

RRFA 01: Robert Rauschenberg papers

Interviews: Hardy, Thomas W. / Questions on Dante Drawings, 1985

Robert Rauschenberg
c/o David White
381 Lafayette St.
New York, New York

March 24, 1985

Dear Mr. Rauschenberg,

Let me introduce myself. I am Tom Hardy, a graduate student at George Washington University and the author of a soon to be completed thesis on the Rauschenberg-Dante Drawings. The title of my paper is "Allusion, Analogy, and Humor in Robert Rauschenberg's Dante Drawings."

Last July I was able to secure the Abrams facsimile edition of the Drawings from Peter Kraus' URSUS BOOKS in New York City. Having been granted a sabbatical for the 1984/1985 academic year from my teaching duties in the Humanities Department at Northern Virginia Community College, it has been my daily pleasure to study the Drawings in detail. Now that the thesis is at the stage of final revisions, I am trying to support my interpretations with as much critical support as I can find.

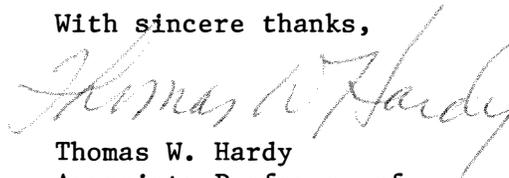
When you spoke in Washington on January 6 at the National Gallery of Washington, I attended the lecture and took notes. I spoke briefly with you after the talk, and asked you if you would be willing to answer a few questions on the Dante Drawings. You may remember me: I was the fellow with the Dore Ashton Commentary which accompanies the facsimile edition. You kindly said that you'd be glad to answer my questions, but that your memory might fail since twenty-five years have elapsed since you created them. As you said to me, "a lot of water has run under that bridge."

I regret not having a set of typed questions for you at that time. Nan Rosenthal said at the time I could send them to her and that she would forward them. Last week, however, I was able to obtain your address from the Castelli Gallery, and so I am writing you directly.

I have drawn up twenty questions which you may choose to answer. All the questions deal with points I am trying to make in my thesis. I would be happy to send you the thesis as it is now, if you would like. Certainly I will send you a copy for your archives when it is accepted by the Graduate School.

Your art speaks for itself. It does not need "answers." By its polysemous nature, multiple readings can, and should, be sustained. However, the academic environment in which I presently toil requires as much "documentation" for my arguments as I can muster. Naturally I, too, am not averse to getting advice and direction from the living artist himself. Perhaps one day we can meet in New York or Washington for a few drinks and some discussion concerning two of the world's greatest artists, Dante and Rauschenberg.

With sincere thanks,



Thomas W. Hardy
Associate Professor of
Humanities & Art History

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TO: Robert Rauschenberg, artist

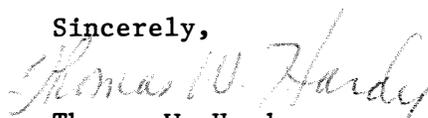
FROM: Thomas W. Hardy, thesis writer on Rauschenberg's
Thirty-four Illustrations for Dante's "Inferno"

Dear Mr. Rauschenberg:

Despite the apparent length of these twenty questions,
most of them require only a YES or NO answer.

Thank you for your time and help in this matter.

Sincerely,



Thomas W. Hardy
George Washington University
Graduate School
Department of Art History
Washington, D.C. 20052

The figure was selected for its anonymity & formal passivity & the golf ads offered different sizes & poses in the same format.

Twenty Questions on the Dante Drawings for the Artist

1) The Dante figure has not fared well with the critics. I dispute their reading of the figure as "passive" and "helpless." Instead, I find the figure and his background grid allusive to Renaissance studies of proportional figures by Francesco di Giorgio, Leonardo, and Dürer. The Dante figure also bears a resemblance to the Greek Kouros type (and its own prototype, the Egyptian Standing Male Figure), because of the stiffness of pose, the blunt frontality, and the mathematical "canons of proportions" that underlie these "canonical figures" from head to toe. Were such evocations intended? (Peter Conrad in his book, The Art of the City, says "the Rauschenbergian recombiner has to be a tense and agile dialectician," and it seems he must know art history if he is to appreciate your wide-ranging allusions.)

2) Why did you choose to illustrate Dante in the first place? Even after the N.E.H. failed to offer you a grant in 1959 for the project's completion, you persevered. And although you said in 1959, "there is no poor subject," the question still remains, what was there in Dante that sustained your devotion to his work over two long years?

