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LGBT Art in Context: Characterizing Homophobia in Art and Examining the Effects of Rauschenberg and Twombly's Romantic Involvement in Art Production

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Abstract:

Pressures to conform to social norms in threat of severe discrimination characterized the Cold War era in United States history. The Lavender Scare, in which the government specifically targeted homosexuals as immoral, increased general homophobia throughout society. The mainly heteronormative art scene of the mid 20th century also displayed this homophobia, influencing gay artists to keep homosexual relationships secret and minimize self-expression in fear of discrimination. Robert Rauschenberg, a prolific artist during this period, was one of these artists. Because of the social context in which he produced his art, the influence of his romantic relationships was never truly acknowledged. Current analyses of his works still often strip them of the context of a gay relationship. A prominent art historian by the name of Jonathan Katz has examined Rauschenberg's long-term relationship with Jasper Johns, an additional artist of the time. The work illustrated that when art he produced during this period is examined in context of the relationship, artistic developments and specific artistic choices can be partially explained when previously left unexamined. While the relationship with Johns has been examined in this way, scholars have not focused as much on Rauschenberg's earlier and shorter relationship with Cy Twombly. This project will focus on the art produced by these artists in the context of their relationship in order to judge the influence it had on artistic creation. Additionally, the project will include a literature review to characterize the general homophobic sentiments in the art scene throughout the 20th century and today in order to add to the body of knowledge relating to the social contexts of LGBT art.

Introduction:

Multiple social complexities characterized the post-WWII era. As tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union expanded, US fears at home became ever more prominent. Social morality became the basis of intense judgment, employment termination, and even incarceration. These fears percolated into mainstream society, resulting in the widespread pressure to conform to social norms. The Red Scare associated with the persecution of Communists was matched by the Lavender Scare, in which homosexual individuals were largely discriminated against and often related to Communist identity. The Lavender Scare was not the first instance of government-sponsored homophobia in US society during the 20th century. In fact, FBI targeting of homosexual individuals began as early as 1937, as government officials and police forces linked homosexual acts to criminal activity and used it for evidence of possible moral degeneracy in investigations. With Cold War tensions to fuel the fire, the Lavender Scare saw an increase in general homophobia that was taken into heart not only by government, but by the American citizenry as well (Charles 2015).

This general homophobia that dominated mainstream society also entered the art scene. The 1940s saw the creation of a new art movement led by well-known artists such as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning coined Abstract Expressionism. Linked to the tragedies of WWII, Abstract Expressionism allowed for the individual artist to express the self in regards to identity and emotion. This focus on individualism within the movement resulted in different artistic preferences in each artist's career (Anfam 1990). Even though this movement was about the expression of individual identity through abstract means, it has been argued that specific individuals could not obtain true expression. Specifically, individuals who were categorized as immoral in mainstream society could be exposed to serious consequences if they practiced true self-expression within their art (Katz 1993).

Mirroring trends in general society, art circles were predominantly heteronormative. The minds of multiple artists during the 1950s harbored a machismo of sorts that cast a large and dark shadow on the homosexual artist and the influence of this identity on artistic creation (Katz and Ward 2010).

Robert Rauschenberg, a prominent artist of the time, was also gay. He did not identify with the ideologies of Abstract Expressionist, arguably because mainstream society not only

rejected but also criminalized a large portion of his person (Katz 2008). An obvious obstacle was blocking Rauschenberg from incorporating self expression in his painting as he comments that “There was a whole language [of Abstract Expressionism] that I could never make function for myself—words like ‘tortured, ‘struggle’ and ‘pain’... I could never see these qualities in paint” (Hunt 1999).

This lack of belonging to Abstract Expressionism can be seen throughout Rauschenberg’s works. In the early 1950s for example, he produced his White Series, large canvases covered in simple white paint (Figure 1a) (Robert Rauschenberg Foundation). Using ordinary house paint and applying it to canvases with a roller, these monochromatic works stood in stark contrast to the drama of expression created by Pollock in works such as *Convergence* (Figure 1b). Bright coloring and color application harbored incredible importance during this era. Rauschenberg instead presents these canvases, blank of color and of emotion. A feeling of silence takes the place of the feelings of dynamism found in Abstract Expressionism (Craft 2013). In the height of dramatic artistic renditions, Rauschenberg portrays the opposite, effectively minimizing the authorial identity of the work. He even claims in a letter to Betty Parsons, an art gallery owner, that “it is completely irrelevant that I am making them—Today is their creator” (Katz 1993). His White Series diffuses the influence, identity, and expression of the individual artist. He presents these works to the viewer without reference to himself or his expression.

