

## On the Museum's Ruins

DOUGLAS CRIMP

*The German word museal [museumlike] has unpleasant overtones. It describes objects to which the observer no longer has a vital relationship and which are in the process of dying. They owe their preservation more to historical respect than to the needs of the present. Museum and mausoleum are connected by more than phonetic association. Museums are like the family sepulchres of works of art.*  
—Theodor W. Adorno, "Valéry Proust Museum"

In his review of the new installation of nineteenth-century art at the Metropolitan Museum, Hilton Kramer attacks the inclusion of salon painting in the André Meyer Galleries. Characterizing that art as silly, sentimental, and impotent, Kramer goes on to assert that, had the reinstallation been done a generation earlier, such pictures would have remained in the museum's store-rooms, to which they had so justly been consigned:

It is the destiny of corpses, after all, to remain buried, and salon painting was found to be very dead indeed.

But nowadays there is no art so dead that an art historian cannot be found to detect some simulacrum of life in its moldering remains. In the last decade, there has, in fact, arisen in the scholarly world a powerful sub-profession that specializes in these lugubrious disinterments.<sup>1</sup>

Kramer's metaphor of death and decay in the museum recalls Adorno's essay, in which the opposite but complementary experiences of Valéry and Proust at the Louvre are analyzed, except that Adorno insists upon this *museal* mortality as a necessary effect of an institution caught in the contradictions of its culture and therefore extending to every object contained there.<sup>2</sup> Kramer, on the other hand, retaining his faith in the eternal life of masterpieces, ascribes the conditions of life and death not to the museum or the particular history of which it is an instrument, but to artworks themselves, their autonomous quality threatened only by the distortions that a particular misguided installation might impose. He therefore wishes to explain "this curious turnabout that places a meretricious little picture like Gérôme's 'Pygmalion and Galatea' under the same roof with masterpieces on the order of Goya's 'Pepito' and Manet's 'Woman with a Parrot.' What kind of taste is it—or what standard of values—that can so easily accommodate such glaring opposites?"

The answer [Kramer thinks] is to be found in that much-discussed phenomenon—the death of modernism. So long as the modernist movement was understood to be thriving, there could be no question about a revival of painters like Gérôme or Bouguereau. Modernism exerted a moral as well as an esthetic authority that precluded such a development. But the demise of modernism has left us with few, if any, defenses against the incursions of debased taste. Under the new post-modernist dispensation, anything goes. . . .

It is as an expression of this post-modernist ethos . . . that the new installation of 19th century art at the Met needs . . . to be understood. What we are given in the beautiful André Meyer Galleries is the first comprehensive account of the 19th century from a post-modernist point of view in one of our major museums.<sup>3</sup>

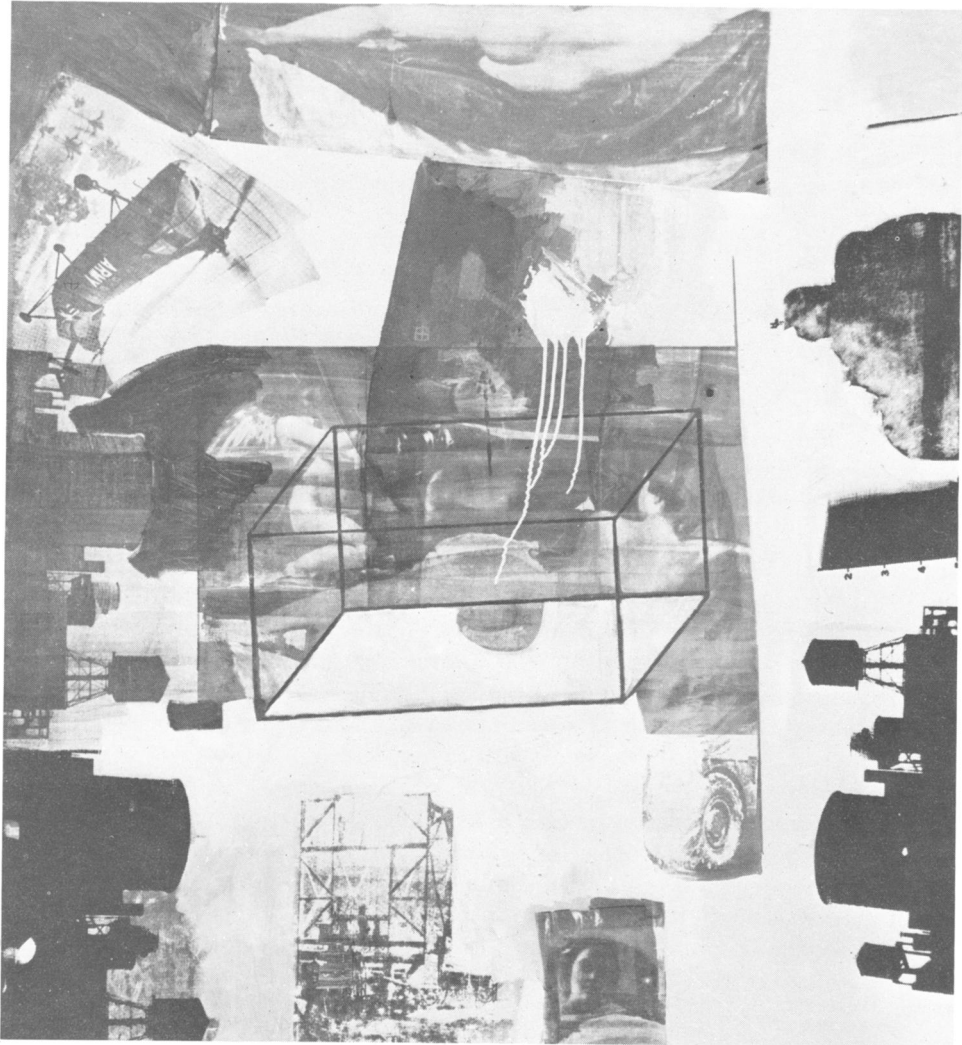
We have here yet another example of Kramer's moralizing cultural conservatism disguised as progressive modernism. But we also have a very interesting