3) I find three self-portraits in the Drawings. John Cage in his 1961 article on you gives confirmation of your foot in Canto XIV; I see your eyes and hand in Canto IX and your penis in Canto XXXIV. Can you, or will you, confirm? Do these self-portraits act, on one level, as your equivalent personal presence in the Drawings, much in the manner of Dante's personal presence as his own epic hero in the Inferno?

4) In many images, I find multiple readings. Calvin Tomkins quotes you as saying your work's themes are: "multiplicity, variety, and inclusion," so I feel I am on the right track. In Canto X when Vergil and Dante visit the heretics who are locked in burning tombs, I find in one image a visual summary of tomb history: a sarcophagus, an urn, a pyramid shape, and, of course, fire, which is indicative of cremation. In Canto XXXIV I see both the Satanic "root" and the "nuclear mushroom," both of which are interlocked in the image of the phallus. Do you support such polysemous interpretations? (The more I look, the more I seem to find in these ever-changing images.)

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5) I have located in back issues of SPORTS ILLUSTRATED two images you borrowed through the solvent transfer technique: the Arch of Constantine and Mt. McKinley. Can you tell me who is the man on television in Canto X? From which magazine does he come? Is it Charles van Doren whose scandal, originating after his rigged appearances on the Twenty One t.v. quiz show, shocked the nation in '59? Were you interested in finding modern equivalents to the Dantean sinners, so that, at one and the same time, an image could be that of "Charles van Doren" and Guido dei Cavalcante?

6) I find numerous puns in your work, for example the icecubes (jeweller's "ice"/eye's-cubes) paired together in Cantos XXXII and XXXIII; the "root" of evil in Canto XXXIV; the "goosings" to come, indicated by your "vulgar" muse in Canto II; the "mooning" in Canto XX; the image of Vergil as surfer/server in Canto XXXIII. And there are many others. I know Ciardi talks about the puns and vulgarities, the burlesque and parody in Dante. Do you acknowledge you wanted to spar with Dante, pun for pun, wit for wit?

7) Is there an allusion to the Washington Square arch in Canto IV behind the running marathon joggers, Vergil and Dante? It is an image difficult to read clearly. If so, aren't you explicitly correlating New York's modern arch with Rome's classical arch, linking the contemporary American present with Antiquity's glorious past, and finally matching your world-stage in a visual "counterpart" to Dante's?

8) According to Calvin Tomkins, President Kennedy appears eleven times in your work in the 1960s. Is it in the Drawings that John Kennedy makes his first appearance in your oeuvre?

9) Like Dante, you put into the Inferno men you admired and detested. Is this why there appear to me to be so many allusions to other artists, both living and dead, in these Drawings. Is this your way of commenting on the artists you liked and disliked? I find references, both direct and indirect, to Duchamp, Johns, Dali, Delaunay, Rodin, Dore, Rubens, Leonardo, and Michelangelo. Dante alluded to Cimabue and Giotto in the Purgatorio and, of course, to countless individuals he personally knew. Since your friends and acquaintances numbered many artists of the day, did they become for you part of the "contemporary world" you wished to comment on?

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NO.

10) Is your depiction of the whore Thais in Canto XVIII an ironic mocking of the Venus at her Toilet composition and its vanitas theme? Your illustration does not correspond to the Dante text, so I have concluded your divergence is based on an art historical context which generates its own art historical meaning through association with the famous Venus prototypes. Dore Ashton's has written of "the great wheel of borrowing" inside these Drawings. Have I read this image and its ironic "quotation" correctly?

11) I believe it is Freud who stands in for Tiresias in Canto XX. Both had clumsy, "determinist" theories about "Oedipus and his fate," and for that reason are joined in the composite allusion. Does this sound sensible to you in hindsight?

POSSIBLY.

12) There are certain prophetic elements in your Drawings: Nixon in Hell with the Violent against their Neighbors; the three Asiatic Gorgons at the entrance to a national "hell," known as Vietnam soon after 1960; the white-black hostility in the Sixties in America. How do you account for your clairvoyant insights?

BY NOT COUNTING.

13) Was there an analogy you intended to draw between the White/Black race problem in America of the twentieth century and the White Guelf/Black Guelf antipathy in Florence in the thirteenth in Canto XV's color symbolism and figural shapes?

YES.

14) What did you mean by the head poking through one of the windows of the Capitol dome? On one level, I interpret it as the head of Sen. Joe McCarthy. You put him in your LIFE silkscreen on the subject of Dante's Inferno done in 1965 which commemorated Dante's birth 700 years earlier. Am I putting the right interpretation on the Capitol's occupant?

