

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG

Image and Gesture

April 25 – November 1, 2026
Kunsthalle Krems



Robert Rauschenberg, *Tree Frog*, 1964, oil and silkscreen on canvas, Museum Ludwig, Köln © Robert Rauschenberg Foundation / Bildrecht, Vienna / Wien 2026, photo: © Historisches Archiv Köln mit Rheinischem Bildarchiv, Tobias Kreuzler

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“Painting relates to both art and life. Neither can be made. (I try to act in that gap between the two.)”

Robert Rauschenberg

Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008) counts among the most influential figures of the twentieth-century art scene. Last year, the American artist would have celebrated his 100th birthday. To mark this anniversary, a series of exhibitions was held from 2025 at locations around the world, including Houston, New York, Hong Kong, Madrid, Munich and Cologne. *Robert Rauschenberg. Image and Gesture*, presented at the Kunsthalle Krems, is the first retrospective exhibition of the artist’s work in Austria.

With his innovative fusion of photography, painting, and everyday materials, Rauschenberg transcended the boundaries of traditional art forms and redefined the dialogue between art and life. Some fifty artworks—from paintings and drawings to prints—on display in Krems attest to Rauschenberg’s pioneering role at the interface of abstraction and Pop art.

Florian Steininger, Artistic Director of the Kunsthalle Krems: *“The presentation at the Kunsthalle Krems is the first Robert Rauschenberg retrospective in an Austrian museum. To commemorate his 100th birthday, a worldwide exhibition program has been devoted to Rauschenberg, with stops in Houston, New York, Hong Kong, Madrid, Munich, and Cologne, with Krems as the final venue in Europe. This marks a strong signal of quality and international trust in the Kunsthalle Krems as a significant art institution. With Rauschenberg, we are showcasing one of the most important figures of modern and contemporary art in Krems: a pioneer and versatile protagonist of Pop Art.”*

Between Pop art and Abstract Expressionism

The exhibition focuses on Rauschenberg’s characteristic combination of photographic motifs and painterly gestures. In his early “Combines” (1954–64), he fused everyday materials and print media with abstract painting on the picture surface. He combined photographic images from newspapers, magazines, and his own photos with expressive, gestural traces—always striving to unite art and reality.

“A pair of socks is no less suitable to make a painting with than wood, nails, turpentine, oil and fabric.”

Robert Rauschenberg

Robert Rauschenberg created his first transfer drawings in 1952, initially using a dry pen nib to rub images off newspaper in a dry transfer process. He later worked with chemical solvents, which caused hazy renderings and gestural hatching to appear on the surface of the paper. Beginning in 1962, he integrated the silkscreen technique into his work with the “Silkscreen Paintings” (1962–64). Photographic motifs were photochemically fixed onto screens and mechanically applied to the canvas with a squeegee. Here, vigorous brushstrokes—characteristic of Abstract Expressionism—were juxtaposed with contemporary imagery from the media in key works like *Dry Run* (1963), *Star Grass*

(1963), and *Tree Frog* (1964). Rauschenberg initially worked in black and white, but from mid-1963 onward, his "Silkscreen Paintings" became more colorful.

The works that Rauschenberg created up to the mid-1960s can be located at the intersection between Abstract Expressionism and Pop art. While in Pop art print images from mass media dominated, Rauschenberg united the painterly gesture with socially charged symbolism in his pictures.

Florian Steininger, Artistic Director of the Kunsthalle Krems: *"Robert Rauschenberg's silkscreen paintings of the 1960s are icons of American Pop art. To a monumental degree, they inundate us with their expressive, abstract images—and these are the works that open the exhibition at the Kunsthalle Krems."*

Design and performance

Rauschenberg did not limit himself to creating visual art but also integrated performance, stage design, music, and new technology into his works. He collaborated with prominent artistic figures such as the dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham and the composer John Cage. As a stage and costume designer, Rauschenberg worked with groups like the Merce Cunningham Dance Company and the Trisha Brown Dance Company. His performative approach is reflected not only in this creative work but also in the fact that he performed on stage himself, turning art into an event. In *Pelican* (1963), a performance he choreographed himself, Rauschenberg moved across the stage with roller skates and a parachute strapped to his back. His technically advanced experiments for theater and dance productions dissolved the conventional boundaries between the art forms and established the medium of performance as a new means of expression. Film clips from *Pelican* and two other performances shown in the exhibition illustrate Rauschenberg's passion for stage action.