1. Hilton Kramer, "Does Gérôme Belong with Goya and Monet?" *New York Times*, April 13, 1980, section 2, p. 35.

2. Theodor W. Adorno, "Valéry Proust Museum," *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber, London, Neville Spearman, 1967, pp. 173–186.

3. Kramer, p. 35.

puzzle, whose pieces are not, in my estimation, fitted together right, perhaps because a crucial one is missing. The pieces Kramer has assembled are the museum, art history, modernism, and postmodernism. To which I would add photography, and complete the puzzle to look, I would say, something like this:



For I want to claim that Rauschenberg's art, using the medium of photography and at the threshold of postmodernism, enacts a deconstruction of the discourse of the museum, of its pretensions to anything we could possibly call knowledge.

One of the early instances of the term *postmodernism* as applied to the visual arts occurs in Leo Steinberg's "Other Criteria," in the course of a discussion of Rauschenberg's work and its transmutation of the picture surface into what Steinberg calls a flatbed, referring, significantly, to a printing press.<sup>4</sup> This flatbed picture plane is an altogether new kind of picture surface, one that effects, according to Steinberg, a radical shift from nature to culture. That is, it is a surface which can receive a vast and heterogeneous array of cultural images and artifacts that had not been compatible with the pictorial field of either premodernist or modernist painting. (A modernist painting retains a "natural" orientation to the spectator's vision, which the postmodernist picture abandons.) Although it is doubtful that Steinberg had a very precise notion of the far-reaching implications of his term *postmodernism*, a term now used extremely promiscuously, his reading of the revolution implicit in Rauschenberg's art can be both focused and extended by taking this designation seriously.

Presumably unconsciously, Steinberg's essay suggests important parallels with the "archeological" enterprise of Michel Foucault. Not only does the very term *postmodernism* imply the foreclosure of what Foucault would call the *episteme*, or archive, of modernism, but even more specifically, by insisting upon the radically different kinds of picture surfaces upon which different kinds of data can be accumulated and organized, Steinberg selects the very figure that Foucault uses to represent the incompatibility of historical periods: the tables upon which their knowledge is tabulated.

Foucault's project involves the replacement of those unities of humanist historical discourse such as tradition, influence, development, evolution, source, and origin with concepts like discontinuity, rupture, threshold, limit, series, and transformation. Thus, in Foucault's terms, if the surface of a Rauschenberg painting truly involves the kind of transformation that Steinberg claims it does, then it cannot be said to evolve from, or in any way be continuous with a modernist picture surface.<sup>5</sup> And if Rauschenberg's flatbed pictures are experienced as effecting such a rupture or discontinuity with the modernist past, as I believe they do, and as I think do the works of many other artists of the present, then perhaps we are indeed experiencing one of those cataclysmic ruptures in the epistemological field that Foucault describes, a rupture as thorough as that which separates the age of classicism (the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) from the age of modernism, the analysis of wealth from economics, natural history from biology, general grammar from philology.<sup>6</sup> But it is not, of course, only the

4. Leo Steinberg, "Other Criteria," *Other Criteria*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1972, pp. 55-91. This essay is based on a lecture presented at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in March 1968.

5. See Rosalind Krauss's discussion of the radical difference between cubist collage and Rauschenberg's "reinvented" collage in "Rauschenberg and the Materialized Image," *Artforum*, XIII, 4 (December 1974), 36-43.

