

Robert Rauschenberg: Bridging Art, Sound, and Percussion

By Scott Courtney

As 2025 marked the centennial of Robert Rauschenberg's birth, this milestone offers a unique opportunity to reflect on and celebrate an artist whose vision resonates deeply for the field of percussion music. Rauschenberg (1925–2008) was more than a pioneering visual artist; he was a champion of interdisciplinary exploration whose legacy resonates deeply within the worlds of percussion and music education. His collaborations with John Cage, innovative use of everyday materials, and embrace of performance and sound as integral artistic components helped dissolve the traditional boundaries between visual art and music. For percussionists — musicians who often operate at the intersection of rhythm, movement, and unconventional sound sources — Rauschenberg's work offers inspiration and a blueprint for creative risk-taking. The Bob Rauschenberg Gallery at Florida SouthWestern State College stands as a living tribute to this spirit, regularly showcasing projects that fuse sound, movement, and technology, mirroring the ever-evolving landscape of contemporary percussion.

While the many contributions of John Cage have routinely appeared in PAS publications, Rauschenberg's centennial presents a timely opportunity to explore his profound contributions. Michael Rosen's insightful article in *Percussive Notes* (Sept. 2012) recounts his meetings with Cage and includes the now-iconic "10 Rules for Students and Teachers," a list of guiding principles released through the Merce Cunningham Studio. These rules, "Always be around," "Come or go to everything," "Always go to class," read as both logical advice and a creative philosophy, one that echoes the intent behind Rauschenberg's Combines. Similarly, Michael Williams' article "John Cage: Professor, Maestro, Percussionist, Composer" (*Percussive Notes*, Aug. 1998) highlights Cage's views on rhythmic structure and the deconstruction of traditional forms, ideas also central to Rauschenberg's compositional approach and his cross-disciplinary collaborations.

Rauschenberg's philosophy holds particular relevance for percussionists because our instruments and performance traditions already invite experimentation. His use of found objects parallels the creation of unconventional percussion instruments; his emphasis on staging and movement aligns with the choreographed precision of percussion ensembles; and his multimedia sensibilities echo the growing use of projections, lighting, and electronics in percussion performance. By embracing his ethos of boundary-blurring creativity, percussionists can deepen their artistic voice, transforming not just what is played, but how one thinks about performance itself.

BACKGROUND AND RELATIONSHIP TO PERCUSSION

Born in Port Arthur, Texas, Rauschenberg began his formal training at the Kansas City Art Institute and later attended Black Mountain College in North Carolina, where he encountered John Cage, Merce Cunningham, and Jasper Johns. These formative relationships fostered a creative ethos that led to the creation of his signature "Combines" — hybrid works that merged painting, sculpture, and found objects into unified compositions. Throughout his career, Rauschenberg explored intersections between sound, movement, and technology, significantly contributing to Pop Art, Fluxus, and performance-art movements.

His artistic legacy is defined by a spirit of collaboration and the belief that creativity thrives in the spaces between disciplines. Works like *Theater Piece No. 1* and *Oracle* challenged audiences to rethink the traditional boundaries of performance, inviting sound and visual art into shared dialogue. Today, his influence is especially relevant to educators and performers seeking to foster interdisciplinary creativity.

Located on the Lee County campus of Florida SouthWestern State College, The Bob Rauschenberg Gallery, founded in 1979 and renamed for Rauschenberg in 2004, reflects his informal, accessible approach to the arts. The gallery has premiered

monumental works and curated interdisciplinary exhibitions spanning literature, music, and visual art. Recent programs have included Ben Neill's mutantrumpet, an electro-acoustic instrument with integrated live visuals, homages to Beat writer William Burroughs and musician David Bradshaw, and lectures by Laurie Anderson and Victor Bockris. Exhibitions have featured figures from punk pioneers Devo to such experimental artists as Japanese percussionist Toshinori Nakatani, underscoring Rauschenberg's broad influence on contemporary creative culture.

The percussion community should continue to celebrate and honor Rauschenberg's vision by embracing the same spirit of experimentation and interdisciplinary collaboration that has long been at the heart of its art form.

THE ART OF THE COMBINE

In the mid-1950s, Rauschenberg began creating what he called Combines: hybrid works that merged painting and sculpture with found objects drawn from everyday life. These pieces incorporated materials as varied as tires, quilts, taxidermy animals, furniture, and newspaper clippings, arranged in layered, often unpredictable compositions. Neither strictly two-dimensional nor fully three-dimensional, Combines blurred the boundaries between artistic categories and invited viewers to reconsider the distinction between art and the objects of daily existence. Rauschenberg's Combines embodied his philosophy of working "in the gap between art and life," a continuum where the richest creative possibilities emerge from the interplay of attention, chance, and the unexpected, creating meaning through the juxtaposition of disparate elements and redefining the possibilities of artistic expression (Tomkins 2005, 85–89).