HIS IDEA

15) Isn't one of your intentions in the Drawings to call attention to parallels between Dante's contemporary "hell" and our modern variation on "hell" in the twentieth century? If so, then there is a sub-text to be read and mastered, as well as the Dantean one. Yea or nay?

YEA

16) This question deals with an architectural allusion I have not included in the thesis because it strikes me as tentative. But here's a chance to run it by the "ultimate" authority. In Canto XX there is a "bridge" that appears to be tripartite and standing no longer over water. Towards it stumble the diviners and soothsayers who look backwards. In two of the later silkscreens you include shots of what Andrew Forge has identified as "the foreshore of the Battery in New York City" -- scenes of the boat dock area from which the ferrys leave for Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty and Staten Island. Is this tripartite dock in Tadpole and Tideline to be associated with the "bridge" that appears in Canto XX? If so, these false diviners and "determinist" prophets could be interpreted as walking away from America's "Liberty" along a dried-up Atlantic Ocean floor? (Or is this too far-fetched a reading?)

TOO
FAR
FETCHED

17) Did you find Dante's vulgarity and coarseness offensive to you as an American raised in a fundamentalist Christian family and church in Port Arthur, Texas? Or did you find that Dante's earthy language had a peculiarly modern ring to it? What I am trying to get at is did you feel there was any kind of incongruity between Dante's "divine" vision and his all-too-human vulgarities and off-color jokes?

18) Did your Port Arthur, Texas religious upbringing have a bearing on your doing the Dante Illustrations? If so, what? I am interested in probing what drew you to Dante, the ardent Christian poet, thinker, and philosopher? Or did you think of him in those terms?

19) Did you consciously try to make allusions to New York City as often as you could in order to "Americanize" and "modernize" the Drawings for your twentieth-century audience just as Dante in the Commedia alludes to Florence and other Italian cities and sites for his medieval public?

20) Where do you place the Dante Drawings in your work's canon?

What question should I have asked about the Drawings that would make them more understandable to the scholar as well as your twentieth-century everyman, with regard to your own intentions and perceptions about the Rauschenberg-Dante Drawings?

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May 10, 1985

Dear Thomas,

I wish you could have been here last evening because it seemed the right moment to ask Bob your questions about the Inferno illustrations, and he got very involved in answering them. I did not have a taperecorder nor do I write shorthand but I got him to speak slowly enough so that everything I write to you is a direct quote from him. Here goes -

1) "The figure was selected for its anonymity and formal passivity and the golf ads offered different sizes and sexes in the same format which were then used to express the threats and dangers within the individual canto." (I had not realized that it wasn't always the same figure repeated.)

2) "I felt very secure as an abstract artist and wondered if I could apply those qualities to specifics and thought it was time to try. I had never read Dante but knew it was a good book. (laughter) The idea came to me while I was sitting on the toilet where I tend to get my best ideas."

3) In response to the part about his body parts, the answer is "yes" to his eyes, hand and foot but "my penis is still in my pants". The answer to the second part is "yes" (He couldn't see a penis in the drawing - nor can I.)

4) "Of course"

5) He responded only to the first part with "It may be, I'm not certain."

6) "sure"

the
7) "It's not/Washington Square arch." Regarding Bob's involvement with arches, he said "One builds arches to march through to celebrate victory. Arches are still a frame." He then slightly digressed to say how important he thought doors were because they were fraught with emotional significance depending on who was entering or leaving.

- 2.
- 8) "yes"
- 9) He seemed mystified by this question and said "The politicians I was directly concerned with but not the artists."
- 10) "no"
- 11) "Possibly"
- 12) ""By not counting" (This is a play-on-words of your use of the word "account" in the question.)
- 13) "yes"
- 14) he said "That's his (meaning your) idea."
- 15) "Yea"
- 16) "Too far-fetched."
- 17) He said this was a good question and responded by saying, "I found him offensive and difficult to collaborate with, with his intolerance and prejudices and cruelty to contemporaries under the guise of salvation, Christianity and goodness."
- 18) "no" (In answer to the first question)
- 19) "I used the contemporary perimeters just as he did."
- 20) "It was a successful withdrawal from freedom."

