

The Shade of the Body:
Notions of Materiality in Rauschenberg's Dante Series
Eliza Mott

Excerpt

In almost every drawing in Robert Rauschenberg's *34 Drawings for Dante's Inferno* (1959-60), there is a transferred image of a man with a towel around his waist (Fig. 1). This figure, which Rauschenberg clipped from a *Sports Illustrated* advertisement for golf clubs, represents the protagonist of Dante Alighieri's canonical poem: Dante himself. Rauschenberg stated that this figure was "the most neutral popular image I could find in that scale." This towel-clad Dante moves through the Hell that Rauschenberg visually renders in thirty-four solvent transfer drawings—thirty-four drawings for thirty-four cantos. Though decidedly and intentionally "neutral," the figure's presence as the protagonist, along with the presence of drawn-on arrows, keeps the narrative element of the poem alive in the collage-like works. It also serves to remind the viewer of the authorial presence of the poet himself. After all, Dante's presence was rather enormous for Rauschenberg as he read the *Inferno* and completed the drawings over the course of two and a half years. When writing to Rosalind Krauss about the endeavor—which, for a dyslexic person with no formal education, was *quite* the endeavor—he referred to it as an "exercise," and to himself as a "reporter," as if to undermine his own artistic authority in creating the series. The use of the term "exercise" implies the project is something of a pre-set task that Rauschenberg is completing in order to improve his artistic craft, like a pianist practicing Hanon's exercises in order to become a better pianist. "Reporter," meanwhile, suggests an unbiased mediator of Dante's story, relaying the sequence of events as Dante witnessed them.

While Dante—both poet and protagonist—might be a constant presence in the series, Rauschenberg inserts his own authorial presence as well. His artistic style and personality shine

through in the technique he uses to visualize the *Inferno*, which combines images transferred with a chemical solvent on paper with watercolor, gouache, pencil, and even tracings of his own body. As his image bank, Rauschenberg used clippings from glossy magazines of photographs, illustrations, and text. In order to transfer these images to paper, he would soak them in lighter fluid, place them face down on the page, and draw over them with an empty ballpoint pen. As far as photographic reproduction techniques go, solvent transferring gives the images an inexact, almost veiled quality. In addition to these transferred images, Rauschenberg would draw on the page or apply colors to it. In one drawing, he includes what appears to be a tracing of his hand, and in another, there is a tracing of his right foot.

Rauschenberg's tracings of his own hand and foot allude to the artist's identity and its place in the narrative. Despite having referred to himself as merely a "reporter" of the cantos, Rauschenberg carves out a space for himself in the fourteenth-century epic poem. His indexing of his own body declares an artistic presence in addition to that of Dante's—one that complicates and even perhaps contradicts Dante. While Dante remains a strict adherent to Christian piety, and his journey through Hell is an allegorical journey with the goal of recognizing and rejecting sin, Rauschenberg at times appears to sympathize or ally himself with the sinners being punished. He also uses images from contemporary American politics and pop culture to provide his own commentary about his nation and his era. Despite Rauschenberg's statements about his work on the series, his canto drawings do not adhere strictly to the text but rather create a unique visual interpretation of the poem that incorporates anachronistic and autobiographical elements in order to convey ideas about his own body and sexuality and to explore notions of materiality and immateriality in art.

Formally, Dante and Rauschenberg both set up restrictions or rules only to break them. Just as Dante establishes his protagonist as an outsider in Hell who contrasts with the shades he encounters, only to confuse that separation at times, Rauschenberg establishes a set technique (solvent transfer) only to break free from the limitations of that technique by adding tracings of

his own body... After exploring the background of Rauschenberg's series, I will examine three of Dante's cantos paired with Rauschenberg's drawings of them in order to reveal how both the poet and the artist engage with and complicate notions of materiality and the human body.