Among Rauschenberg's most celebrated Combines is *Monogram* (1955–59), a work that has become an icon of postwar American art. The piece features a full-size taxidermy Angora goat encircled by a rubber tire, standing atop a low platform covered with an abstractly painted canvas. The goat, an object of both absurdity and majesty, becomes part of a painterly composition, its presence transforming the work into a dialogue between the everyday and the art historical. Critics at the time were divided, some seeing the work as irreverent or even shocking, while others recognized it as a breakthrough in collapsing the boundaries between painting, sculpture, and life (Tomkins 2005, 85–89).

Another celebrated example is *Bed* (1955), a vertical assemblage made from Rauschenberg's own quilt, pillow, and sheets, mounted on a wooden frame and covered in vigorous strokes of paint. The domestic intimacy of the bedding, marked with the artist's physical gestures, brings the private space of the bedroom into the public realm of the gallery. In works like *Canyon* (1959), featuring a stuffed bald eagle, a pillow tied to the canvas with string, and fragments of fabric and wood, Rauschenberg continued to merge personal artifacts, cultural references, and found materials into dense, layered narratives. These pieces not only disrupted formal

categories but also embodied his belief that art could emerge from the most ordinary of objects, provided they were reimaged through creative juxtaposition (Kotz 2004, 101–108).

Rauschenberg's earliest collaborations with John Cage and Merce Cunningham fundamentally challenged conventions of stage performance, promoting a seamless integration of visual art, sound, and movement. By mixing and layering disparate elements, objects, textures, and images, he created works that placed the real world squarely within the realm of art, constructing meaning through contrast and shared space.

In doing so, Rauschenberg rewrote the rules of artistic engagement. He rejected the notion that only certain materials or subjects were worthy of artistic treatment. As his son, Chris Rauschenberg, once reflected, Robert's guiding principle was simple: never disregard everyday objects. This ethos remains especially resonant for musicians and educators, encouraging a mindset of curiosity, critical observation, and appreciation for the unexpected, qualities essential to any percussionist exploring the intersections of sound, space, and expression.

For percussionists, the term Combine is particularly resonant; it represents the merging of artistic forms into a single, integrated performance. Rauschenberg's collaborations with Cage and Cunningham modeled a fearless blending of visual art, sound, and movement, a sensibility echoed today in immersive art experiences like the *Immersive Van Gogh*, Nigel Stanford's *Cymatics*, multimedia percussion works, and such PASIC presentations as Maria Finkelmeier's physical and sound-responsive projections. His philosophy remains a call to curiosity and innovation, encouraging percussionists to see unlimited creative potential in the materials, spaces, and moments around them. Just as Rauschenberg's Combines united diverse visual elements into a singular statement, percussionists can create their own "sonic combines," musical works that merge traditional instruments, found objects, and multimedia elements into cohesive, immersive performances.

THE SONIC COMBINE AND STRATEGIC STRUCTURES

If Rauschenberg's Combines merged disparate visual elements into unified works, then the Sonic Combine applies that same principle to the world of sound. In percussion, this might mean blending conventional instruments with found objects, layering acoustic and electronic textures, or integrating sound with visual and theatrical elements. The result is not merely a collage of noises, but a carefully constructed performance where each component, whether a snare drum, a sheet of metal, a sampled voice, or a projected image, exists in deliberate relationship to the others.

For percussionists, this approach invites a rethinking of what a "complete" performance can be. A Sonic Combine might involve staging that redefines the performance space, the incorporation of movement or dance, or the use of lighting and video to alter

the audience's perception of time and rhythm. Much like Rauschenberg's process, it thrives on the friction between contrasting materials and the unexpected resonance that can occur when

Photo of "Strategic Structures" courtesy of The Bob Rauschenberg Gallery at FSW



Photo of Rauschenberg playing Bow with Kat Eppler, courtesy of The Bob Rauschenberg Gallery at FSW



they meet. In this way, percussion performance becomes a kind of living installation, immersive, interdisciplinary, and deeply connected to the moment of its creation.