Success and controversy: the 1964 Venice Biennale

An early milestone in Rauschenberg's career came in 1964, when he was awarded the Grand Prize for painting at the Venice Biennale. It marked a paradigm shift in the perception of American art. The work *Tree Frog* (1964), which was on view in Venice, is also featured in the Krems exhibition. The awarding of the prize, however, was not uncontroversial: many European observers interpreted it as an expression of America's dominant position in the international cultural dialogue. The radicalness of Rauschenberg's approach elicited criticism and set off debates. After the Biennale, Rauschenberg ended his silkscreen project and had all the screens used in the series destroyed to avoid the temptation of repeating himself.

ROCI: cultural transfer through art

In 1984, Robert Rauschenberg initiated the international art project ROCI (Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange), which traveled to eleven countries and ran until 1991. In each country he presented an exhibition of his work inspired by that venue as well as the others he had visited. The idea for ROCI came to the artist after his stay in China in 1982, where he experienced that nation's authoritarian atmosphere. In preparation for the traveling exhibition, Rauschenberg visited each country, photographed his impressions, met with artists and artisans, studying local traditions. He then returned to his studio to make artworks which were a tribute to that country. The exhibition tour began in Mexico, continued to Chile, Venezuela, China, Tibet, then to Japan, Cuba, the Soviet Union, Germany, and Malaysia, and ended in the United States, in Washington, DC. Rauschenberg often chose countries where artistic expression and dialogue had been suppressed in order to provide a counterpoint to state propaganda. He created some 125 works for ROCI, including silkscreen paintings, textile works, assemblages, and large sculptures. Over two million people attended the exhibitions, which were

almost entirely privately financed by the artist. Particularly noteworthy was the 1989 exhibition in Moscow, which drew over 145,000 people and was made possible by Mikhail Gorbachev's *glasnost* and *perestroika* policies.

"I feel strong in my beliefs, based on my varied and widely traveled collaborations, that a one-to-one contact through art contains potent peaceful powers, and is the most non-elitist way to share exotic and common information, hopefully seducing us into creative mutual understandings for the benefit of all."

Robert Rauschenberg

Late work with metal

The show in Krems explores Rauschenberg's late works as well. Beginning in the 1980s, the materiality of the support, such as metal, increasingly became a focal point in his oeuvre. Series like "Borealis" (1988–92), executed on copper, brass, or bronze sheets, and the "Night Shade" works (1991) examine the interplay of light, reflection, and painterly interventions. In the late works of the 1990s and 2000s, Rauschenberg turned his attention to the processing of digital images, creating vibrant, collage-like compositions in series such as "Waterworks" (1992–95) and "Anagrams" (1995–97).

Relevance through innovation

From the beginning, Robert Rauschenberg experimented with the various possibilities of artistic production—always concerned with not simply repeating past successes but exploring new connections, subjects, and forms of expression. His work was thus constantly evolving, reflecting the dynamic of zeitgeist, technology, and political impact. His interdisciplinary and performative approach, his openness to artistic dialogue across borders, and his unflagging innovative drive still make him a key figure of international art history today.

Florian Steininger, Artistic Director of the Kunsthalle Krems: *"Robert Rauschenberg opened up art in a radical manner. He allowed life to flow into the abstract image. His work is a shimmering kaleidoscope: Rauschenberg as a painter, draftsman, sculptor, performer, stage designer, activist, and collaborator. At the Kunsthalle Krems, all these facets can be experienced together."*

International art collections

Rauschenberg is represented in the world's most prominent art collections, including the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA), the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, the Museum Ludwig, Cologne, and in Vienna the mumok – Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig.

The exhibition program is supported by the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, New York, and the Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, London · Paris · Salzburg · Milan · Seoul.

Curator: Florian Steininger

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG CENTENNIAL

In honor of the 100th birthday of Robert Rauschenberg on October 22, 2025, the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation initiated an extensive international exhibition and event program extending through 2025 and 2026. This global Centennial pays tribute to Rauschenberg's artistic oeuvre in its entire breadth and at the same time places the focus on its sustained relevance for contemporary artistic, social, and ecological issues. The exhibition *Robert Rauschenberg. Image and Gesture* at the Kunsthalle Krems represents the final stage of this international exhibition series in Europe.

