

Factum I Factum II

JONATHAN T.D. NEIL

IN 1957 ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG MADE *FACTUM I*, the first member of a duo that includes *Factum II*, which was also painted that same year. These days, however, the two live apart: *Factum I* is now in the collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles; *Factum II* lives in New York, at the Museum of Modern Art.

Though the two no doubt belong together, there may be something appropriate about their geographical separation. The *Factum* paintings are members of the *Combines*, that family of works through which Rauschenberg renovated the enterprise of 'collage' and made it solely his own. Different from the more singular representatives of that family, however, *Factum I* and *Factum II* are like biological twins: imperfect repetitions of one another that now, in their new found distance, would seem to fold West Coast onto East (or vice versa). Their connection would seem to render the map of the US as a combine itself, one more patchwork unity produced through

Factum I, 1957
combine painting:
oil, ink, pencil, crayon,
paper, fabric, newspaper,
printed reproductions,
and printed paper on
canvas, 156 x 91cm
THE MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY
ART, LOS ANGELES, THE PANZA
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constant addition and alteration. Or perhaps that map is just one more element within an even larger combine, as it is in *Trophy V (for Jasper Johns)* (1962).

In attending to the geographical history of the *Factum* twins, however, we would do well to consider the immediate region of Rauschenberg's studio on Pearl Street, to which he moved in 1955, the first full year of his *Combines* production. Close to this new studio – just downstairs, in fact – was Jasper Johns himself.

While Rauschenberg was at work on the *Factum* twins, Johns was applying himself to pieces such as *Drawer* and *Newspaper* (both 1957), works in which, as with the bodily fragments that reside at the top of Johns's seminal *Target with Plaster Casts* (1955), the object is offered in place of its representation. But, in these later works, Johns's encaustic seals the objects to, and sometimes as, the canvas, thereby returning the three-dimensional object to a two-dimensional image,

all the while retaining a sense of its manifest heterogeneity.

Perhaps this integration of surfaces attracted Rauschenberg. For, in the following year, Rauschenberg made *Cage*, *Currency* and *Course* (all 1958), all of which are sometimes included among the *Combines* family. In these pieces, however, the imagery is not so much on but

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of the ground. The collage aesthetic of the *Combines* – sometimes aggressively chasing the third dimension, as with *The Tower* (1957) and the more famous *Monogram* (1955–9) – is here replaced by a solvent transfer process that leaves the work as a singular surface unmuddied by layers of paint, papers, fabrics, newsprint, photographs and the other assorted items that build out and render what Brian O'Doherty famously called the *Combines'* streetwise 'vernacular glance'.

If Johns had used encaustic to efface a drawer's 'objecthood' by returning it to the two-dimensional space of painting, then Rauschenberg used the solvent transfer process to pull that two-dimensional surface apart and to layer it, one might say, without really adding a thing. As an effect of that process, the transferred images – the runners, the Mona Lisas, the beach balls – appear from within the paper's surface. Each is over- or perhaps underwritten by the burnishing strokes that effect the transfer, and in this, the paper is given the appearance of photosensitivity, and thus of a photograph, which, of course, is another way of capturing the 'actuality' of objects.

This photographic condition was not entirely new. After all, the practice of collage in Rauschenberg's hands serves as a strategy for displacing the given homogeneity of the modernist picture plane with a heterogeneous dispersal of whatever is 'out there' in the world. Even Rauschenberg's series of *White Paintings* (1951) could be seen to capture, in John Cage's words, 'the lights, shadows and particles' of their environment, a lesson Cage took to heart in *4'33"* (1952), his homage to silence and the sounds of the world.

But if one condition of photography is to capture the world – its 'lights, shadows and particles' – then its logic is to double or repeat that world through a separation. Photography carves off a piece of the world and splits it from itself: a lesson readily available via the medium of collage and taught by the *Factum* twins. So it is *Factum I* and *Factum II* which first introduce this logic into the geography of Rauschenberg's painting, a logic which makes it impossible to read these two canvases as just one *Factum* after another.

Factum II Factum I

JONATHAN T.D. NEIL

IN 1957 ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG MADE *FACTUM II*, which took its place as the second member of a duo that included *Factum I*, also painted that same year. Now in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, *Factum II* is separated from its twin, which resides in the warmer climes of Los Angeles, at the Museum of Contemporary Art.

To say that *II* was painted after *I* would be incorrect. The two canvases were painted simultaneously, with Rauschenberg attending to one and then to the other. We should note, however, that he did not replicate his actions and materials in order to make the same painting, or even really to make two different paintings; rather, Rauschenberg seems to have painted the works simultaneously so as to render difference itself, to render difference as an inescapable, indeed necessary, goal of creation, artistic or otherwise.

Getting at this difference takes time. We might even say that

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time is the medium of difference. For what Rauschenberg seems to make clear with the *Factum* repetition is that to make it 'new' would simply require making it again – like stamping out another Barbie doll, or producing one more sitcom. To make it again, then, is to offer the same in the guise of the different

and the new; to make it again is to deny time.

Nevertheless it is time, and difference, which is everywhere registered between the *Factum* twins. We see it announced in the calendar of year 1958, a year that at the time of the works' making had yet to come. We see it in the double newspaper photographs of the burning building, a two-step narrative about the facts of catastrophe and the following response. We see it in the drips of paint, as with the red blaze applied at the centre of the image, a blaze whose excesses have gathered off on different routes, in different directions, and under different marching orders from the canvas. We can even see it in the two red letter 'T's, which seem to announce, as with any dynamic equation, that these *Factums* are taken at times T1 and T2 respectively: two different works with two different beginnings, alphabetically emblemized on each canvas by two white letter 'A's.

If difference is everywhere registered between *Factum I* and *II*, then the pair also register a moment of difference in Rauschenberg's work from that period. The following year, Rauschenberg would embark on the series of 34 *Cantos*, meant as illustrations for Dante's *Inferno* and composed primarily of imagery wrought by a solvent transfer process. In these works, the images are not so much *on* but *of* the ground: unlike collage items or marks in paint and gouache that are added to the paper surface, the veiled quality of the transfer imagery gives it the appearance of having been revealed, or uncovered, through the legible striations of the burnishing stroke that is used to coax the ink from one ground to the next.

Rauschenberg's first combine painting appeared in 1954 with a stained glass window – another such integrated surface – and he would continue to make some of his most famous works, such as *Canyon* (1959), after experimenting with the solvent transfer process. But if we can say that the *Factum* twins introduce difference as a function of time and repetition, then the solvent transfer process integrates this difference into the structure of

the image itself. The burnishing stroke separates the image from itself; it cleaves it in two and peels the image away from itself.

Thus rendered is a mirror, an image doubled both in space (but not as model to copy) and in time. We are presented with a before and an after, a temporal structure reminiscent of the abstract expressionist strokes that Cy Twombly was then rewriting in *Olympia* (1957), as so much graffiti, itself constituted by equally self-separating marks: with the graffiti, the author is always absent, a fugitive from his actions.

This concern with time would become quite literal a few years later in *Combines* such as *Third Time Painting* (1961), in which an alarm clock takes up residence in the work. But it is *Factum I* and *Factum II* which first introduce into Rauschenberg's work time as a calculus of difference, a difference which makes it impossible to read the two canvases as just one *Factum* after another. ●

Factum II, 1957
combine painting:
oil, ink, pencil, crayon,
paper, fabric, newspaper,
printed reproductions
and painted paper on
canvas, 156 x 91 cm
PURCHASE, ANONYMOUS GIFT AND
LOUISE REINHARDT SMITH BEQUEST
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