One example can be found in the multimedia performances of Maria Finkelmeier, whose PASIC 2024 presentation integrated live percussion with sound-responsive video projections. In her work, projected visuals were triggered and manipulated in real time by the performer's playing, creating a direct cause-and-effect relationship between sound and image. This interplay transformed the performance into a visual-musical dialogue, echoing Rauschenberg's belief that the richest creative possibilities occur in the space between disciplines (Tomkins 2005, 85–89).

Similarly, composer John Luther Adams has explored large-scale percussion environments in works such as "Inuksuit" (2009), where musicians are positioned throughout a landscape, blending instrumental sounds with the ambient noise of the environment. The audience moves freely among performers, creating an experience in which sound, space, and listener perspective are inseparable (Kotz 2004, 101–108). This spatial awareness parallels Rauschenberg's staging innovations and his use of environment as an active element in the work.

Other percussionists have created Sonic Combines by incorporating theater and movement into their performances. Michael Colgrass's theatrical percussion works, such as "Dreamcatcher" (1985), require the performer to navigate choreography, spoken word, and unconventional props alongside traditional percussion instruments (Colgrass 1985). This integrated approach mirrors Rauschenberg's layering of materials and his insistence that meaning emerges from the juxtaposition of diverse elements.

Even popular music offers examples. Performance painter David Garibaldi, who opened for KISS on their farewell tour, built his act around the synchronization of live painting, music, and movement (Garibaldi 2023). While not strictly percussion, the rhythmic coordination of physical gesture, visual output, and sound reflects the same interdisciplinary impulses that drive the Sonic Combine.

For percussionists, these works serve as both inspiration and a challenge, to think beyond the score and instrument, to design performances that live "in the gap between art and life." By adopting Rauschenberg's mindset, percussionists can create experiences where sound is only one of many equal partners in an evolving, immersive artistic conversation.

THE ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG STUDIO HOUSE BAND

Rauschenberg's intersection with performance art found a unique expression in the ensemble informally known as the Robert Rauschenberg Studio House Band, or Sonic Combine. This avant-garde trio, comprising Kat Eppler, Lawrence Voytek, and Laurence Getford, performed using custom-built metal sculptures, synthesizers, theremins, world flutes, and electronic wind

instruments. Their abstract performances could be discordant, resonant, ethereal, or hauntingly beautiful, embodying the artist's ethos of integrating art, sound, and life through layered, multisensory experiences.

One especially notable collaboration resulted in the album *Strategic Structures* (1989), recorded live at Rauschenberg's beach house on Captiva Island, Florida. The piece was improvised entirely on site, using a series of custom-made metal audio sculptures constructed from such materials as aluminum, bell-grade brass, steel, and both elemental and Alpha/Beta weapons-grade titanium. These structures were shaped using an 8,000-degree arc welding torch with high-frequency current (440 V, 310 A), and outfitted with electronic audio processors to amplify and color the resonant tones produced by bowing, plucking, or striking them (Sonic Combine).

This fusion of organic and technological, visual and sonic, aligns precisely with Rauschenberg's philosophy of creativity, where experimentation and everyday materials converge to redefine artistic boundaries. The Sonic Combine transforms performance into a tactile, acoustic, and sculptural act, inviting percussionists to consider sound-making as both construction and expression.

As Bob Rauschenberg Gallery Director Jade Dellinger reminds us, "Bob always said that 'success is a worn down pencil lead' and believed that it was always about putting in the effort. He played scratched Edith Piaf LP records at the first-ever 'happening,' John Cage's 'Theater Piece #1,' and won a Grammy Award for his collaborative package design with the Talking Heads on their *Speaking in Tongues* album" (Dellinger, 2025). This

perspective reinforces the Sonic Combine's creative philosophy: experimentation, collaboration, and a willingness to embrace imperfection as part of the art-making process.

The Sonic Combine transforms performance into a tactile, acoustic, and sculptural act, inviting percussionists to see instrument-making, staging, and sound design as integral to musical expression. In doing so, it offers a living model of how Rauschenberg's principles can shape contemporary percussion practice.

In April 2025, Sonic Combine collaborated with Japanese percussionist Tatsuya Nakatani, known for his masterful use of bowed gongs and handmade instruments. Nakatani's approach, grounded in the Japanese aesthetic of *ma* (間), the space between sounds, offered a compelling complement to Sonic Combine's experimental ethos. His Nakatani Gong Orchestra often includes local performers to create immersive, meditative soundscapes, and this collaboration extends Rauschenberg's legacy of experimental partnership, merging visual art, cultural exchange, and sonic exploration into a powerful, genre-defying performance.