The core of the program is made up of ten major institutional exhibitions around the world that examine Rauschenberg's transdisciplinary and collaborative practice from various perspectives and place it in a contemporary context. This series of international exhibitions is complemented by numerous events, performances, publications, and educational programs that highlight the artist's open, experimental approach. In this context, Rauschenberg's work is not only honored in a historical sense; it is also reevaluated in a dialogue with contemporary art.

The exhibitions connect important institutions in Europe, the United States, and Asia: Centennial exhibitions began at Museum Brandhorst in Munich in an exhibition that continued on to Museum Ludwig in Cologne. In the United States, the Museum of the City of New York considered Rauschenberg's relationship to photography, while the Menil Collection in Houston undertook the first comprehensive examination of his textile works of the 1970s. The Fundación Juan March explored the important role of photography in his work in all media, and the exhibition at Hong Kong's M+ surveyed Rauschenberg's extended engagement with Asia and the importance of international dialogue to his art making.

www.rauschenberg100.org

RAUSCHENBERG100

BIOGRAPHY

Robert Rauschenberg was born in 1925 in Port Arthur, Texas, an oil refinery town. At an early age, he developed a strong interest in art, which was encouraged by his mother but frowned upon by his father. At his parents' recommendation, he began studying pharmacology at the University of Texas, Austin, but dropped out after his first semester due to a lack of interest.

Shortly thereafter, Rauschenberg was drafted into the U.S. Navy. Because of his personal convictions, he refused to use a weapon; he was transferred to the Hospital Corps School for nursing instruction and worked in various Naval hospitals in California. These experiences raised his awareness of social issues and had a lasting effect on his artistic practice.

In 1947, Rauschenberg decided to become an artist. He changed his name to "Bob" (later to "Robert") and enrolled at the Kansas City Art Institute through a grant from the G.I. Bill, a program that provided various benefits to veterans. The following year, he traveled to Paris and attended the Académie Julian. There, he met Susan Weil, and the two painted, visited museums, and explored the Parisian art scene together. At the end of 1948, Rauschenberg returned to the United States and followed Weil to Black Mountain College in North Carolina. In 1949 he began attending the Art Students League in New York. In 1950, Rauschenberg and Weil married, and the couple collaborated on cyanotypes that were published in *LIFE* magazine and presented at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). The marriage ended in 1952, after the birth of their son, Christopher, but their friendship continued.

At Black Mountain College, Rauschenberg found a creative and open environment that fostered non-conformity and cross-material exchange. His classes with Josef Albers and collaboration with artists such as John Cage and Merce Cunningham influenced his thinking, and it was at Black Mountain that he learned to combine various techniques and materials, a principle that was to shape his all of his creative work. He also immersed himself in interdisciplinary working methods, particularly with regard to music and dance. During this period, he began a relationship with the artist Cy Twombly. The two of them traveled to Italy and Morocco together and shared an apartment in New York until Twombly was drafted into the military in 1953.

In the early 1950s, when the Abstract Expressionists dominated the New York art scene, Rauschenberg began his monochrome paintings at Black Mountain College. His participation in the legendary "Ninth Street Show" in 1951 represented an early high point in his career, but he nonetheless had to work on occasion as a handyman and janitor to make ends meet. In 1953, with permission from Willem de Kooning, he erased one of one of the elder artist's drawings, creating a work of his own titled *Erased de Kooning Drawing*—a radical extension of the artistic process.

Jasper Johns, whom Rauschenberg met in 1954, played a key role in his artistic and personal development. The two lived together and had a close artistic collaboration shaped by mutual inspiration. In this period, Rauschenberg began incorporating everyday materials such as newspapers and found objects into his works, leading to the creation of his first "Combines," an innovative fusion of painting and found objects. Simultaneously, Rauschenberg designed stage sets and costumes for the Merce Cunningham Dance Company.

In the 1960s, Rauschenberg expanded his forms of expression through the incorporation of silkscreen and his collaborations with engineers. In 1964, he represented the United States at the Venice Biennale

and was awarded the International Grand Prize in Painting. The decision was controversial and the subject of heated debate in Europe, but it nonetheless marked the artist's international breakthrough. Rauschenberg subsequently ended his silkscreen project and had all the existing screens destroyed.