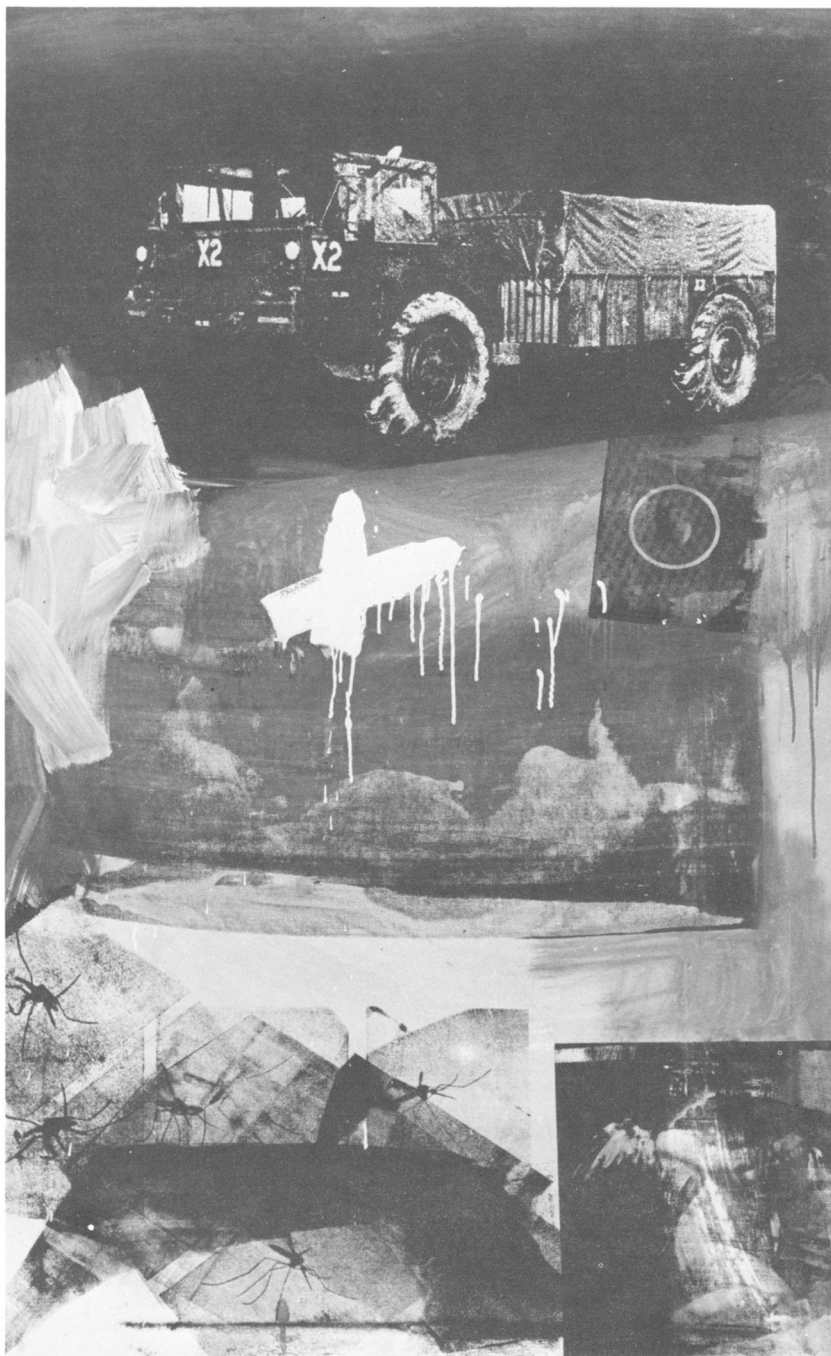
6. These are the subjects analyzed by Foucault in *The Order of Things*, New York, Pantheon, 1970.

epistemological field that is unrecognizably transformed at certain moments in history. New institutions of power, as well as new discourses, arise; indeed the two are interdependent. Foucault has concentrated on modern institutions of confinement: the asylum, the clinic, and the prison; for him, it is these institutions that produce the respective discourses of madness, illness, and criminality—not the other way around. There is another institution of confinement ripe for analysis in Foucault's terms: the museum; and another discipline: art history. They are, together with photography, or perhaps more precisely the repression and selective use of photography, the preconditions of the discourse that we call modern art. Foucault himself has hinted at the way to begin thinking about this analysis.

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The beginning of modernism in painting is usually located in Manet's work of the early sixties, in which painting's relationship to its art-historical precedents was made shamelessly obvious. Titian's *Venus of Urbino* is meant to be as recognizable a vehicle for the picture of a modern courtesan in Manet's *Olympia* as is the unmodeled pink paint that composes her body. Just one hundred years after Manet problematized painting's relationship to its sources,<sup>7</sup> Rauschenberg made a series of pictures using the images of Velazquez's *Rokeby Venus* and Rubens's *Venus at Her Toilet*. But Rauschenberg's references to these old-master paintings is effected entirely differently from Manet's; while Manet duplicates the pose, composition, and certain details of the original in a painted transformation, Rauschenberg simply silkscreens a photographic reproduction of the original onto a surface that might also contain such images as trucks and helicopters. And if trucks and helicopters cannot have found their way onto the surface of *Olympia*, it is obviously not only because such products of the modern age had not yet been invented. More crucially, it is because of the structural coherence that made an image-bearing surface legible as a picture at the threshold of modernism, as

7. Of course, not all art historians would agree that Manet problematized the relationship of painting to its sources. This is, however, the initial assumption of Michael Fried's "Manet's Sources: Aspects of his Art, 1859–1865" (*Artforum*, VII, 7 [March 1969], 28–82), whose first sentence reads: "If a single question is guiding for our understanding of Manet's art during the first half of the 1860s, it is this: What are we to make of the numerous references in his paintings of those years to the work of the great painters of the past?" (p. 28). In part, Fried's presupposition that Manet's references to earlier art were *different*, in their "literalness and obviousness," from the ways in which Western painting had previously used sources led Theodore Reff to attack Fried's essay, saying, for example, "When Reynolds portrays his sitters in attitudes borrowed from famous pictures by Holbein, Michelangelo, and Annibale Carracci, wittily playing on their relevance to his own subjects; when Ingres deliberately refers in his religious compositions to those of Raphael, and in his portraits to familiar examples of Greek sculpture or Roman painting, do they not reveal the same historical consciousness that informs Manet's early work?" (Theodore Reff, "Manet's Sources: A Critical Evaluation," *Artforum*, VIII, 1 [September 1969], 40). As a result of this denial of difference, Reff is able to continue applying to modernism art-historical methodologies devised to explain past art, for example that which explains the very particular relationship of Italian Renaissance art to the art of classical antiquity.



