or his *Tu m'* of 1918, is no longer the analogue of a world perceived from an upright position, but a matrix of information conveniently placed in a vertical situation. And one detects a sense of the significance of a ninetydegree shift in relation to a man's posture (even in some of those Duchamp 'works' that once seemed no more than provocative gestures: the *Coatrack* nailed to the floor and the famous *Urinal* tilted up like a monument.[1]

But on the New York art scene the great shift came in Rauschenberg's work of the early 1950s. Even as Abstract Expressionism was celebrating its triumphs. he proposed the flatbed or worksurface picture plane as the foundation of an artistic language that would deal with a different order of experience. The earliest work which Rauschenberg admits into his canon—*White Painting with Numbers*—was painted in 1949 in a life class at the Art Students' League, the young painter turning his back on the model. Rauschenberg's picture, with its cryptic meander of lines and numbers, is a work surface that cannot be construed into anything else. Up and down are as subtly confounded as positivenegative space or figureground differential. You cannot read it as masonry, nor as a system of chains or quoins, and the written ciphers read every way. Scratched into wet paint, the picture ends up as a verification of its own opaque surface.

In the year following, Rauschenberg began to experiment with objects placed on blueprint paper and exposed to sunlight. Already then he was involved with the physical material of plans; and in the early 1950s used newsprint to prime his canvas—to activate the ground, as he put it—so that his first brushstroke upon it took place in a gray map of words.

C. Monet
Nymphéas (1905)

M. Duchamp
Large Glass (1915)

R. Rauschenberg
White Painting with Numbers (1949)

M. Duchamp
T um' (1918)

M. Duchamp
Urinal (1917)

[1] Cf. also Duchamp's suggestion to 'use a Rembrandt as an ironing board' (Salt Seller: The Writings of Marcel Duchamp, ed. Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson, New York , 1973, p. 32). NB: not a dart board or bulletin board, but a horizontal work surface.

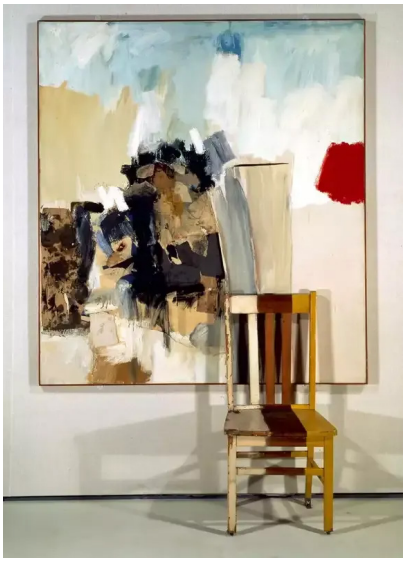
In retrospect the most clownish of Rauschenberg's youthful pranks take on a kind of stylistic consistency. Back in the fifties, he was invited to participate in an exhibitor on the on the nostalgic subject of 'nature in art'—the organizers hoping perhaps to promote an alternative to the new abstract painting. Rauschenberg's entry was a square patch of growing grass held down with chicken wire, placed in a box suitable for framing and hung on the wall. The artist visited the show periodically to water his piece—a transposition from nature to culture through a shift of ninety degrees. When he erased a de Kooning drawing, exhibiting it as 'Drawing by Willem de Kooning erased by Robert Rauschenberg,' he was making more than a multifaceted psychological gesture; he was changing—for the viewer no less than for himself—the angle of imaginative confrontation; tilting de Kooning's evocation of a worldspace into a thing produced by pressing down on a desk. The paintings he made towards the end of that decade included intrusive nonart attachments: a pillow suspended horizontally from the lower frame (*Canyon*, 1959); a grounded ladder inserted between the painted panels which made up the picture (*Winter Pool*, 195960); a chair standing against a wall but ingrown with the painting behind (*Pilgrim*, 1960). Though they hung on the wall, the pictures kept referring back to the horizontals on which we walk and sit, work and sleep.

When in the early 1960s he worked with photographic transfers, the images— each in itself illusionistic—kept interfering with one another; intimations of spatial meaning forever canceling out to subside in a kind of optical noise. The waste and detritus of communication—like radio transmission with interference; noise and meaning on the same wavelength, visually on the same flatbed plane.