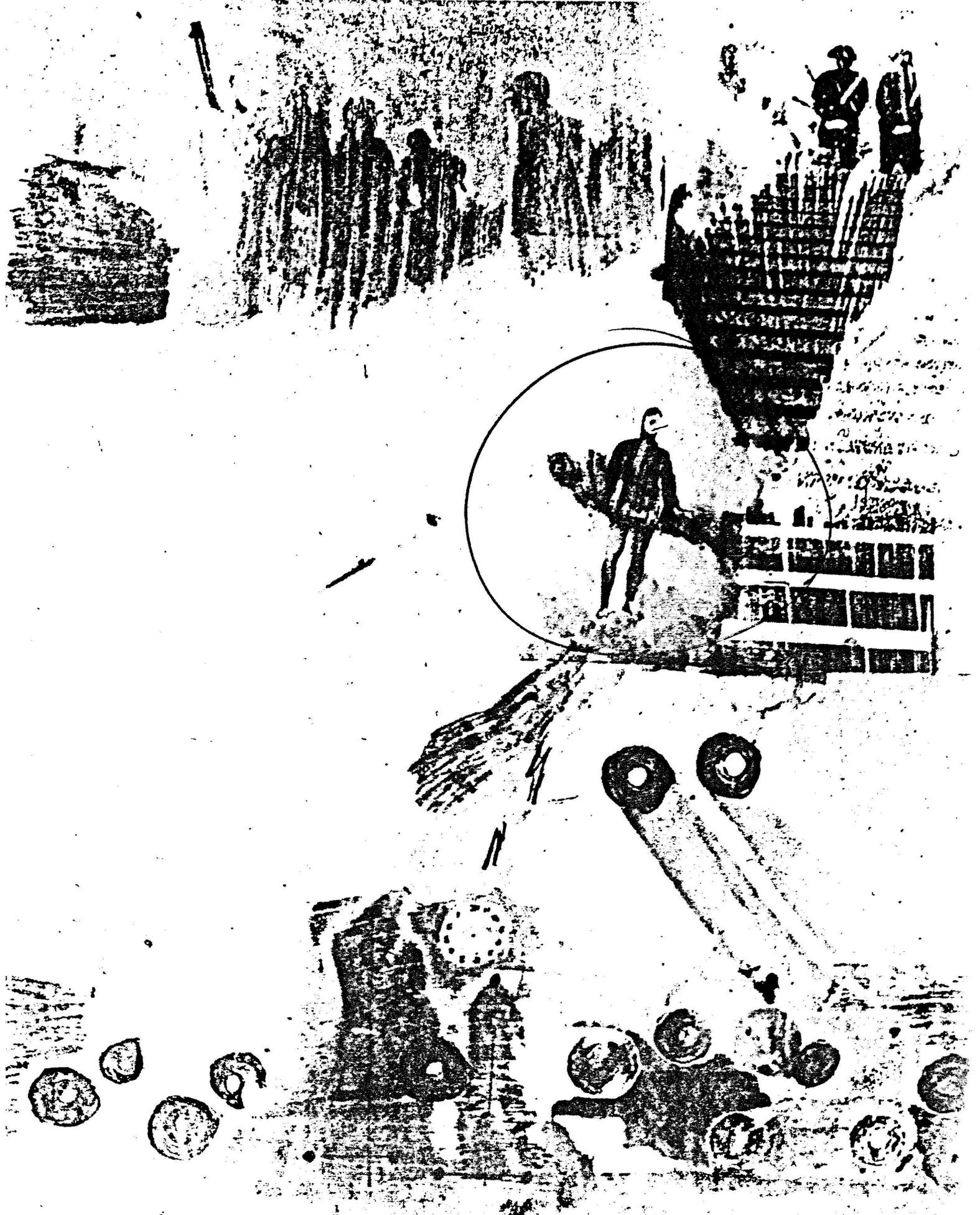
I hope these answers help. Bob also thought that you might be interested in seeing the photograph of a Spring Training rehearsal to compare with an image in Canto XXIII.

Best regards,



David White

I'm glad I got to the door the other day before you had gone.



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Exhibited *Oracle* May 15–June 19 at Leo Castelli Gallery, New York, with Billy Klüver as engineer.

Repeated *Spring Training* on September 18 in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and later in year at Milwaukee Art Center.

Performed his *Map Room (I)* in November at Goddard College, Plainfield, Vermont.

Premiere performance of his *Map Room II* presented in New York at “Film-Makers Cinematheque” held December 1–3 and 16–18.

Exhibition of drawings for Dante’s “Inferno” held December 21, 1965 – May 6, 1966, at The Museum of Modern Art, then circulated throughout Europe under auspices of International Council of The Museum of Modern Art.



Rehearsal for Rauschenberg’s *Spring Training*, 1965. Left to right: Alex Hay, Rauschenberg, Steve Paxton, and Trisha Brown.

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