*Robert Rauschenberg. Crocus. 1962.*

opposed to the radically different pictorial logic that obtains at the beginning of postmodernism. Just what it is that constitutes the particular logic of a Manet painting is discussed in an essay by Foucault about Flaubert's *Temptation of St. Anthony*:

*Déjeuner sur l'Herbe* and *Olympia* were perhaps the first "museum" paintings, the first paintings in European art that were less a response to the achievement of Giorgione, Raphael, and Velazquez than an acknowledgement (supported by this singular and obvious connection, using this legible reference to cloak its operation) of the new and substantial relationship of painting to itself, as a manifestation of the existence of museums and the particular reality and interdependence that paintings acquire in museums. In the same period, *The Temptation* was the first literary work to comprehend the greenish institutions where books are accumulated and where the slow and incontrovertible vegetation of learning quietly proliferates. Flaubert is to the library what Manet is to the museum. They both produced works in a self-conscious relationship to earlier paintings or texts—or rather to the aspect in painting or writing that remains indefinitely open. They erect their art within the archive. They were not meant to foster the lamentations—the lost youth, the absence of vigor, and the decline of inventiveness—through which we reproach our Alexandrian age, but to unearth an essential aspect of our culture: every painting now belongs within the squared and massive surface of painting and all literary works are confined to the indefinite murmur of writing.<sup>8</sup>

At a later point in this essay, Foucault says that "*Saint Anthony* seems to summon *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, at least to the extent that the latter stands as its grotesque shadow." If *The Temptation* points to the library as the generator of modern literature, then *Bouvard and Pécuchet* fingers it as the dumping grounds of an irredeemable classical culture. *Bouvard and Pécuchet* is a novel that systematically parodies the inconsistencies, irrelevancies, the massive foolishness of received ideas in the mid-nineteenth century. Indeed a "Dictionary of Received Ideas" was to comprise part of a second volume of Flaubert's last, unfinished novel.

*Bouvard and Pécuchet* is the narrative of two loony Parisian bachelors who, at a chance meeting, discover between themselves a profound sympathy, and also that they are both copy clerks. They share a distaste for city life and particularly for their fate of sitting behind desks all day. When Bouvard inherits a small fortune the two buy a farm in Normandy, to which they retire, expecting there to

8. Michel Foucault, "Fantasia of the Library," *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1977, pp. 92-93.

meet head on the reality that was denied them in the half-life of their Parisian offices. They begin with the idea that they will farm their farm, at which they fail miserably. From agriculture they move to a more specialized field: arboriculture. Failing that they decide upon garden architecture. To prepare themselves for each of their new professions, they consult various manuals and treatises, in which they are extremely perplexed to find contradictions and misinformation of all kinds. The advice they seek in them is either confusing or utterly inapplicable; theory and practice never coincide. But undaunted by their successive failures, they move on inexorably to the next activity, only to find that it too is incommensurate with the texts which purport to represent it. They try chemistry, physiology, anatomy, geology, archeology . . . the list goes on. When they finally succumb to the fact that the knowledge they've relied upon is a mass of contradictions, utterly haphazard, and quite disjunct from the reality they'd sought to confront, they revert to their initial task of copying. Here is one of Flaubert's scenarios for the end of the novel:

They copy papers haphazardly, everything they find, tobacco pouches, old newspapers, posters, torn books, etc. (real items and their imitations. Typical of each category).

Then, they feel the need for a taxonomy. They make tables, antithetical oppositions such as "crimes of the kings and crimes of the people"—blessings of religion, crimes of religion. Beauties of history, etc.; sometimes, however, they have real problems putting each thing in its proper place and suffer great anxieties about it.

—Onward! Enough speculation! Keep on copying! The page must be filled. Everything is equal, the good and the evil. The farcical and the sublime—the beautiful and the ugly—the insignificant and the typical, they all become an exaltation of the statistical. There are nothing but facts—and phenomena.

Final bliss.<sup>9</sup>

In a recent essay about the novel, Eugenio Donato argues persuasively that the emblem for the series of heterogeneous activities of Bouvard and Pécuchet is not, as Foucault and others have claimed, the library-encyclopedia, but rather the museum. This is not only because the museum is a privileged term in the novel itself, but also because of the absolute heterogeneity it gathers together. The museum contains everything the library contains and it contains the library as well:

9. Quoted in Eugenio Donato, "The Museum's Furnace: Notes Toward a Contextual Reading of *Bouvard and Pécuchet*," *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, ed. Josué V. Harari, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1979, p. 214. I wish to thank Rosalind Krauss for bringing this essay to my attention and more generally for our many discussions of the issues raised here.

If Bouvard and Pécuchet never assemble what can amount to a library, they nevertheless manage to constitute for themselves a private museum. The museum, in fact, occupies a central position in the novel; it is connected to the characters' interest in archeology, geology, and history and it is thus through the *Museum* that questions of origin, causality, representation, and symbolization are most clearly stated. The *Museum*, as well as the questions it tries to answer, depends upon an archeological epistemology. Its representational and historical pretensions are based upon a number of metaphysical assumptions about origins—archeology intends, after all, to be a science of the *archē*s. Archeological origins are important in two ways: each archeological artifact has to be an original artifact, and these original artifacts must in turn explain the “meaning” of a subsequent larger history. Thus, in Flaubert's caricatural example, the baptismal font that Bouvard and Pécuchet discover has to be a Celtic sacrificial stone, and Celtic culture has in turn to act as an original master pattern for cultural history.<sup>10</sup>

Not only do Bouvard and Pécuchet derive all of Western culture from the few stones that remain from the Celtic past, but the “meaning” of that culture as well. Those menhirs lead them to construct the phallic wing of their museum:

In former times towers, pyramids, candles, milestones and even trees had a phallic significance, and for Bouvard and Pécuchet everything became phallic. They collected swing-poles of carriages, chair-legs, cellar bolts, pharmacists' pestles. When people came to see them they would ask: ‘What do you think that looks like?’ then confided the mystery, and if there were objections, they shrugged their shoulders pityingly.<sup>11</sup>

Even in this subcategory of phallic objects, Flaubert maintains the heterogeneity of the museum's artifacts, a heterogeneity which defies the systematization and homogenization that knowledge demands.