RELEVANCE FOR PERCUSSIONISTS

For percussionists, Rauschenberg's philosophy offers more than artistic admiration; it provides a practical framework for creative exploration. His refusal to separate art from life mirrors the way percussionists have long approached their craft: finding instruments in unexpected places, drawing inspiration from other disciplines, and expanding the definition of performance. Just as his Combines assembled disparate materials into unified works, "sonic combines" can be built that integrate traditional percussion, found objects, electronics, and visual or theatrical elements into cohesive artistic statements.

In the classroom, this might begin with simple, exploratory activities, assignments where students create short compositions using both standard instruments and everyday objects, or projects where sound is paired with a visual or physical component. Rauschenberg's belief in "never disregarding everyday objects" encourages students to listen closely to their environment and recognize the musical potential in materials beyond the percussion cabinet. This can foster curiosity, critical thinking, and problem-solving, while also cultivating a personal connection to the creative process.

In modern performance, embracing Rauschenberg's interdisciplinary approach can push percussionists to reimagine the concert experience. This might mean collaborating with visual artists, dancers, or projection designers; rethinking stage layout and audience interaction; or blending acoustic timbres with electronic processing to create immersive soundscapes. The goal is not novelty for its own sake, but rather the thoughtful layering of media to enhance artistic impact, much as Rauschenberg sought meaning through the interplay of contrast, texture, and space.

THREE TAKEAWAYS FOR PERCUSSIONISTS

- **Experiment Across Disciplines:** Integrate elements from visual art, theater, dance, and technology into percussion performances to create multi-sensory experiences.
- **Find Music in Everyday Objects:** Encourage exploration of non-traditional sound sources, emphasizing the creative value of materials often overlooked. Example: John Cage's "Living Room Music" uses household items, magazines, books, and tabletops as instruments, a concept easily adaptable for classroom improvisation projects.
- **Foster Ownership in Students:** Design classroom projects that give students a sense of authorship and personal connection, moving them from passive engagement to true commitment. Example: In a high school percussion ensemble, students selected found objects meaningful to them and composed a piece integrating those sounds with traditional instruments, resulting in a performance that was uniquely theirs.

Ultimately, applying Rauschenberg's theories allows percussionists to design performances that are as visually compelling as they are sonically rich, inviting audiences into a multi-sensory conversation. Whether in a classroom lab or on a festival stage, his legacy reminds us that our work is at its most powerful when it inhabits "the gap between art and life," where creativity feels alive, relevant, and deeply human.

CONCLUSIONS

As Rauschenberg once remarked, "Fort Myers is as small as your mind is... It can be just as large as the world is!" That sentiment feels especially relevant in my role as faculty at Florida SouthWestern State College, home to the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery. The continued programs, lectures, and performances presented here not only celebrate his legacy but also serve as a constant source of inspiration. They remind us that, like Rauschenberg, we can choose to see our local community as a hub for global ideas, an environment where creativity is nurtured, boundaries are challenged, and our minds are always moving forward.

Robert Rauschenberg's legacy is undeniably relevant to percussionists, particularly in how his artistic philosophy embraces innovation, interdisciplinarity, and the breaking of traditional boundaries. His concept of the Combine, merging everyday objects with high art, parallels percussion's unique ability to incorporate a wide variety of materials and sounds into musical expression. Like Rauschenberg, percussionists often work with diverse instruments, unconventional objects, and experimental techniques to create new textures, rhythms, and sonic landscapes. His collaborations with avant-garde musicians and performers, most notably John Cage, demonstrate a deep understanding of the potential for sound to transcend conventional limits, a sensibility deeply familiar to our craft.

Furthermore, Rauschenberg's integration of sound, movement, and visual media reflects a holistic approach to performance that resonates with contemporary percussionists who increasingly embrace multimedia, technology, and the physicality of music-making. His belief in the "gap between art and life," where creativity thrives in unexpected collisions, speaks directly to percussionists who navigate the spaces between genres, disciplines, and cultural contexts.

As educators, percussionists can draw on his approach to foster student ownership, curiosity, and a willingness to experiment, qualities that lead to deeper artistic commitment. As performers, percussionists can apply his vision to create experiences that are immersive, interdisciplinary, and personally meaningful.

In these years following the centennial of his birth, Rauschenberg's pioneering spirit continues to challenge us to see percussion not just as a musical discipline, but as a boundless art form, one where sound, image, movement, and life itself are interconnected. His work reminds everyone that the richest performances emerge when one embraces the unexpected,

values the everyday, and allows art to dissolve the boundaries that too often define it.

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