

Franz Kline and Robert Rauschenberg: Construction and Assemblage

Notes for a talk at the Black Mountain College Celebration, Crickhowell, 2018.

slide 1 title

Dance, poetry and visual art practice at Black Mountain College could be summarised through the terms of Constructionist and Situationist facture, not as alternatives but as constituent and necessarily inclusive parts. These particular traits are also evident in some artists practices working out of New York studios contemporary with practices at Black Mountain College, indeed some of the artists working in the college are also working in New York.

[I use the term Situationist facture unguardedly and with flourish. From 1953 to the early 1960s, International Situationists in Europe wanted to make a reciprocal cohesion of the activities of the artist and the viewer and thus make cultural production a part of everyday life. A little earlier than this and then contemporary with this group of anarchists, social scientists and agitators, were many artists working in and out of New York studios and Black Mountain College. Frank Kline and Robert Rauschenberg in different ways, using different constructionist and proprioceptive decisions, presented the viewer with vertically hung canvases that demanded reciprocal proprioceptive comprehensions in the viewer. This aesthetic demand and reciprocity shows a direct understanding of the Existential proposals from the 1940s and the subsequent Situationist demand for participatory decision and cohesion. Some of the New York and Black Mountain College painters' practices alluded to here precede the European activities, nevertheless I call their activity *Situationist facture*.^{1]}

slide 2 Franz Kline, *High Street*, 1952.²

slide 3 Kline, Study for *High Street*, 1952.

High Street is a subway stop in Brooklyn near where Franz Kline and his wife Elizabeth V. Parsons (formerly known as the ballet dancer Elizabeth Vincent) lived.

¹ It is necessary here in printed form to say that I have over-summarised the complexity of the Situationist stance and have not taken into proper account their directed revolutionary social practices. Sometime after Rimbaud's magic lore and somewhat a long while before the current twenty-first century reiterations, 'happiness' was a 1960s' Situationist theme of critique and address.

² It is possible that *High Street* has been correctly dated 1950 by Harvard, but in view of the study for the work dated 1952, the later date appears to have more veracity.

[He met Elizabeth in London when she was modelling at Heatherley School of Fine Art near Baker Street (it is now in Lots Road, Chelsea).] The school taught figurative painting and sculpture and portraiture.

Kline made observational drawing, a combination of phenomenological report from perception and its physiological neuronal consequence. That report from perception can be from a figure sitting in a chair or moving through a dance space, or a configuration of an iron girder, bridge supports or machine parts like a lathe or engine or a black and white cartoon drawn by Phil May. Its physiological consequences involve the proprioceptive comprehension of succinct structures and form, an understanding from physical presence or memory of physical presences. Put straight-forwardly and perhaps over-simply, the experience of weight and gravity, the comprehension of up and down and how an object occupies spacetime. It is necessary to spell it out like this in view of the considerable lack of attention shown by many commentators on visual art practice which can obscure the basis for some aesthetic production.

Some of these drawings become the basis for constructive paintings that is, for example, paintings factured using the drawings to inform the dynamic of the composition that involves the journey from a horizontally factured study to a squared-up stretcher with a taut canvas tightly folded around the straight outer edges nailed or stapled usually at the rear, a canvas that is then primed with a flat white ground to provide the basis for the subsequent work on a rectangular vertical frame.

slide 4 Kline, *High Street* treated by AF.

Here I have blanked out part of the structure to demonstrate its function. The linking between the larger set of shapes needs to have connection to the smaller set of shapes to prevent the latter from free float in air.

slide 5 Kline, *High Street*.

What the viewer experiences is a limited and planned series of black lines, usually or in many cases, with a relatively wide brush application. The lines are floating or are concluded or cut by the canvas edges. The viewer is provided with the potential for a proprioceptive understanding in relation, of course, to gravity and structure, what is held in place by the edge of the canvas what is falling what is rising like a pillar from the base and it is this constructive visual experience that constitutes the artefact. Its success relies on how obvious or complexed how eloquent or obscured the conceptual

intention has been achieved, derived and therefore in relation to, the initial impetus of the phenomenological report.

[The complexity of viewing is shifted to and fro by inaccurate commentary and sometimes poorly-informed understanding of what is in front of the viewer which makes comprehension of these paintings at best difficult and at worst too often stupid. There are no surprises here, in a culture that still considers the poetry of Philip Larkin worth reading more than once³, or where Rosalind Kraus, an editor of the prestigious *October* journal, writing about the work of Cy Twombly says, ‘Twombly “misreads” Pollock’s mark as graffiti, as **violent**, as a type of antiform (my emphasis).’⁴ The need for education now undermined by the conservative complacency of the liberal and reactionary news media continues as a pressing albeit ignored issue. Kline is exemplary, and one of many, who provides the potential for an alternative.]

slide 6 Phil May, *Portrait of a man with a top hat* (said to be Gladstone), ca. 1887.