The set of objects the Museum displays is sustained only by the fiction that they somehow constitute a coherent representational universe. The fiction is that a repeated metonymic displacement of fragment for totality, object to label, series of objects to series of labels, can still produce a representation which is somehow adequate to a nonlinguis-

10. *Ibid.*, p. 220. The apparent continuity between Foucault's and Donato's essays here is misleading, inasmuch as Donato is explicitly engaged in an attack upon Foucault's archeological methodology, claiming that it implicates Foucault in a return to a metaphysics of origins.

11. Gustave Flaubert, *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer, New York, Penguin Books, 1976, pp. 114-115.

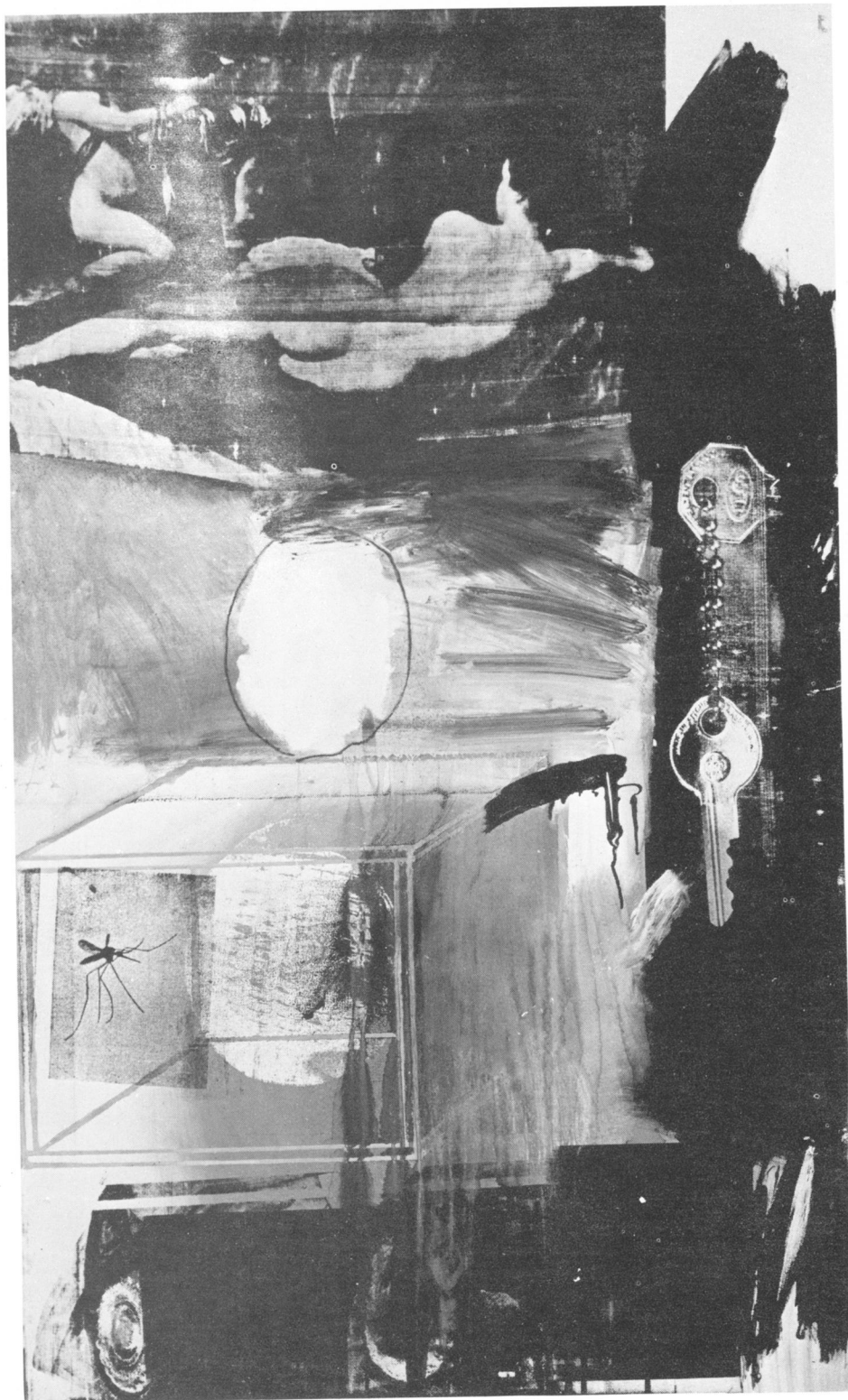
tic universe. Such a fiction is the result of an uncritical belief in the notion that ordering and classifying, that is to say, the spatial juxtaposition of fragments, can produce a representational understanding of the world. Should the fiction disappear, there is nothing left of the *Museum* but “bric-a-brac,” a heap of meaningless and valueless fragments of objects which are incapable of substituting themselves either metonymically for the original objects or metaphorically for their representations.<sup>12</sup>

This perception of the museum is what Flaubert figures through the comedy of *Bouvard and Pécuchet*. Founded on the disciplines of archeology and natural history, both inherited from the classical age, the museum was a discredited institution from its very inception. And the history of museology is a history of all the various attempts to deny the heterogeneity of the museum, to reduce it to a homogeneous system or series. The faith in the possibility of ordering the museum’s “bric-a-brac,” echoing that of Bouvard and Pécuchet themselves, persists until today. Reinstallations like that of the André Meyer Galleries, particularly numerous throughout the past decade, are testimonies to that faith. What so alarms Hilton Kramer in this particular instance is that the criterion for determining the order of aesthetic objects in the museum throughout the era of modernism—the “self-evident” quality of masterpieces—has been broken, and as a result “anything goes.” Nothing could speak more eloquently of the fragility of the museum’s claims to represent anything coherent at all.

