

Trophy IV (for John Cage)

By [Jeffrey Saletnik](#), July 2013

Part of the [Rauschenberg Research Project](#)

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1 Trophies are ghoulish objects. Often erected from pillage to celebrate a victory, they are material evidence of something conquered—wild game, a culture, an enemy. Historically, they have involved the display of severed heads, hands, feet, fingers, and toes to emblemize one's power over another. When pressed about the title of *Trophy IV (for John Cage)* (1961), Robert Rauschenberg resisted the suggestion that the word *trophy* implied anything other than an expression of "a special kind of thanks."¹ Yet when met with the prompt that the work was made as an *homage* (another term that can imply vassalage) to Cage (1912–1992), he offered the quip: "*Homage* is a dirty word."² Like meaning, dirtiness is relative; the presence of a—now infamous—taxidermy eagle (trophy) affixed to the surface of *Canyon* (1959, fig. 2) led to the possibility of its confiscation and the work being barred from international travel under the U.S. Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act.³ If not a trophy in the sense of the word's most literal and sinister definition, and not an homage or a gift (Rauschenberg kept the work for himself), then what is *Trophy IV (for John Cage)* other than linguistically unstable, as are so many of the artist's punning titles?

2 Puns are effective because they exploit the tension between semantics and experience. Rauschenberg mined this mutually inflective dynamic in his hybrid practice, which necessitated the introduction of new descriptive language—like "Combine" and "flatbed picture plane"—into discourse to account for his works' formal instability.⁴ Indeed, *Trophy IV (for John Cage)* couples a painted surface (minimal in comparison to other Combines, like *Canyon*) with an accumulation of three-dimensional elements, including metal, wood, tire tread, a flashlight,⁵ and a boot. One could decode the strange materials that adhere to the work's surface as iconographic prompts for Rauschenberg's rapport with Cage. Might the boot be an oblique reference to Cage's remark, in writing about Rauschenberg's practice, that "beauty is now underfoot wherever we take the trouble to look"?⁶ This kind of iconographic approach could lead to endless speculation and potentially occlude the indirect, doctrinal aspect of Rauschenberg's relationship to Cage. The presence of a fragment of tire tread is conspicuous in light of the artist's *Automobile Tire Print* (1953), a work made in collaboration with Cage that articulates the terms of Rauschenberg's indebtedness to the composer.⁷

3 In 1953, Cage drove his Model A Ford over twenty sheets of joined white paper after passing through a pool of black paint that Rauschenberg had poured in the street outside his studio. It has been noted how these "tread marks [assert] twenty-two feet of unmitigated literalness . . . the point of which seems to be that along this stretch of road there is no break that would allow the old-time metaphysics of tension and release to occur."⁸ In other words, the work represents a move from the line as an expressive mark to the line as a literal mark: an index. Indeed; and the work thusly occupies a prominent position in art critical discourse. Yet this assessment neglects the fact that Cage's automobile was actually moving.⁹ *Automobile Tire Print* also records the duration of its performance; moreover, it resulted from the use of material—of paint-covered tire in motion, on paper and street—literally as active process: it is so very "Cagean" in this regard. With the making of *Automobile Tire Print*, the process of engaging one's material environment, which is essential to Rauschenberg's practice, becomes an act incorporating outcomes unknown, in time.¹⁰

4 By the early 1960s Rauschenberg had moved from *Automobile Tire Print* as register of performance to actual staged performance work.¹¹ In *Homage to David Tudor* (1961) he collaborated with Tudor (1926–1996), Jasper Johns (b. 1930), Niki de Saint Phalle



1. Robert Rauschenberg, *Trophy IV (for John Cage)*, 1961; metal, fabric, boot, wood, tire tread, chain, paint, tape, and flashlight, 33 x 82 x 21 in. (83.82 x 208.28 x 53.34 cm); Collection SFMOMA, Purchase through a gift of Phyllis Wattis; © Robert Rauschenberg Foundation / Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY; photo: Ben Blackwell



2. Robert Rauschenberg, *Canyon*, 1959. Oil, graphite, paper, metal, photograph, fabric, wood, canvas, buttons, mirror, taxidermy eagle, cardboard, pillow, paint tube, and other materials, 81 3/4 x 70 x 24 in. (207.6 x 177.8 x 61 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York, gift of the family of Ileana Sonnabend; © Robert Rauschenberg Foundation / Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY



3. Robert Rauschenberg, *Untitled*, ca. 1952. Engraving, graphite, and paper mounted on paper board, 10 x 7 in. (25.4 x 17.8 cm). Sonnabend Collection; © Robert Rauschenberg Foundation / Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

(1930–2002), and Jean Tinguely (1925–1991) on a performance at the Théâtre de l'Ambassade des États-Unis in Paris. Tudor performed Cage's composition *Variations II* (1961); Johns crafted a target out of flowers; de Saint Phalle included one of her *tir*, or "picture-shoot," paintings; and Tinguely contributed a motorized sculpture. As his contribution to the performance, Rauschenberg created *First Time Painting* (1961). He worked onstage with the back of the canvas facing the audience, leaving them unable to see the work (fig. 4). When an alarm clock attached to the canvas rang, Rauschenberg ceased to paint and the canvas was wrapped in paper and taken offstage.¹² Rather than see the work as it was made, the audience experienced its making aurally; contact microphones amplified the sound of Rauschenberg crafting the painting. There is thus an explicit temporal element to the work, inasmuch as it was completed within an established duration, in addition to the sonic aspect of its performance. The latter, in particular, points to Cage; one becomes attuned to the sounds of making *First Time Painting* and, by extension, to the sounds of one's surroundings—the sounds of painting and living.



4. Robert Rauschenberg working on *First Time Painting* onstage during "Homage to David Tudor," Théâtre de l'Ambassade des États-Unis, Paris, June 20, 1961. Photo: Harry Shunk; © Roy Lichtenstein Foundation

- 5 Cage's aesthetics promote the heightening of sensory awareness through attentiveness to one's environment and the rejecting of hierarchies between musical and nonmusical sound.¹³ Rauschenberg shared this democratizing attitude with respect to the visual field. In addition to the motley array of objects that compose its form, *Trophy IV (for John Cage)* includes an explicitly durational element as a nod to Cage. When its boot (which can swing to and fro) strikes the crumpled metal form before it, it makes a sound, actively "combining" visual objects and other-sensory experience (fig. 5). Moreover, the parameters of one's experience of *Trophy IV (for John Cage)* are measured, in part, by the time it takes to resonate. Yet the work no longer achieves this effect directly; today, in the context of the museum, it is more akin to a reliquary.¹⁴



5. Robert Rauschenberg activates *Trophy IV (for John Cage)* during a 1999 interview at SFMOMA. Video edited by Richard Robertson, 2013

6 Cynthia Hahn has observed how medieval “charismatic” body-part reliquaries (fig. 6) were “objects with the potential to have an arresting and decisive impact upon the senses” insofar as they were especially effective in encouraging their viewer to contemplate abstract ideas rather than to revere the actual relic they may—or may not—contain.¹⁵ As she suggests, when viewing the gold- and jewel-encrusted portable altar of Saint Andrew, one drew upon sensory knowledge of one’s gait to position oneself as if walking in the footsteps of Christ’s apostle; moreover, this aesthetic lesson would be employed to reform the daily lumbering of one’s body, step by step, and in so doing, aid in the quest for bodily and spiritual attunement. The represented foot assumes a “medial location in aesthetic contemplation” as one opens one’s self to spiritual understanding.¹⁶ *Trophy IV (for John Cage)* behaves similarly. Like a reliquary, which could be touched only by ecclesiastical and secular elites, only a select few are allowed to handle *Trophy IV (for John Cage)*, let alone cock and release its boot. The sound of this activity is absent and left to the imagination. Like a “charismatic” body-part reliquary, here too, concealment is a powerful tool; *Trophy IV (for John Cage)* requires indirect aesthetic contemplation—a kind of mental performance—for the object to be understood. It does not point to the thing itself (the particular sound of the object), but rather assumes a mediating function. And like its medieval counterpart, knowledge of doctrine (here, Cage’s) is necessary not only to recognize but also to understand this medial object: to remind one of the sensory value of attuning to one’s aesthetic environment. Rich in connotations, *Trophy IV (for John Cage)*, like the word *trophy* itself, draws its power from its many meanings, at once an appropriation, a recognition, a memorial, and a challenge.



