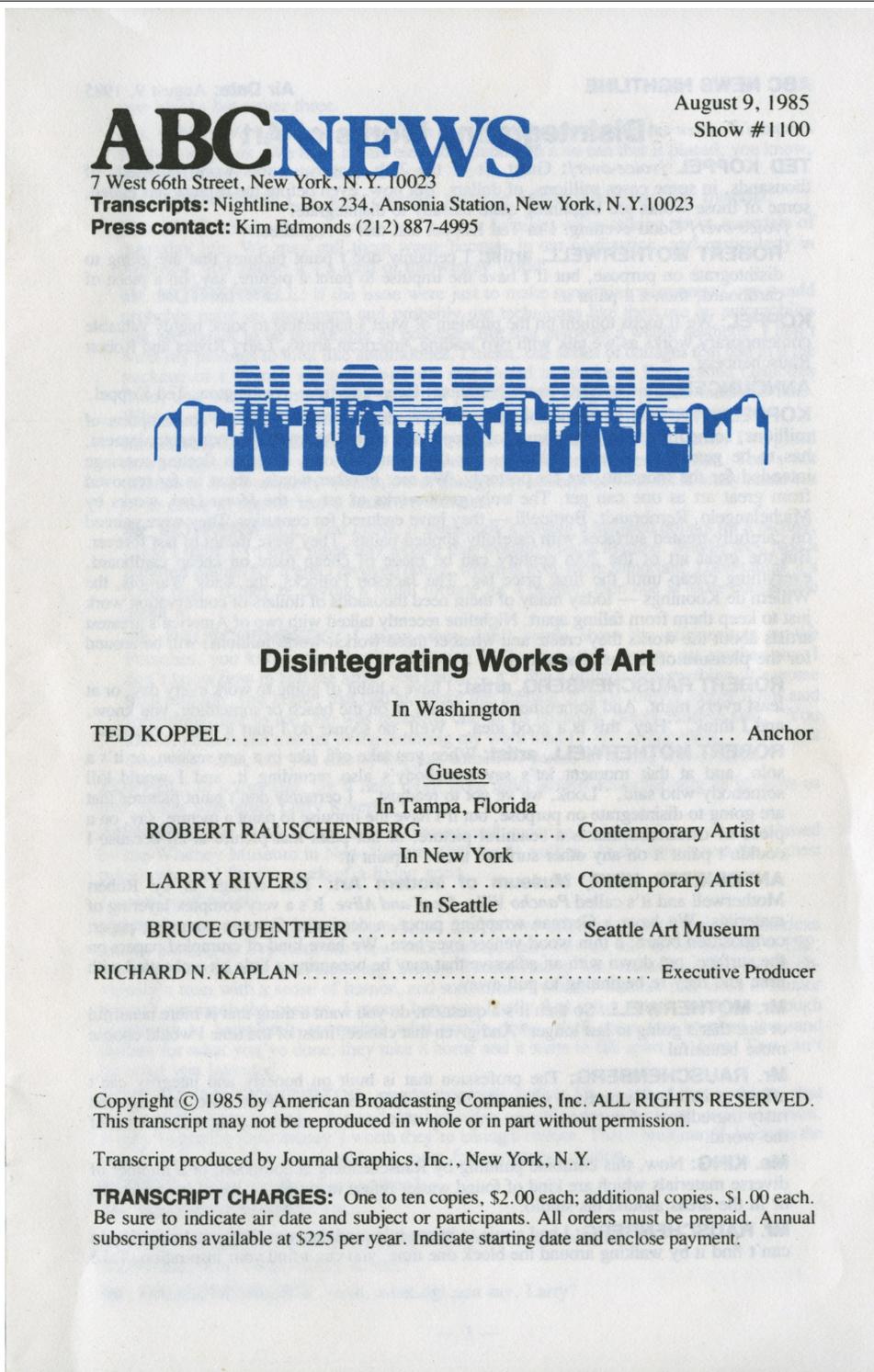


RRFA 01: Robert Rauschenberg papers

Interviews: Koppel, Ted / "Disintegrating Works of Art" (with Robert Rauschenberg, Larry Rivers, Bruce Guenther) / ABC News, 1985



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Disintegrating Works of Art

TED KOPPEL [voice-over]: Great art of the 20th century, works worth hundreds of thousands, in some cases millions, of dollars. But now, even before the century has ended, some of those works are beginning quite literally to disintegrate.

[voice-over] Good evening. I'm Ted Koppel and this is Nightline.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL, artist: I certainly don't paint pictures that are going to disintegrate on purpose, but if I have the impulse to paint a picture, say, on a piece of cardboard, then I'll paint it.