In the mid-1960s, Rauschenberg became increasingly involved in social and ecological issues. He designed posters for civil rights and environmental causes, and anti-apartheid initiatives. His ROCI (Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange, 1984–1991) project was dedicated to artistic and intercultural exchange on a global level. Until the very end of his life, he supported numerous initiatives and donated to social and ecological projects.

In 1970, Rauschenberg moved to Captiva, Florida, which became the center of his life and artistic work. Captiva was to remain his primary residence and creative refuge until his death in 2008.

In 2002, Rauschenberg suffered a stroke but continued to work despite partial paralysis, often with the help of studio assistants. Rauschenberg died on May 12, 2008, in Captiva. His work represents the innovative fusion of painting, photography, and everyday materials and shaped the development of art far beyond his generation.



Robert Rauschenberg with *The 1/4 Mile or 2 Furlong Piece* (1981–98), Captiva, FL, United States, May 1992. Photo: Ed Chappell. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York.

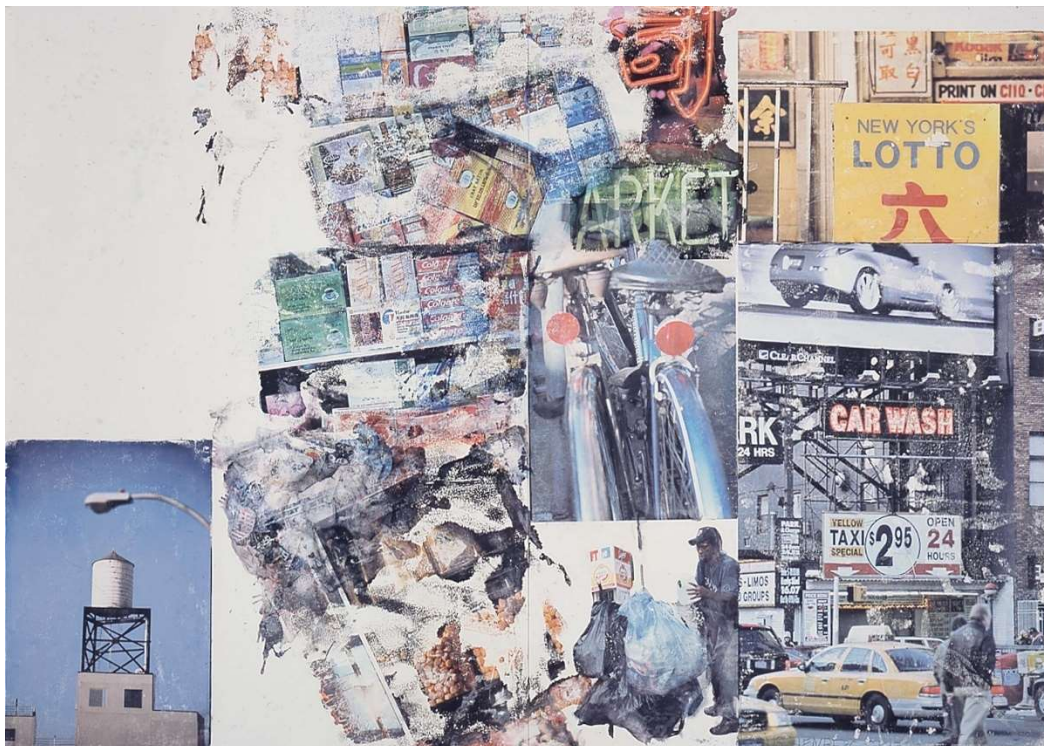
IMAGES FROM THE EXHIBITION (selection)



Robert Rauschenberg, *Bear Grass [Anagram (A Pun)]*, 1999, Inkjet pigment transfer and graphite on Polylamine, courtesy Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, London · Paris · Salzburg · Milan · Seoul © The Robert Rauschenberg Foundation / Bildrecht, Vienna / Wien 2026



Robert Rauschenberg, *Vitamin*, 1960/1968, Oil, printed paper, cardboard, rubber, plastic, nails and hooks on canvas , courtesy Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, London · Paris · Salzburg · Milan · Seoul © The Robert Rauschenberg Foundation / Bildrecht, Vienna / Wien 2026, photo: Ulrich Ghezzi