6. Portable altar and reliquary of Saint Andrew, ca. 977–93. Chased gold, wood, ivory, enamel, gems, and pearls, 12 ½ x 17 ¾ x 8 7/16 in. (31 x 44.7 x 22 cm). Trier Cathedral Treasury, Trier, Germany

Notes

1. Robert Rauschenberg, video interview by David A. Ross, Walter Hopps, Gary Garrels, and Peter Samis, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, May 6, 1999. Unpublished transcript at the SFMOMA Research Library and Archives, N 6537 .R27 A35 1999a, 45. Ross questioned Rauschenberg about how the work might be a “victory,” which a trophy often commemorates.
2. Ibid., 44. Rauschenberg does not elaborate as to what he might mean.
3. See Eileen Kinsella, “Rauschenberg Eagle Ruffles Feathers,” *ARTnews* 111, no. 5 (2012): 54–55.
4. This was particularly necessary in describing the body of work Rauschenberg created between 1955 and 1961, when he made the majority of his Combines, including *Trophy IV (for John Cage)*. “Combine” is Rauschenberg’s term; Leo Steinberg used “flatbed picture plane” in his assessment of Rauschenberg’s work. See Leo Steinberg, *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972).
5. A flashlight and chain were added to *Trophy IV (for John Cage)* at some point after its first showing at the exhibition [Rauschenberg, Leo Castelli Gallery](#), New York (November 7–December 5, 1961).
6. John Cage, “On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and His Work,” in *Silence: Lectures and Writings by John Cage* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 98. Originally published as John Cage, “On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and his Work,” *Metro* 2 (May 1961): 41.
7. Rauschenberg made trophies in the early 1960s for Cage, Merce Cunningham, Teeny and Marcel Duchamp, Jean Tinguely, and Jasper Johns. A trophy for Darryl Pottorf was added in the 1990s. Rauschenberg referred to [the series](#) thusly: “when you get so involved [with someone]—and it’s like debts—that you wanna thank somebody back who has given you so much, then there’s a new trophy.” See Rauschenberg, interview by Ross, Hopps, et al., May 6, 1999, 44.
8. Rosalind Krauss, “Perpetual Inventory,” in *Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective*, ed. Walter Hopps and Susan Davidson (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1997), 208.
9. Branden W. Joseph recognizes *Automobile Tire Print* as significant in terms of “its simplicity and exposure to the process used in its creation,” linking this to the “implementation of Duchampian strategies” on the part of Rauschenberg by creating an “indexical mark” with the tire print and his employment of Cage (as driver of the car) to manufacture the piece. See Branden W. Joseph, *Random Order: Robert Rauschenberg and the Neo-Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 89–91.
10. That Rauschenberg relinquished control of his mark making in *Automobile Tire Print* also points to Cage insofar as it is an embrace of chance in composition.
11. For an overview of Rauschenberg’s “performative sensibility,” see Nancy Spector, “Rauschenberg and Performance, 1963–67: A ‘Poetry of Infinite Possibilities,’” in *Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective*, ed. Walter Hopps and Susan Davidson (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1997), 226–45. About *Automobile Tire Print* and *First Time Painting*, Spector (227) asserts that these works “embody the defining characteristics of Rauschenberg’s theatrical sensibility: temporality, collaboration, and the elemental presence of a viewer.”
12. A more complete description of the performance can be found in Spector, “Rauschenberg and Performance,” 227. Spector’s text draws upon Calvin Tomkins’s description. See also Calvin Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors: Five Masters of the Avant-Garde* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1965), 228.

13. Cage demonstrated this principle most famously through his 4'33", a composition in which no programmed sounds are performed, thereby attuning "the listener" to the sounds of the performance space itself.
14. *First Time Painting* also has lost its ability to communicate as it did originally; today, one can only encounter it as a fixed record of the performance that brought it into being.
15. Cynthia Hahn, "The Spectacle of the Charismatic Body: Patrons, Artists, and Body-Part Reliquaries," in *Treasures of Heaven: Saints, Relics, and Devotion in Medieval Europe*, ed. Martina Bagnoli, Holger A. Klein, C. Griffith Mann, and James Robinson (Baltimore: Walters Art Museum, 2010), 164. Among other objects, none of which is the remnant of a foot, the portable altar of Saint Andrew contains a relic of a sandal.
16. *Ibid.*, 170.