KOPPEL: We'll focus tonight on the problem of what's happening to some highly valuable contemporary works as we talk with two leading American artists, Larry Rivers and Robert Rauschenberg.

ANNOUNCER: This is ABC News Nightline. Reporting from Washington, Ted Koppel.

KOPPEL: This, that is, television, is a mass medium, intended for the consumption of millions, sometimes tens of millions, of people at a time. Our message, our entertainment, has to be geared to a mass audience. For the most part ours is also a fleeting message intended for the moment, not for posterity. We are, in other words, about as far removed from great art as one can get. The truly great works of art — the *Mona Lisa*, works by Michelangelo, Rembrandt, Botticelli — they have endured for centuries. They were painted on carefully treated surfaces with carefully applied paints. They were meant to last forever. But the great art of the 20th century can be made of cheap paint on cheap cardboard, everything cheap until the final price tag. The Jackson Pollocks, the Andy Warhols, the Willem de Koonings — today many of them need thousands of dollars of conservation work just to keep them from falling apart. Nightline recently talked with two of America's greatest artists about the works they create and whether those works, worth millions, will be around for the pleasure of future generations.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG, artist: I have a habit of going to work every day, or at least every night. And sometimes I say, like I'm on the beach or something, you know, and I think, "Hey, this is a good idea." Well, no sooner do I start it than it changes.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL, artist: When you take off, like in a jam session, or it's a solo, and at that moment let's say somebody's also recording it, and I would kill somebody who said, "Look, we've got to readjust." I certainly don't paint pictures that are going to disintegrate on purpose, but if I have the impulse to paint a picture, say, on a piece of cardboard that is a beautiful picture, or not paint that picture at all because I couldn't paint it on any other surface, then I'll paint it.

ANTOINETTE KING, Museum of Modern Art: This collage is by Robert Motherwell and it's called *Pancho Villa, Dead and Alive*. It's a very complex layering of materials. We have a German wrapping paper, a decorated German wrapping paper; composition board; a thin wood veneer over here. We have kind of crumpled papers on the surface, put down with an adhesive that may be becoming a little bit embrittled with time and they're beginning to pull away.

Mr. MOTHERWELL: So then it's a question, do you want a thing that is more beautiful or one that's going to last longer? And given that choice, most of the time I would choose more beautiful.

Mr. RAUSCHENBERG: The profession that is built on honesty and integrity can't afford to indulge themselves with a myth of eternity. So some of the shirts and rags and rusty ingredients of my work is my only way of honestly communicating with the rest of the world.

Ms. KING: Now, this combine painting by Rauschenberg is composed of a number of diverse materials which are kind of found waste, refuse materials — found in vacant lots or in the areas around his studio.

Mr. RAUSCHENBERG: I had a rule, a house rule, and that was that, you know, if you can't find it by walking around the block one time, you can't find your inspiration. Take

two blocks but never three.

Ms. KING: We have a tire here which is very commonly used in his work. We have a kind of old plank. We have a blue electric lightbulb in a tin can that is placed, you know, with something from the back of a car.

Mr. MOTHERWELL: I don't consider anything unavailable to me, any material.

Ms. KING: Garbage is possibly just a term. I mean, we're talking about materials of everyday life. We may call them waste because in our civilization, and particularly in America, you know, it's a kind of throwaway world.

Mr. MOTHERWELL: If the issue were just to make something permanent, one would probably paint on aluminum and probably use techniques like they use on automobiles that are meant to be as durable as possible. But that involves a whole aesthetic. I don't want my pictures to look like automobiles. I mean, one series of collages that had in it the package of a French student's cigarette that I used to smoke in Paris called Gauloises Bleu, and which to me a very beautiful package, but all given printed materials fade. When I saw some of them fading, then I had the label copied in permanent inks.

Mr. RAUSCHENBERG: Well, I don't think I would do that. You know, I've glued down edges from—you know, that have popped up and things like that. That's not offensive. But I certainly wouldn't ever change my concept of what art is really made out of in order to appear like a better investment.

Mr. MOTHERWELL: You know, if somebody's paying a hundred dollars for a picture, I don't think I've ever made any picture that wouldn't last a lifetime. Maybe they paid a hundred dollars for it and I enjoyed doing, which is even more important. I don't think it's a big deal. If they're paying a small fortune for a picture, then one is more considerate about it.

Mr. RAUSCHENBERG: I mean, they don't worry about the refrigerators or the Porsches, you know, that they're investing in. I mean, they just go get another one. I don't know how in hell the artist, you know—it's like a religion or something. It's worse than religion, you know, that had to inherit this attitude of art is forever. Jasper Johns said something nice to me. He was restoring one of his encaustic pieces, and he said, "You know, I can make a better living restoring my work than I could selling them." That's not true, of course, but you know, this just somehow comes in to this conversation.