Not only did Rauschenberg’s homosexuality in general influence his works, the gay partners he had throughout his career largely influenced him. Due to the homophobia of the time, the acknowledgement of these homosexual relationships was not common. Throughout multiple of Rauschenberg’s relationships in which he and his significant other were living together and working in unison, colleagues often considered them a pair but not a couple (Katz 1993). The professional relationship was very much separated from the romantic relationship, and there was great pressure to keep the true nature of the connection a secret.

Even today, many art historians analyze Rauschenberg’s work while simultaneously stripping it of the context of his homosexual relationships. For example, in 2006 the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles hosted a comprehensive Rauschenberg exhibit, portraying many his works throughout his career without mentioning his relationships with men in more detail than a single sentence (Steidl 2005). Even more, the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation’s website presents a chronology of his life without reference to his major gay relationships with Cy

Twombly and Jasper Johns. Many other museums and galleries continue this practice of analyzing an artist separate from gay contexts.

A prominent contemporary art historian, Jonathan Katz, is a leading scholar on LGBT art in the United States and has examined Rauschenberg's art in relation to his homosexuality. Specifically, he has conducted extensive research into his long-term relationship with Jasper Johns, an additional artist of the time. Looking at Rauschenberg's art in the context of his true identity has proven fruitful. Not only did Johns' continual presence influence major artistic developments such as the execution of his famous combines, it also possibly explains artistic choices in individual pieces otherwise deemed mysteries. Many features of Rauschenberg's combines, for example, display newspaper clippings and comics some of which are painted over some of which are not. This technique oftentimes attributed to the nonsense of Neo-Dada, an art movement inspired by the post WWI Dada movement that focused on antiart, may in fact carry significant meaning. Katz linked many of these exposed words on the combines to works done by Johns in addition to statements relating to homosexuality. Due to homosexual stigma, these themes are not predominant in many of his works; however, if they are analyzed and examined while keeping in mind this context, discoveries can still be made (Katz 1993, Katz 2008).

While some art historians have analyzed the art made during the period in with Rauschenberg and Johns were romantically involved in context of this involvement, there hasn't been much research in the works produced during the earlier and briefer involvement with Cy Twombly. Rauschenberg met Twombly in early 1951 while he was still married to Susan Weil. They had an affair, and Rauschenberg followed him to Black Mountain College, an art institute, for the summer. Soon after, Susan Weil filed for a divorce. Twombly received a research grant from the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in the summer of 1952 to travel throughout Europe, and Rauschenberg joined him. Based in Rome for a year, Rauschenberg produced multiple photographs and a number of smaller collages (Katz 1990). Twombly was also producing art throughout this period. A less productive artist at the time of their meeting, Rauschenberg inspired Twombly to increase his art production and utilize techniques other than those found in Abstract Expressionism (Cullinan 2008).

In a similar fashion, art historians have overwhelmingly ignored and severely underplayed the influences of Twombly's homosexual relationships. On the official Cy Twombly website, for example, the romantic involvement between him and Rauschenberg is

only briefly stated, even though Rauschenberg was largely influential in Twombly's decisions to begin painting in place of producing poetry (Cullinan 2008).

Because the art produced by either artist during the time has not been fully examined in the context of their romantic relationship, the body of knowledge surrounding it may be incomplete. Additional formal analyses need to be done on each artist's works during their time together and compared in order to identify effects of this relationship on artistic creation. Furthermore, the context of homophobia in the art scene throughout the 20th century to today deserves a literature review in order to deepen the understanding of the effects that homosexual stigma has had on art historical understanding.