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In the period following World War II, perhaps the greatest monument to the museum’s discourse is André Malraux’s *Museum Without Walls*. If *Bouvard and Pécuchet* is a parody of received ideas of the mid-nineteenth century, the *Museum Without Walls* is the hyperbole of such ideas in the mid-twentieth. Specifically, what Malraux unconsciously parodies is “art history as a humanistic discipline.” For Malraux finds in the notion of style the ultimate homogenizing principle, indeed the essence of art, hypostatized, interestingly enough, through the medium of photography. Any work of art that can be photographed can take its place in Malraux’s super-museum. But photography not only secures the admittance of objects, fragments of objects, details, etc., to the museum, it is also the organizing device: it reduces the now even vaster heterogeneity to a single perfect similitude. Through photographic reproduction a cameo takes up residence on the page next to a painted tondo and a sculpted relief; a detail of a Rubens in Antwerp is

12. Donato, p. 223. No distinctions are made in Donato’s essay, nor in my own, between the art museum and its prototype, the natural history museum. The reasons for removing art to its own special museum and the particular history of that institution must be the subject of another essay.



compared to that of a Michelangelo in Rome. The art historian's slide lecture, the art-history student's slide comparison exam belong in the museum without walls. In a recent example provided by one of our most eminent art historians, the oil sketch for a tiny detail of a cobblestone street in *Paris—A Rainy Day*, painted in the 1870s by Gustave Caillebotte, occupies the left-hand screen while a painting by Robert Ryman from the *Winsor* series occupies the right; and presto! they are revealed to be one and the same.<sup>13</sup> But what kind of knowledge is it that this artistic essence, style, can provide? Here is Malraux:

Reproduction has disclosed the whole of world's sculpture. It has multiplied accepted masterpieces, promoted other works to their due rank and launched some minor styles—in some cases, one might say, invented them. It is introducing the language of color into art history; in our Museum without Walls picture, fresco, miniature and stained-glass window seem of one and the same family. For all alike—miniatures, frescoes, stained glass, tapestries, Scythian plaques, pictures, Greek vase paintings, "details" and even statuary—have become "colorplates." In the process they have lost their properties as *objects*; but, by the same token, they have gained something: the utmost significance as to *style* that they can possibly acquire. It is hard for us clearly to realize the gulf between the performance of an Aeschylean tragedy, with the instant Persian threat and Salamis looming across the Bay, and the effect we get from reading it; yet, dimly albeit, we feel the difference. All that remains of Aeschylus is his genius. It is the same with figures that in reproduction lose both their original significance as objects and their function (religious or other); we see them only as works of art and they bring home to us only their makers' talent. We might almost call them not "works" but "moments" of art. Yet diverse

13. This comparison was first presented by Robert Rosenblum in a symposium entitled "Modern Art and the Modern City: From Caillebotte and the Impressionists to the Present Day," held in conjunction with the Gustave Caillebotte exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum in March 1977. Rosenblum published a version of his lecture, although only works by Caillebotte were illustrated. The following excerpt will suffice to give an impression of the comparisons Rosenblum drew: "Caillebotte's art seems equally in tune with some of the structural innovations of recent non-figurative painting and sculpture. His embracing, in the 1870s, of the new experience of modern Paris . . . involves fresh ways of seeing that are surprisingly close to our own decade. For one, he seems to have polarized more than any of his Impressionist contemporaries the extremities of the random and the ordered, usually juxtaposing these contrary modes in the same work. Parisians in city and country come and go in open spaces, but within their leisurely movements are grids of arithmetic, technological regularity. Crisscrossing or parallel patterns of steel girders move with an A-A-A-A beat along the railing of a bridge. Checkerboards of square pavement stones map out the repetitive grid systems we see in Warhol or early Stella, Ryman or Andre. Clean stripes, as in Daniel Buren[1], suddenly impose a cheerful, primary esthetic order upon urban flux and scatter." ("Gustave Caillebotte: The 1970s and the 1870s," *Artforum*, XV, 7 [March 1977], 52). When Rosenblum again presented the Ryman-Caillebotte slide comparison in a symposium on modernism at Hunter College this past March, he admitted that it was perhaps what Panofsky would have called a pseudomorphism.

as they are, all these objects . . . speak for the same endeavor; it is as though an unseen presence, the spirit of art, were urging all on the same quest. . . . Thus it is that, thanks to the rather specious unity imposed by photographic reproduction on a multiplicity of objects, ranging from the statue to the bas-relief, from bas-reliefs to seal-impressions, and from these to the plaques of the nomads, a "Babylonian style" seems to emerge as a real entity, not a mere classification—as something resembling, rather, the life-story of a great creator. Nothing conveys more vividly and compellingly the notion of a destiny shaping human ends than do the great styles, whose evolutions and transformations seem like long scars that Fate has left, in passing, on the face of the earth.<sup>14</sup>

All the works of what we call art, or at least all of them that can be submitted to the process of photographic reproduction, can take their place in the great super-oeuvre, Art as ontological essence, created not by men but by Man. This is the comforting "knowledge" to which the *Museum Without Walls* gives testimony. And concomitantly, it is the deception to which art history, a discipline now thoroughly professionalized, is most deeply, if often unconsciously, committed.