Looking at work by Victorian caricaturists like Phil May as Kline did is to recognise a significant graphic understanding. The stride in Gladstone’s legs becomes a triangular structural base.

slide 7 Phil May, *A soiree at which a man sings* *Ciro Pinsul’s 1857 song ‘I Fear No Foe’*, 1899. To take another example, *A soiree at which a man sings ‘I Fear No Foe’*

slide 8 AF ink drawing from slide 7.

can **be** redrawn with an emphasis on an internal structural form.

slide 9 detail from slide 7.

These small drawings are then enlarged into a full scale from an imagined or simulated proprioceptive understanding to give them proprioceptive presence. (The process of this facture was clarified by Elaine De Kooning in her description of Willem De Kooning demonstrating the use of an opaque projector to project an

³ Eric Mottram, for example, noted in 1982 (KPFA interview with Erik Bauersfeld, published by John Whiting online) that since the war from 1945, what became labelled as the Movement defined an English poetry which was a ‘very boring unimaginative’ poetry ‘not really interested in invented form’. (The Movement in the reactionary critic J.D. Scott’s list included Philip Larkin, Kingsley Ams, Donald Davie, D.J. Enright, John Wain, Elizabeth Jennings, Thom Gunn.)

⁴ Rosalind Kraus. ‘Cy was here: Cy’s up’, *ArtForum*, September 1994.

enlargement from a modest drawing onto a large canvas to inform the mark facture on the canvas surface.)

A feature of my projections of images can lead to deception. The unity of scale of the projection on the screen belies the fact that small images appear to be the same size as larger images.

slide 10 Kline, *Corinthian II*, 1961.

could be a small table graphic

slide 11 Kline in studio, Fred McDarrah, 1961, photograph.

It is in fact seven feet high.

slide 12 Kline, *Study for Zinc Door*, 1960.

The study for *Zinc Door* is 11 inches high

slide 13 Kline, *Zinc Door*, 1961.

The painting is nearly eight feet high

slide 14 James Abbott McNeill Whistler, *Nocturne in Blue and Gold - Old Battersea Bridge*, ca. 1872-75.

Whistler's *Nocturne in Blue and Gold*, subtitled *Old Battersea Bridge*, is two feet high.

slide 15 Kline, *Le Gros*, 1961.

This can become Kline's *Le Gros*, a reference to Whistler's colleague, the painter and print-maker Alphonse Legros in London, twice the height.

In each case the structural strength is achieved, where the paint meets the edges of the canvas, when the painter and then the viewer is involved in a proprioceptive comprehension of the structural basis. We notice the care in both Whistler and Kline not to drop the vertical off the base of the canvas, but to leave it blurring just above it. [Dropping the vertical mark facture over the base would change the dynamic to a vertical lift rather than the preferred tension of a horizontal hang.]

slide 16 Kline, *Study for Merce C*, 1961 and *Merce C*, 1961.

In *Merce C* from watching Merce Cunningham in 1961, the drawing on the left is fourteen inches high, the painting is nearly eight feet. The exactness of the mark facture is made strongly evident and confirms the constructionist intentions.

slide 17 Kline, *Study for Carnival*, ca. 1960.

The drawing for *Carnival* drags the flying object into the structure it flies behind.

slide 18 Kline, *Carnival*, 1961.

In the painting Kline breaks that drag and gives it free air.

Our comprehension of Kline's art, when it is at its best, provides for the opportunity to address and readdress the substance of our existence, its physicality, its Situationist positions, its efficacy.

slide 19 Robert Rauschenberg, *Factum I*, 1957 and *II*, 1957.

Rauschenberg's work at BMC used pasted papers, some of them with printed images, all overpainted in black in a variety of surfaces.

He then continued this practice with a series of white paintings and a series of red paintings.

A few years later at John Cage's apartment, Cage complained to Rauschenberg that the Black Painting by Rauschenberg that he now owned made him depressed.

Rauschenberg left the apartment, brought a tin of white paint, returned to the apartment and painted over the black paint.

Rauschenberg left BMC in 1952, He factured *Factum I* and *II* five years later in his NY studio. He has now changed the visual use of his collaged papers to provide referential and visual graphic effect over the previous compositional necessity.

The duplication and repetition between these two pictures is clearly evident. It shows the basis for Rauschenberg's assemblage practice. [A trait, albeit at a much smaller scale, also evident in some of the Situationist 'literature'.] The mark facture of the black in the top left **almost** duplicates from *I* to *II*. The red diagonal shape with its trail of red and dripping paint and the white crowd-out blocks do so also. The masking of some of the mark facture and pasted images, evident in his black and white paintings, is also **almost** duplicated. The news-cuttings here from identical sources. Eisenhower is seen doubled in both, the magazine rotogravure of the two trees, the newsprint of a building on fire in two stages, Rauschenberg makes use of the repetition and difference.