Figure 1: a. *White Series* Robert Rauschenberg 1951 (Robert Rauschenber Foundation) b. *Convergence* Jackson Pollock 1952 (jacksonpollock.org)

Methods:

In the first part of the summer, I will live near LMU in order to conduct research at the LMU library. I will use the libraries resources and catalogue in order to develop a comprehensive social context of homophobia in art scenes from the mid 20th century through today. Specifically, I will analyze homophobic sentiments in major exhibits and galleries in the form of censorship and the rejection of art. In addition to utilizing resources at LMU, I will work with the One Archives Foundation to expose myself to general LGBT scholarship. Living in Los Angeles will allow me to work closely with these two institutions in order to maximize the effectiveness of this literature review, which can then be used to understand LGBT artistic choices and decisions throughout their careers.

Examining Rauschenberg and Twombly's relationship will provide a case study to the importance of LGBT art scholarship and maintaining the context of gay relationships in artistic production and the literature review will also grant insight into Rauschenberg and Twombly's situation. In order to characterize the effects of the romantic involvement between Rauschenberg and Cy Twombly on their art, I will examine works they created before, during, and after their relationship, starting in the year 1949 when Rauschenberg began producing art to 1954, when Rauschenberg began another relationship with Jasper Johns and Twombly began preparing to move to Europe. In addition, I will examine archival letters and other documents that may refer to the dynamics of their relationship during this period.

In order to formally analyze their art, viewing the works in person is a necessity. Multiple aspects of a work cannot be truly felt and experienced without standing in front of each piece. This will facilitate comparisons between characteristics such as size, texture, and the interplay of colors. To make valid comparisons, each artists' work must be viewed and analyzed in person.

I plan to travel to San Francisco to visit the Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA). SFMOMA contains 10 works on display by Rauschenberg including one of his White Paintings and one of his Black Paintings. Formally analyzing these pieces in person is vital in the development of the project. Additionally, the institution is the home of the Rauschenberg Research Project, providing archives that consist of countless documents, letters, and interview information throughout Rauschenberg's career. These documents will provide insight into his

romantic relationship with Twombly in addition to general societal sentiments on homosexuality during his career.

The Menil Collection in Houston, Texas, hosts the Twombly Gallery that contains many of the artist's work from the early 1950s. Formal analyses will again be performed and comparisons with Rauschenberg's works from SFMOMA.

The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts houses correspondence between Twombly and Leslie Creek throughout the European travels of 1952-1953. Examining these documents is vital in understanding the context of their relationship and their artistic ideologies throughout the travels. These archival documents are not published online so visiting the site is important in gaining knowledge about their experiences traveling.

In addition I will travel to New York City primarily to visit the Rober Rauschenberg Foundation in order to examine additional works and archive materials. I will do additional formal analyses on Rauschenberg's art in the Guggenheim Museum, specifically on of his Red Paintings. While in New York City, I also plan to visit the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art. Even though it contains no works by Twombly or Rauschenberg, it provides multiple examples of LGBT art and how LBGT artists have expressed gay identity throughout the 20th century. The general knowledge gained from this museum visit may aid in the general discussion of LGBT art related themes.

Finally, I will visit the Smithsonian American Art Archives in Washington D.C. to view documents, pictures, and commentary about the Betty Parson Gallery and the Stable Gallery. Rauschenberg participated in the Betty Parson Gallery in 1951 prior to any in depth involvement with Twombly and both artists participated in the Stable Gallery on their return from Europe. The gallery participation will possibly grant insight into Rauschenberg's thought processes before and after getting involved romantically with Twombly. Not all the documents available in these archives are available online, so traveling to the site is vital.

Expectations:

By examining art produced by Rauschenberg and Twombly side by side throughout their relationship, I expect to find patterns in artistic development and artistic choice. Looking at these works in context of their relationship may provide theories into patterns within each artist's career. I expect to encounter changes in art, formally and ideologically, along with changes in

their romantic relationship. Going to museums that house the art of this time will allow for concrete formal analyses, facilitating productive comparisons, while archival review will give insight into relationship development.

Conducting a literature review will characterize the extent of homophobia in both artists' lives and will add to the growing body of LGBT art scholarship. By compiling information of this social context, insights will be made into artistic decisions and expression between Twombly and Rauschenberg and throughout LGBT art in general as well. Additionally, the comprehensive examination of homophobia in the art world will provide information that can be used for future studies.

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