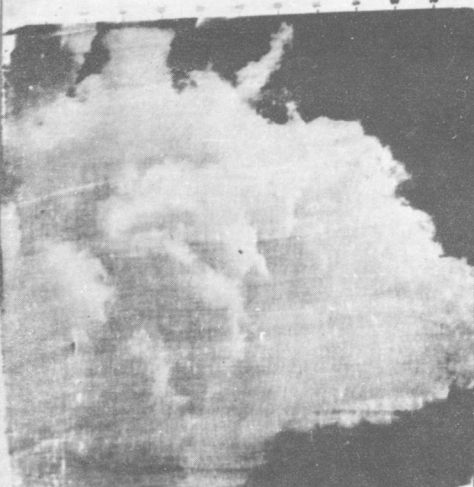
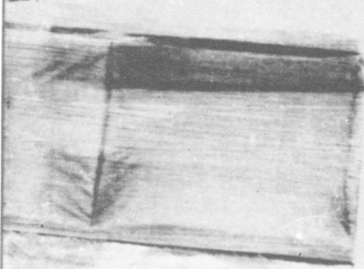
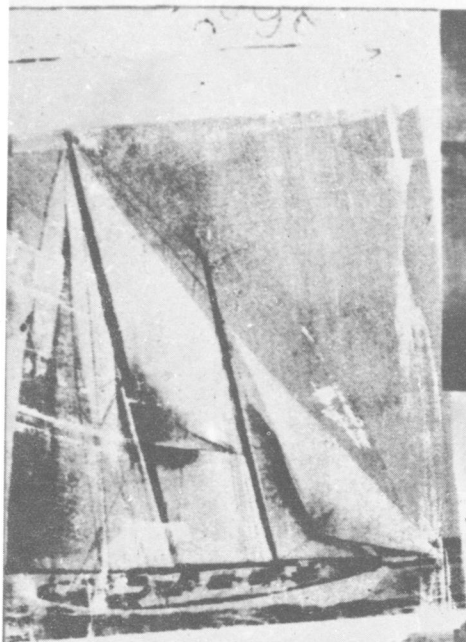
But Malraux makes a fatal error near the end of his *Museum*: he admits within its pages the very thing that had constituted its homogeneity; that thing is of course photography. So long as photography was merely a *vehicle* by which art objects entered the museum, a certain coherence obtained. But once photography itself enters, an art object among others, heterogeneity is reestablished at the heart of the museum; its pretensions to knowledge are doomed. Even photography cannot hypostatize style from a photograph.

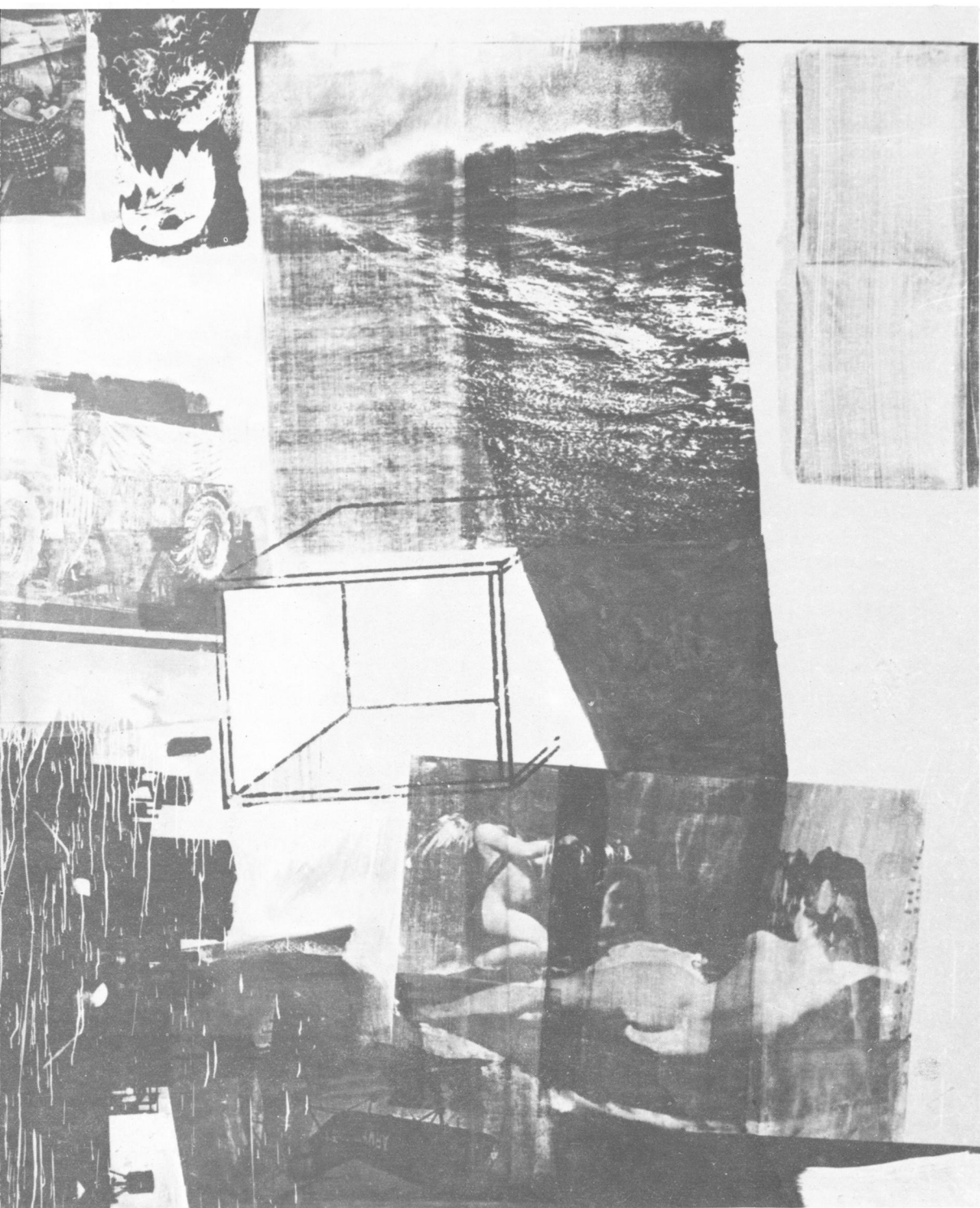
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In Flaubert's "Dictionary of Received Ideas" the entry under "Photography" reads, "Will make painting obsolete. (See DAGUERREOTYPE.)" And the entry for "Daguerreotype" reads, in turn, "Will take the place of painting. (See PHOTOGRAPHY.)"<sup>15</sup> No one took seriously the possibility that photography might usurp painting. Less than half a century after photography's invention such a notion was one of those received ideas to be parodied. In our century until recently only Walter Benjamin gave credence to the notion, claiming that inevitably photography must have a truly profound effect upon art, even to the extent that