The theoretical and philosophical moment is upon us. I lift a copy of *Difference and Repetition* by Gilles Deleuze, published in 1968, from the shelf ...

For today's encounter I will move on.

slides 20-23, Rauschenberg, *Retroactive I*, 1963, *II*, 1963, *III* (not titled by gallery), 1963 and *Untitled*, 1963.

Rauschenberg provides the resources for many of his paintings through simulated variations of photographic fragments in the form of silkscreens and glued on prints of the same images. This encourages the artifice of repetition and its variation and the concept of series in his work in the period 1963 to 1965. Rauschenberg's facture uses silk screen ink and the original printed materials often duplicated or repeated glued (some say collaged⁵) with oil paint onto the canvases set up as screens sometimes linked together as assemblages sometimes presented as pendants to each other or as separate screens or pictures with visually connective variations with a thematic basis or interrupted thematic basis. This structural basis becomes both internal to the separate picture plane or provides external connectivity to each other.

In the pictures here the images of Kennedy, the glass of water, the astronaut-parachutist, the carton of oranges, the diagrammatic representations of cuboid boxes vary in position and colour (but inevitably not scale) within each picture and from one picture to the next. The structural nuances use tilted images, reversed images, recoloured images, inverted images, some in crowd-out and some painted out images provide the main artifice.

slide 24 Rauschenberg, *Skyway*, 1964.

In *Skyway* we see a culmination and reappraisal of this straightforward practice of repetition and difference. It is as if *Factum I* and *II* and their development through paintings like the *Retroactive* series, became one canvas plane.

slide 25 Rauschenberg in his studio facturing *Skyway*, Hans Namuth, 1964, photograph.

We see Rauschenberg facturing part of *Skyway* on the floor using a squeegee to silk screen one of the image complexes, a diagram showing the Earth and Moon. Two of the completed *Retroactive* paintings lean against the wall behind him.

⁵ I have elsewhere argued that collage is no longer an appropriate term to use for Rauschenberg's practice which promotes cohesion rather than disruption. Allen Fisher. *The Imperfect Fit. Aesthetic Function, Facture, and Perception in Art and Writing since 1950*, Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama, 2016.

slide 26 and 27 (detailed on slide list).

Here we see some of the image sources used to facture his silk screens.

Right through this period 1963-64 Rauschenberg's demand on his facture shifts silk screens as palette-brushes into different structural attentions with a variety of colour choices and from traditional proportions like *Tracer* 84 x 60 inches, 7 by 5

slide 28 Rauschenberg, *Tracer*, 1963.

to tall panels like *Trapeze*.

slide 29 Rauschenberg, *Trapeze*, 1964.

slide 30 Rauschenberg, *Axle*, 1964.

towards large scale institutional and corporate New York loft scales, continuing his repetition and variation. In *Axle* the eagle, astronaut- parachutist, Kennedy repeats, Venus and mirror, road signage, graphic cuboids, diving boards; from photographic to painterly mark, from silk screen to blank out to direct mark facture provides the basis for a dynamic informed by visual lyric and improvisation, by referential billboard news-screen television into breathtaking screens.

This is a fraught celebration of America in a time of war in S.E. Asia, preparations to fly to the Moon, and Kennedy's speech on Laos, the Cuban missile crisis and his assassination on 22nd November 1963. The canvases use the silk screens factured before Kennedy's assassination right through to 1965. [The photographs of Kennedy addressing a press conference on the Cuban Missile crisis in October 1962 and addressing the situation in Laos in 1963, appear to be from the same footage, were the official issue of the White House.]

slide 31 three versions of *Retroactive*.

Constructionist and Situationist facture does not fully describe the processes involved in work by Kline and Rauschenberg. Clearly they use different approaches in their facture. In the work of Kline after 1950 the constructionist facture clearly and emphatically engages with addressing the proprioceptive conditions involved in comprehending various aspects of structure in the phenomenological report and then transformed in the object being factured. This engagement is contemporary with the Situationist stance in both the confrontation with the present conditions and in its demand to produce new conditions. In the work of Rauschenberg in 1963-64 this engagement and demand, very differently articulated, is also achieved.