KOPPEL: In a moment, we'll hear more from artist Robert Rauschenberg as he joins us live, along with artist Larry Rivers.

ANNOUNCER: *Three Flags*, a three-dimensional painting by Jasper Johns, was purchased by the Whitney Museum in New York in 1980 for \$1 million. At the time it was the highest price ever paid for the work of a living artist.

[commercial break]

KOPPEL: We're pleased to have with us tonight two celebrated contemporary American artists. Joining us live from our New York studios, Larry Rivers, and at our affiliate WTSP, covering Tampa and St. Petersburg, Robert Rauschenberg. Mr. Rauschenberg, you're obviously a man with a sense of humor, and sometimes I wonder whether that sense of humor doesn't approach the cosmic. I mean, here you finally find a few people who have enough sensitivity to completely appreciate what you're doing, shell out a few hundred thousand dollars for what you've done; they take it home and it starts to fall apart on them. That can't be what you intended.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG, contemporary artist: I've not had that problem, that they're falling apart. And—but to defend artists in general, I don't think any creative person, if they're getting their money's worth they're taking a chance. That's built into it, because the risk is part of it. Nobody should pay more for permanent caution.

KOPPEL: What are they buying then?

Mr. RAUSCHENBERG: Uh—

LARRY RIVERS, contemporary artist: Honesty and integrity.

KOPPEL: Who's that, Larry Rivers?

Mr. RAUSCHENBERG: Yeah, what did you say, Larry?

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Mr. RIVERS: Honesty and integrity. You said that you're in the business of honesty and integrity. And just passed it as if you weren't even listening to him. But anyway, that's what it sounded like.

KOPPEL: No, no, no, but go ahead. What do you mean by honesty and integrity? Does that also mean some degree of permanence? Mr. Rivers?

Mr. RAUSCHENBERG: I don't see what—

Mr. RIVERS: Who are you talking to?

Mr. RAUSCHENBERG: Yeah, permanence doesn't have anything to do with anything.

KOPPEL: Why not?

Mr. RAUSCHENBERG: Well, uh—

KOPPEL: I mean, in theory why not do it with disappearing ink and really have a— I mean, then you'll really have a cosmic joke. The guy takes it home, enjoys it for half an hour and it's gone.

Mr. RIVERS: I think Bob's character not(?) was based a little bit on the idea that he wasn't that interested in it in the sense that someone was going to purchase it and take it home. He was interested in doing it and didn't think it through that much. Actually—

Mr. RAUSCHENBERG: No, but Larry, the fragility of life. My work is about reminding somebody of the moment. I've said from years back, if I was successful in my work, there wouldn't be any need for art.

Mr. RIVERS: I don't—

KOPPEL: Hold on, I'm a little—

Mr. RIVERS: I just saw you on the screen looking at somebody pushing some pigment through a silk, and you were looking at it in some other way; you weren't talking about the fragility of life — you were looking about whether you liked the color or whether it was working right and things like that. I think when you're in the studio, I don't know if that's exactly what's on your mind. And if it was on your mind at 25 years old, it doesn't still have to be there at 50. So we are different people.

Mr. RAUSCHENBERG: Okay, okay. I didn't see that. I didn't see that. I'm sitting in a dark room myself. And— but what you saw I think is the first time that I ever worked on copper, and I had to use all kinds of chemicals to treat the copper.

Mr. RIVERS: It looked like silk screen to me.

KOPPEL: All right. But gentlemen, let me jump in for a moment. Bob Rauschenberg, look, I mean, what I'm trying to get at here is, if you want to do art for yourself, no one can deny you that pleasure, and whatever pleasure you get out of it, more power to you. But if it is art that someone is going to buy, I mean, we're not dealing with caveat emptor here, let the buyer beware; they're dealing with a great work of art, you are a great artist. Surely you want it to survive beyond your death, don't you?

Mr. RAUSCHENBERG: Well, you know, the only thing that— I mean, everything can last as long as you take care of it except love.

KOPPEL: What does that mean?

Mr. RAUSCHENBERG: That's the only thing that disappears right when you need it?

Mr. RIVERS: Love? Love disappears when you need it.

Mr. RAUSCHENBERG: Who's that? Larry?

KOPPEL: Well, you pick up on that. I'm not sure I understand what that means.