14. André Malraux, *Museum Without Walls, The Voices of Silence*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, Bollingen Series XXIV, 1978, pp. 44, 46.

15. Flaubert, pp. 321, 300.





*Robert Rauschenberg. Bicycle. 1963.*

the art of painting might disappear, having lost its all-important aura through mechanical reproduction.<sup>16</sup> A denial of this power of photography to transform art continued to energize modernist painting through the immediate postwar period in America. But then in the work of Rauschenberg photography began to conspire with painting in its own destruction.

While it was only with slight discomfort that Rauschenberg was called a painter throughout the first decade of his career, when he systematically embraced photographic images in the early sixties it became less and less possible to think of his work as *painting*. It was instead a hybrid form of *printing*. Rauschenberg had moved definitively from techniques of *production* (combines, assemblages) to techniques of *reproduction* (silkscreens, transfer drawings). And it is that move that requires us to think of Rauschenberg's art as postmodernist. Through reproductive technology postmodernist art dispenses with the aura. The fantasy of a creating subject gives way to the frank confiscation, quotation, excerptation, accumulation, and repetition of already existing images.<sup>17</sup> Notions of originality, authenticity, and presence, essential to the ordered discourse of the museum, are undermined. Rauschenberg steals the *Rokeby Venus* and screens her onto the surface of *Crocus*, which also contains pictures of mosquitoes and a truck, as well as a reduplicated Cupid with a mirror. She appears again, twice, in *Transom*, now in the company of a helicopter and repeated images of water towers on Manhattan rooftops. In *Bicycle* she reappears with the truck of *Crocus* and the helicopter of *Transom*, but now also a sailboat, a cloud, an eagle. She reclines just above three Cunningham dancers in *Overcast III* and atop a statue of George Washington and a car key in *Breakthrough*. The absolute heterogeneity that is the purview of both the museum and of photography is spread across the surface of every Rauschenberg work. More importantly, it is spread from work to work.

Malraux was enraptured by the endless possibilities of his Museum, by the proliferation of discourses it could set in motion, establishing ever-new series of iconography and style simply by reshuffling the photographs. That proliferation is enacted by Rauschenberg: Malraux's dream has become Rauschenberg's joke.<sup>18</sup>

16. See Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, New York, Schocken Books, 1969, pp. 217-251.

17. For further discussion of these postmodernist techniques pervasive in recent art, see my essay "Pictures," *October*, 8 (Spring 1979), 75-88; and Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," *October*, 12 (Spring 1980), 67-86. That we are now experiencing the "decay of the aura" that Benjamin predicted can be understood not only in these positive terms of what has replaced it, but also in the many desperate attempts to recuperate it by reviving the style and rhetoric of expressionism. This tendency is, needless to say, particularly strong in the marketplace, but also in museum exhibitions.

18. Just how little inclined to agree with my analysis of the museum Rauschenberg would be is clear from the proclamation he composed for the Metropolitan Museum's Centennial Certificate. It reads: "Treasury of the conscience of man. / Masterworks collected, protected / and celebrated commonly. Timeless in / concept the museum amasses to / concertise a moment of pride / serving to defend the dreams / and ideals apolitically of mankind / aware and responsive to the / changes, needs and complexities / of current life while keeping / history and love alive." The poster was signed by the Museum's officials.

But of course not everyone gets the joke. And so we are still told that order can be made of this stuff; the *Rebus* can be read. It reads, in fact, "That reproduces sundry cases of childish and comic coincidences to be read by eyes opened finally to a pattern of abstract problems."<sup>19</sup> Bouvard and Pécuchet would surely be confused.

19. This reading of Rauschenberg's *Rebus* appears in Charles F. Stuckey, "Reading Rauschenberg," *Art in America*, 65, 2 (March-April 1977), 82. I reproduce it here as a fairly typical example of the blind application of traditional art-historical methodologies to contemporary art.

*Robert Rauschenberg. Breakthrough II. 1965.*