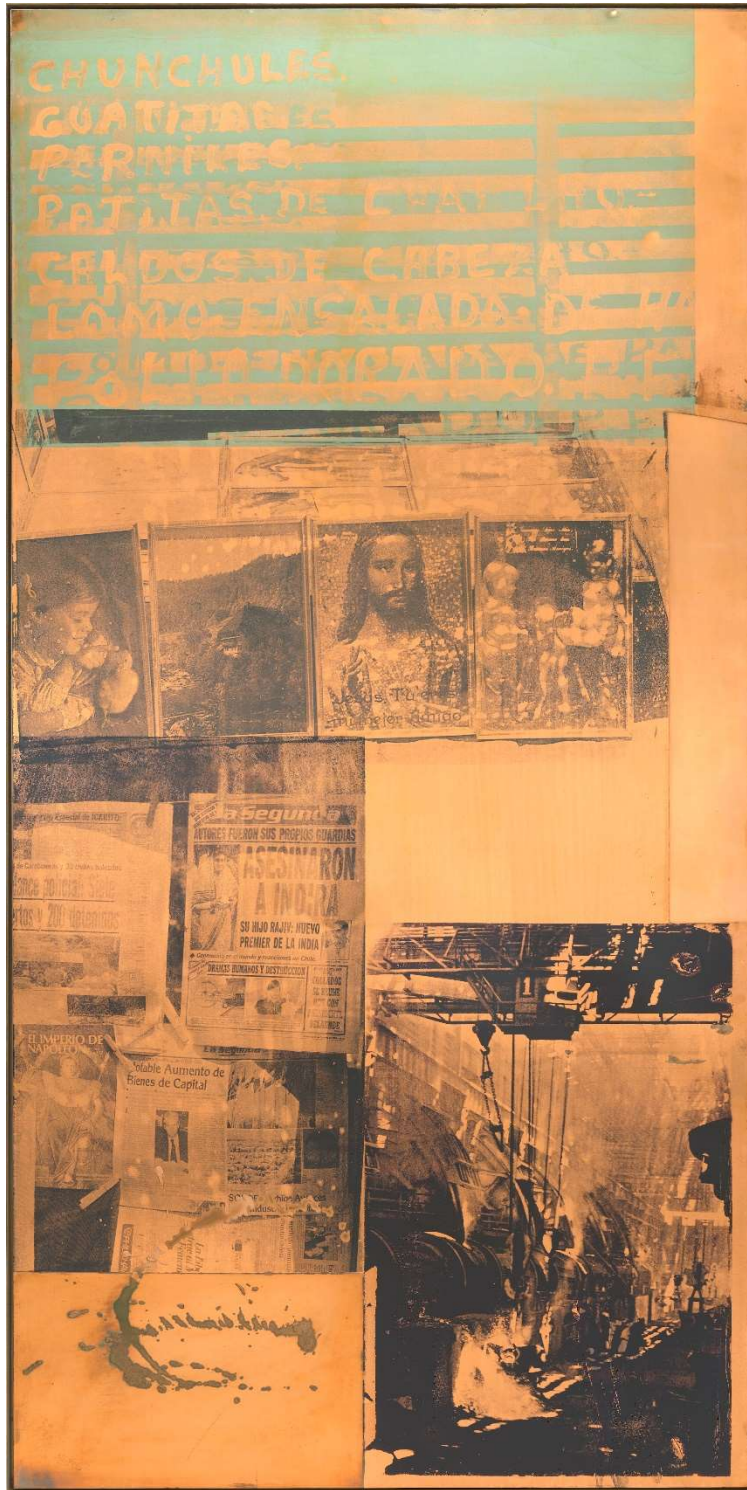
Robert Rauschenberg, *Random Want (Scenario)*, 2003, Inkjet pigment transfer on poly laminate, Private Collection © The Robert Rauschenberg Foundation / Bildrecht, Vienna / Wien 2026



Robert Rauschenberg, *Portrait of Ethel Scull*, 1962, Solvent transfer, crayon, oil, watercolor, and graphite on paper, mounted on paperboard, Collection Thaddaeus Ropac, London · Paris · Salzburg · Milan · Seoul © The Robert Rauschenberg Foundation / Bildrecht, Vienna / Wien 2026, photo: Ulrich Ghezzi