Mr. RAUSCHENBERG: Okay. We have restorers. We have conservationists. We have museums. We have air conditioners. We know a lot more about chemicals. The old masters. Ted, I think you were wrong about that business about that for years, centuries, you know, that paintings lasted. They didn't last; they've fallen off of walls all over the world, you know.

KOPPEL: And yet we are looking at great works of art that are three, four, five, seven hundred years old.

Mr. RIVERS: But Ted, they constantly need face lifts.

Mr. RAUSCHENBERG: That's right.

Mr. RIVERS: They need face lifting just as I suppose modern art needs some kind of, you know, taking care of.

KOPPEL: Yes, I—

Mr. RIVERS: I don't know if that's the issue. I think you're making the point that—

KOPPEL: I suppose part of the issue — and excuse me for interrupting you — but I guess part of the issue is, you could as easily select for your works materials that you think will last longer as other ones.

Mr. RAUSCHENBERG: No, you can't, not without compromising, Ted. It's a—

Mr. RIVERS: Not without thinking.

Mr. RAUSCHENBERG: Well, not the way that I work and not the way Larry works, picking up materials, using what really has the smell and the feel of our total environment.

KOPPEL: All right, gentlemen, I'll tell you what. We're going to take a break. When we come back, we'll be joined by contemporary art expert and museum curator Bruce Guenther.

[commercial break]

KOPPEL: Joining us live now from our affiliate KOMO in Seattle is Bruce Guenther, author, art historian and curator of contemporary art at the Seattle Art Museum. Mr. Guenther, I admit without any sense of pride that I'm out of my depth. Help me a little here. What am I missing?

BRUCE GUENTHER, Seattle Art Museum: Well, I think the contradiction is the separation between process and product. In the museum world we make a distinction between the artist's process and advocating that process as contemporary art people from their product. And once it leaves their hands then the series of concerns you've been discussing become an important one, but they don't concern people like Bob Rauschenberg, whose total focus has to be on the act of creating.

KOPPEL: All right. Have we come up with a new attitude, then, toward what happens to art after it leaves the artist's possession? It is my impression, and you'll correct me if I'm wrong, that the artists of another age were in fact concerned about creating something for posterity. Not for eternity, of course, but for posterity.

Mr. GUENTHER: Well, I think that's probably true, although it's hard for us to project back into time to find out what their thoughts really were.

Mr. RIVERS: Well, they're making different things. They're making different things, they're using different materials, so there are different things that come up that could go wrong. There seems to be less— or there are things that were going wrong with painting and paint, different from putting a piece of wood on a piece of canvas, and you're using some kind of adhesive to put that there, which if you don't know too much about it and you just want to do it, so you get it there with whatever you do know at the time.

KOPPEL: Yeah, but Larry, I guess the point that I'm trying to make is, I think — and you're right, we will never know — but I think that the artists of another age at least made every effort they could to make their works as enduring as possible. And I— *[crosstalk]*

Mr. RIVERS: They went to schools and were taught different things.

Mr. RAUSCHENBERG: Not by compromising.

Mr. RIVERS: They were taught different things that just doesn't seem to be part of art education, so to speak. We started in the schools — Bob went to school, I went to school; no one told me that tape eats paper. And I used it for years. I wanted to bind down different things; I used tape. After a while it destroys the paper.

KOPPEL: Now, Bob, what did you mean by not compromising?

Mr. RAUSCHENBERG: Larry, they used funny mud chemicals and things like that in mixtures with egg and things that didn't last at all. They—

Mr. RIVERS: No, I said that. They had different problems.

Mr. RAUSCHENBERG: In some cases the colors totally reversed in the thing.

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Mr. RIVERS: They had different problems than we have now.

KOPPEL: But Bob, the question—

Mr. RAUSCHENBERG: They were all natural.

KOPPEL: Bob, the question I'm asking, though, is, I guess— I think that if you were able to sit down with Rembrandt or Botticelli or someone like that and say, "Did you intend for it to last?" they would say yes. I ask Bob Rauschenberg and he kind of shrugs his shoulders—

Mr. RAUSCHENBERG: No we don't intend for it not to last, Ted.

KOPPEL: No, but I mean—

Mr. RIVERS: No, but you did say that— you're giving them the idea, Bob, that you had built in to your work a certain fragileness, that you wanted it to be there. And so you're giving somewhat a wrong, I think, impression of what you are about.

Mr. RAUSCHENBERG: Okay, okay. I—

Mr. GUENTHER: Of course for Rauschenberg it's a matter of the impermanence and talking about the fragility of human experience. And so as a museum, as a buying public, we have a responsibility to take that message. And then in my position I've tried to carry it into the future, to provide future generations a sense of what Rauschenberg's talked about.