This picture plane, as in the enormous canvas called *Overdraw* (1963), could look like some garbled conflation of controls system and cityscape, suggesting the ceaseless inflow of urban message, stimulus, and impediment. To hold all this together, Rauschenberg's picture plane had to become a surface to which anything reachablethinkable would adhere. It had to be whatever a billboard or dashboard is, and everything a projection screen is, with further affinities for anything that is flat and worked over—palimpsest, canceled plate, printer's proof, trial blank, chart, map, aerial view. Any flat documentary surface that tabulates information is a relevant analogue of his picture plane—radically different from the transparent projection plane with its optical correspondence to man's visual field. And it seemed at times that Rauschenberg's work surface stood for the mind itself—dump, reservoir, switching center, abundant with concrete references freely associated as in an internal monologue—the outward symbol of the mind as a running transformer of the external world, constantly ingesting incoming unprocessed data to be mapped in an overcharged field.

R. Rauschenberg
Canyon (1959)

R. Rauschenberg
Winter Pool (1959)



R. Rauschenberg
Pilgrim (1960)

R. Rauschenberg
Overdraw (1963)

To cope with his symbolic program, the available types of pictorial surface seemed inadequate; they were too exclusive and too homogeneous. Rauschenberg found that his imagery needed bedrock as hard and tolerant as a workbench. If some collage element, such as a pasteddown photograph, threatened to evoke a topical illusion of depth, the surface was casually stained or smeared with paint to recall its irreducible flatness. The 'integrity of the picture plane'—once the accomplishment of good design—was to become that which is given. The Picture's 'flatness' was to be no more of a problem than the flatness of a disordered desk or an unswept floor. Against Rauschenberg's picture plane you can pin or project any image because it will not work as the glimpse of a world. but as a scrap of printed material. And you can attach any object, so long as it beds itself down on the work surface. The old clock in Rauschenberg's 1961 *Third Time Painting* lies with the number 12 on the left, because the clock face properly uprighted would have illusionized the whole system into a real vertical plane—like the wall of a room, part of the given world. Or, in the same picture the flattened shirt with its sleeves outstretched—not like wash on a line, but—with paint stains and drips holding it down—like laundry laid out for pressing. The consistent horizontality is called upon to maintain a symbolic continuum of litter, workbench, and dataingesting mind.

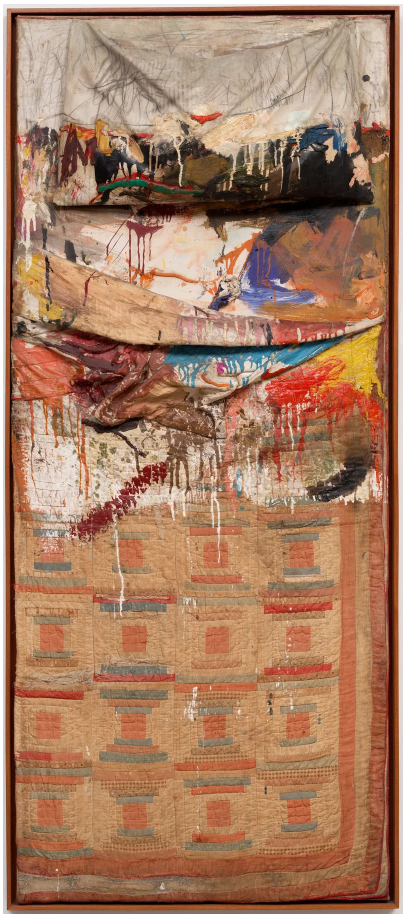
Perhaps Rauschenberg's profoundest symbolic gesture came in 1955 when he seized his own bed, smeared paint on its pillow and quilt coverlet, and uprighted it against the wall. There, in the vertical posture of 'art,' it continues to work in the imagination as the eternal companion of our other resource, our horizontality, the flat bedding in which we do our begetting, conceiving, and dreaming The horizontality of the bed relates to 'making' as the vertical of the Renaissance picture plane related to seeing.