Robert Rauschenberg and Franz Kline		
Construction and Assemblage		
<i>High Street</i>	Franz Kline, 1952 (dated 1950 by Harvard), oil on canvas, 148 x 197 cm (58 x 78")	Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge, Mass.
Ink Study for <i>High Street</i>	Kline, 1952, ink on printed paper, 21 x 28 cm (9 x 11")	Allan Stone Collection, New York
<i>Portrait of a man with a top hat</i> (said to be Gladstone)	Phil May, ca. 1887, graphite, 30 x 24 cm	Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
<i>A soiree at which a man sings</i> <i>Ciro Pinsul's 1857 song 'I Fear No</i> <i>Foe'</i>	Phil May, before 1899, ink on paper in sketch book	Bristol University
<i>Corinthian II</i>	Kline, 1961, oil on canvas, 202 x 272 cm (80 x 107")	Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
Franz Kline standing in his studio	Fred McDarragh, 1961, photograph, 28 x 35 cm (11 x 14")	Smithsonian Institute, Washington D.C.
<i>Study for Zinc Door</i>	Kline, 1960, ink on telephone-book paper, 28 x 23 cm (11 x 9")	Private collection
<i>Zinc Door</i>	Kline, 1961, oil on canvas, 235 x 172 cm (93 x 68")	Hauser and Wirth, London
<i>Nocturne in Blue and Gold - Old</i> <i>Battersea Bridge</i>	James Abbott McNeill Whistler, 1872-75, oil on canvas, 67 x 50 cm (26 x 20")	Tate collection, London
<i>Le Gros</i>	Kline, 1961, oil on canvas, 105 x 134 cm (41 x 53")	Museum of Modern Art, New York
<i>Study for Merce C</i>	Kline, 1961, ink on paper, 30 x 22 cm (14 x 10")	Private collection
<i>Merce C</i>	Kline, 1961, oil on canvas, 236 x 189 cm (93 x 75")	Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington DC
<i>Study for Curnival</i>	Kline, ca. 1960, ink on paper, 28 x 23 cm (11 x 9")	Private collection
<i>Curnival</i>	Kline, 1961, oil on canvas, 201 x 150 cm (79 x 59")	Private collection
<i>Factum I and Factum II</i>	Robert Rauschenberg, 1957, oil, ink, pencil, crayon, paper, fabric, newspaper, prints and painted paper on two canvases, each 156 x 91 cm (62 x 36")	One in Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, the other in Museum of Modern Art, New York
<i>Retroactive I</i>	Rauschenberg, 1963, oil and silkscreen ink on canvas, 213 x 152 cm (84 x 60")	Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Harford, Conn.

<i>Retroactive II</i>	Rauschenberg, 1963, oil and silkscreen ink on canvas, 213 x 152 cm (84 x 60")	Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago
<i>Retroactive II</i> (a second version)	Rauschenberg, 1963, oil and silkscreen ink on canvas (measurement details not currently available)	Museum of the Gulf Coast, Port Arthur, Texas
<i>Untitled</i>	Rauschenberg, 1963, oil and silkscreen ink on canvas, 147 x 127 cm (58 x 50")	Private collection, France, on display at The Broad, Los Angeles
<i>Skyway</i>	Rauschenberg, 1964, oil and silkscreen ink on canvas on masonite, 549 x 488 cm (216 x 192")	Dallas Museum of Art
<i>Robert Rauschenberg in his Broadway studio, New York, working on Skyway</i>	Hans Namuth, 1964, photograph	Robert S. Mattison. <i>Robert Rauschenberg: Breaking Boundaries</i> , Yale UP, 2003.
John F. Kennedy speech showing situation in Laos	Abbie Rowe, 1961, photograph	Presidential Library and Museum, Boston
John F. Kennedy address during Cuban Missile crisis	Abbie Rowe, 1962, photograph	Presidential Library and Museum, Boston
<i>Untitled (glass of water)</i>	Rauschenberg, ca. 1952, photograph	Robert Rauschenberg Fondation, New York
NASA space suit equipped with a combination of a parachute and balloon to be used if an astronaut ejected out of Gemini space capsule	NASA, 1963, photograph	National Aeronautics and Space Administration, John F. Kennedy Space Center, Titusville, Florida
<i>Venus in front of her Mirror</i>	Peter Paul Rubens, ca. 1614-15, oil on panel, 123 x 98 cm (48 x 39")	Liechtenstein, The Princely Collections, Vienna
<i>Tracer</i>	Rauschenberg, 1963, oil and silkscreen ink on canvas, 213 x 152 cm (84 x 60")	Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City
<i>Trapeze</i>	Rauschenberg, 1964, oil and silkscreen ink on canvas, 305 x 122 cm (120 x 48")	Michael Crichton collection, New York
<i>Axle</i>	Rauschenberg, 1964, oil and silkscreen ink on canvas 276 x 610 x 5 cm (109 x 240 x 2")	Museum Ludwig, Cologne

Kline taught at Black Mountain college in 1952.

Rauschenberg was a student there in 1948-49 and again in 1951-52.