Mr. RIVERS: What, to put fragileness up on the wall? Are you looking to put fragileness up on the wall? Well, maybe you can do it. It actually is an interesting idea.

KOPPEL: Yeah, but Bob, let me ask you a straightforward question. Do you give a damn whether your paintings and your works survive beyond your own life?

Mr. RAUSCHENBERG: I've painted in air.

KOPPEL: What does that mean? You painted in air.

Mr. RAUSCHENBERG: I mean, I've used air as color for a particular work, you know. And I prefer performance too, because it can't be called furniture. So I don't have this problem about something worth something, so I have this additional thing. I mean, where was anybody when I couldn't even give them anything, you know?

Mr. GUENTHER: Well, as a practical issue, a young artist uses materials they can afford. As an artist matures and a market develops for them, they no longer have to use newsprint. They can choose papers that will survive. They can choose not to use tape, as Larry Rivers has done in current recent years, that will not destroy what he's making.

KOPPEL: All right. Larry—

Mr. RAUSCHENBERG: We're not doing it deliberately. But I do have paintings that were made from stuffed chickens and old shoes that I got from the Salvation Army or the street that have just opened up in the Count Panza collection at MOCA, and they're over 35 years old.

Mr. RIVERS: Also I think that Ted is talking about paintings and Bob is not especially interested in that kind of thing, of canvas and brushes.

=Mr. RAUSCHENBERG: I'm talking about creating.

KOPPEL: All right, but—

Mr. RIVERS: Yeah, so you see, it's changed.

KOPPEL: Let me stop you for one second because, Bob, you were talking about a performance. Now, Larry, you are also an accomplished jazz musician. There is a difference between when you pick up your trumpet and when you pick up whatever it is you pick up to make your works of art.

Mr. RIVERS: Yes, well, Bob came through sort of the art scene— I mean he had lots of varied interests. He wanted to play tennis with the racket being electrified, things like that. So Bob has a more sort of an entertainer's feeling about art. It has to be considered when you're thinking about his works. So when you bring up Botticelli, you're doing something that's very, very complicated. I mean, to try to say if you sat down with Botticelli—

Mr. RAUSCHENBERG: Actually, Larry, Botticelli, I did *Dante's Inferno* too — that's pretty classic.

Mr. RIVERS: Yeah, that's right. Okay. That was up — what year was that?

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Mr. RAUSCHENBERG: I don't know — '65 or something. It took me two and a half years.

KOPPEL: All right, gentlemen. We're going to come back for a final comment from you in a moment. What I want to hear is whether you care what the rest of us think about what you do. We'll get that answer in just a moment.

[commercial break]

KOPPEL: Back once again with Robert Rauschenberg and Larry Rivers. I'm dying to ask about that electrified tennis racket, but I'm going to resist the temptation. Let me rather ask you, Larry Rivers, do you care what your public thinks of what you do?

Mr. RIVERS: Do I care what my public thinks of what I do? Yes. I think that it's fairly normal. Don't I look like a human being? Somewhat. I mean, that doesn't mean it's with me every second and every decision I make at the canvas or wherever I'm working, or what red I choose or what material choose. But when that comes up as an issue, if someone says to me do I care about what people think — yes, I do.

KOPPEL: Bob Rauschenberg, how about you? Are you working for us or are you working for yourself?

Mr. RAUSCHENBERG: Well, I— okay. Well, as far as my work is concerned, I care about what people think about my work as long as it changes their mind about something that they're absolutely sure of.

Mr. RIVERS: But also doesn't this happen to you, Bob? I know that you want to travel, you know, soon, or are going to. And isn't the thoughts of your "public" or whatever, however it's referred to on TV, going to affect how much you're going to get together moneywise to be able to do all this? So that in some ways—

Mr. RAUSCHENBERG: It's coming out of my pocket. I sold an Andy Warhol—

Mr. RIVERS: But that pocket's being filled by people.

Mr. RAUSCHENBERG: No, that pocket was not filled by people.

Mr. RIVERS: It's not an endless hole. I mean, what do you think, it goes on and on and on?

Mr. RAUSCHENBERG: That pocket so far was filled by an Andy Warhol that I sold for a million dollars.

KOPPEL: I wish we could go on, I really do, and I thank the both of you for being so patient with me. You're nice men. Thanks for being with us.

Mr. RAUSCHENBERG: Ted, you are too.

KOPPEL: Thank you. Watch Kathleen Sullivan on World News Tonight Saturday tomorrow at the dinner hour. Sunday on This Week with David Brinkley the topic is AIDS. That's our report for tonight. I'm Ted Koppel in Washington. For all of us here at ABC News, good night.

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