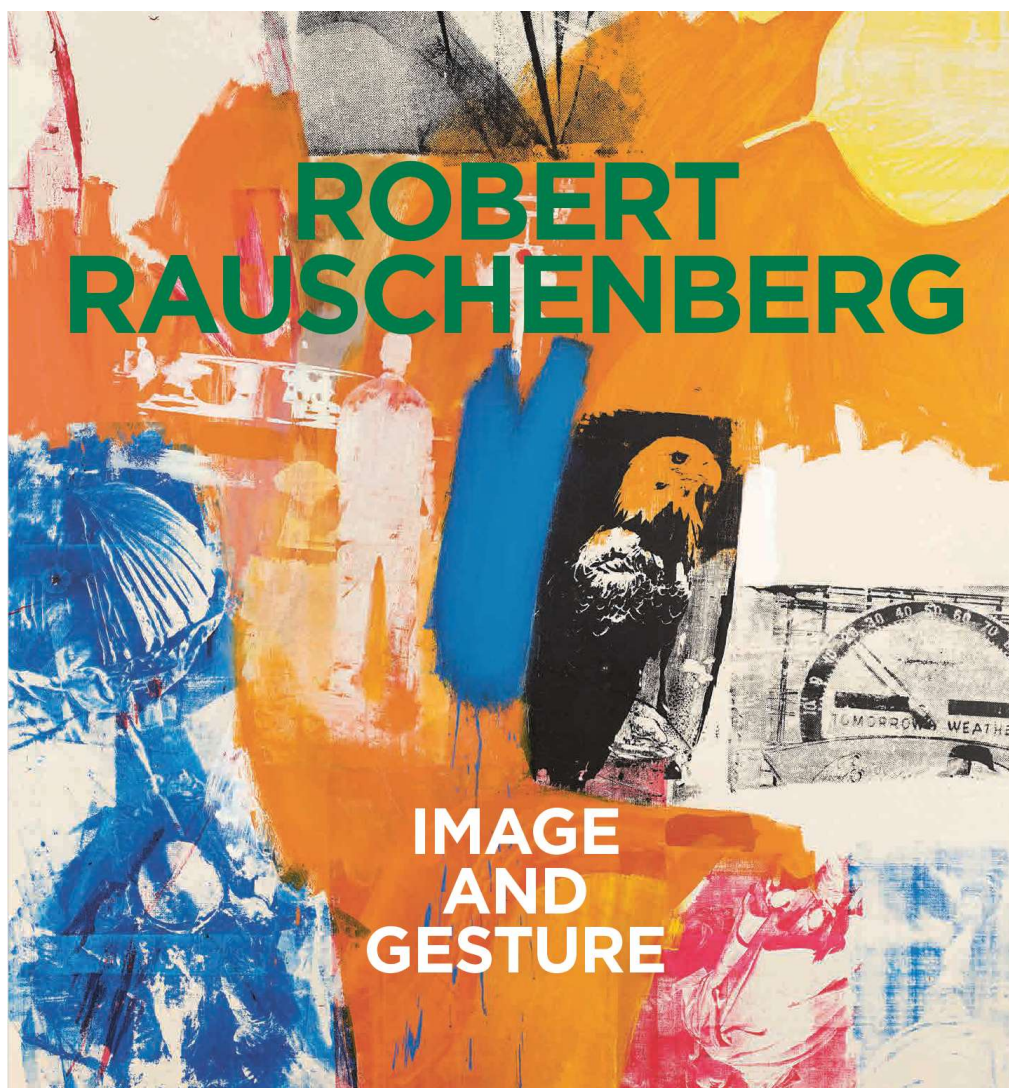


Robert Rauschenberg, *Rigger*, 1961, Oil, metal, rope, wood, fabric, plastic buttons, paper, graphite, and sand on canvas, Private Collection, Europe. Courtesy Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, London · Paris · Salzburg · Milan · Seoul © The Robert Rauschenberg Foundation / Bildrecht, Vienna / Wien 2026, photo: Eva Herzog



Robert Rauschenberg, *Copperhead-Bite IV / ROCI Chile*, 1985, Silkscreen, acrylic, and tarnish on copper, courtesy Robert Rauschenberg Foundation © The Robert Rauschenberg Foundation / Bildrecht, Vienna / Wien 2026

EXHIBITION PUBLICATION



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EXHIBITION INFORMATION

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PRESS IMAGES

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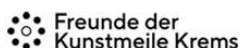
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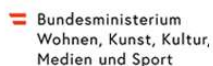
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