I once heard Jasper Johns say that Rauschenberg was the man who in this century had invented the most since Picasso. What he invented above all was, I think, a pictorial surface that let the world in again. Not the world of the Renaissance man who looked for his weather clues out of the window; but the world of men who turn knobs to hear a taped message, 'precipitation probability ten percent tonight,' electronically transmitted from some windowless booth. Rauschenberg's picture plane is for the consciousness immersed in the brain of the city.

The flatbed picture plane lends itself to any content that does not evoke a prior optical event. As a criterion of classification it cuts across the terms 'abstract' and 'representational,' Pop and Modernist. Color field painters such as Noland, Frank Stella, and Ellsworth Kelly, whenever their works suggest .l reproducible image, seem to work with the flatbed picture plane, i.e. one which is manmade and stops short at the pigmented surface; whereas Pollock's and Louis's pictures remain visionary, and Frankenthaler's abstractions, for all their immediate modernism, are—as Lawrence Alloway recently put it—'a celebration of human pleasure in what is not manmade.'[2]

R. Rauschenberg
Third Time Painting
(1961)

R. Rauschenberg
Erased de Kooning
Drawing (1953)



R. Rauschenberg
Bed (1955)

[2] Frankenthaler as Pastoral,' *ArtNews*, November 1971, p. 68.

Insofar as the flatbed picture plane accommodates recognizable objects, It presents them as manmade things of universally familiar character. The emblematic images of the early Johns belong in this class; so, I think, does most of Pop Art. When Roy Lichtenstein in the early sixties painted an Air Force officer kissing his girl goodbye, the actual subject matter was the massproduced, comicbook image; benday dots and stereotyped drawing ensured that the image was understood as a representation of printed matter. The pathetic humanity that populate Dubuffet's pictures are rude manmade graffiti, and their reality derives both from the materialdensity of the surface and from the emotional pressure that guided the hand. Claes Oldenburg's drawing, to quote his own words, 'takes on an 'ugliness' which is a mimicry of the scrawls and patterns of street graffiti. It celebrates irrationality, disconnection, violence, and stunted expression—the damaged life forces of the city street.'[3]

R. Lichtenstein
The Kiss (1961)

And about Andy Warhol, David Antin once wrote a paragraph which I wish I had written:

> In the Warhol canvases, the image can be said to barely exist. On the one hand this is part of his overriding interest in the 'deteriorated image,' the consequence of a series of regressions from some initial image of the real world. Here there is actually a series of images of images, beginning from the translation of the light reflectivity of a human face into the precipitation of silver from a photosensitive emulsion, this negative image developed, rephotographed into a positive image with reversal of light and shadow, and consequent blurring, further translated by telegraphy, engraved on a plate and printed through a crude screen with lowgrade ink on newsprint, and this final blurring and silkscreening in an imposed lilac color on canvas. What is left? The sense that there is something out there one recognizes and yet can't see. Before the Warhol canvases we are trapped in a ghastly embarrassment. This sense of the arbitrary coloring, the nearly obliterated image and the persistently intrusive feeling. Somewhere in the image there is a proposition. It is unclear.[4]

A. Worhal
Marilyn Diptych
(1962)

The picture conceived as the image of an image. It's a conception which guarantees that the presentation will not be directly that of a worldspace, and that it will nevertheless admit any experience as the matter of representation. And it readmits the artist in the fullness of his human interests, as well as the artist-technician.

The all-purpose picture plane underlying this post-Modernist painting has made the course of art once again nonlinear and unpredictable. What I have called the flatbed is more than a surface distinction if it is understood as a change within painting that changed the relationship between artist and image, image and viewer. Yet this internal change is no more than a symptom of changes which go far beyond questions of picture planes, or of painting as such. It is part of a shakeup which contaminates all purified categories. The deepening inroads of art into non-art continue to alienate the connoisseur as art defects and departs into strange territories leaving the old standby criteria to rule an eroding plain.

A. Worhal
Marilyn Diptych
(1962)

[3] Quoted in Eila Kokkinen, review of Claes Oldenburg.' Drawings and Prints, in Arts, November 1969, p.12.
[4] 'Warhol: The Silver Tenement,' *Art News*, Summer 1966, p. 58

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in *Other Criteria*, 1972, pp.68-98.