Rauschenberg's *Canto XIV: Circle Seven, Round 3, The Violent Against God, Nature, and Art* (Fig. 4)

In Rauschenberg's drawing of Canto XIV, he uses an outline of his own foot in a bright shade of red to make an ambiguous statement. He is simultaneously depicting an element of the canto (a mythic statue's terracotta foot) and using a marking of his body to identify with a group of shades whose punishment is to run barefoot on hot sand. It is taken for granted throughout the literature that this red foot is in fact a tracing of Rauschenberg's own...

However, the red foot tracing could easily be a representation of a separate foot within the canto. In this canto, Virgil tells Dante a myth about the source of all waters in Hell. He describes a mountain, which encases the statue of a giant, whose tears flow to make up the rivers in Hell. This giant statue is made up of many different materials, but his right foot is made of terracotta (Canto XIV, vv. 106-111). That terracotta foot is overlooked in the scholarship on the Dante series, despite the fact that in Rauschenberg's drawing the foot tracing is both a terracotta shade of red and a right foot. It also is much larger than the other footprints within the work and too large to belong to any of the human figures depicted. These factors combine to make it almost impossible to discount a connection between the tracing and the terracotta right foot of the statue of the giant.

In spite of this, the red foot tracing is generally discussed as Rauschenberg's identification with the homosexuality in a kind of coded in-joke. Scholars argue that the viewer who knows the canto knows that Rauschenberg is alluding to his own homosexuality because he is putting his own foot upon the burning sand. This correlates to the sodomites' punishment as it is developed in later cantos (XV, XVI). Quite a few scholars have also written specifically on

Rauschenberg's visual coding of his own sexuality throughout his works. Members of this group, who use iconographic readings to reveal the queer undertones or messages behind the artist's body of work, almost always include or focus upon this tracing of Rauschenberg's foot.

While a singular reading of this drawing is shortsighted and shows a lack of consideration for the text of the whole canto, it is important to consider seriously the interpretation of the foot as identification with the sodomites on the artist's part. If this foot tracing is an expression of the artist's individual perspective, several elements of Canto XIV itself make that statement more complex. In this canto, Virgil warns Dante not to step on the burning sand, for it will injure him ("Now follow me; and mind for your own good / you do not step upon the burning sand / but keep well back along the edge of the wood."). If this tracing represents Rauschenberg's foot as an expression of his identity, he is depicting himself disobeying Virgil's order to Dante. Perhaps Rauschenberg is offering a hypothetical situation wherein Dante disobeys Virgil. If, however, he is depicting his own entry into the narrative, he is contradicting an order given to someone else. This act has its own connotations of temptation. It seems that Virgil's order for Dante to not step on the burning sand somehow tempted Rauschenberg into doing so. In this scenario, awareness of a desire's illicitness might cause the artist to act upon that desire.

Author Commentary

Eliza Mott

Under the guidance of the incredible Susanna Berger of the Department of Art and Archaeology, I wrote my spring semester junior paper on Robert Rauschenberg's 34 Drawings for Dante's *Inferno* (1959-60). Rauschenberg, a post-Abstract Expressionist artist, decided to tackle Dante's 14th-century canonical poem using collage and solvent-transfer techniques. In the paper, I analyze three of Dante's cantos paired with Rauschenberg's corresponding drawings, focusing on the ways in which both poet and artist complicate notions of materiality and the human body.

The excerpt above includes most of my introduction and the final canto-drawing comparison section, which examines Rauschenberg's treatment of Canto XIV of the *Inferno*, in which Dante portrays the punishment of "the Violent Against God, Nature, and Art." I spend much of this section exploring Rauschenberg's choice to trace his own foot. I consider several interpretations of the foot without favoring one over the other. I discuss the iconographic interpretation of the tracing as Rauschenberg's identification with the "sodomites" depicted in this canto. I also offer up the possibility of seeing the foot tracing as a movement toward increased materiality which mirrors the increasing materiality of souls over the course of the *Inferno*.

The greatest difficulty and joy of writing this paper was the constant analytical juggling required in comparing Dante's poem to Rauschenberg's drawings. This was made more difficult by the fact that Rauschenberg's drawings do not illustrate (or at least not in any traditional sense) the plot of the *Inferno*, which is a highly narrative work. As I argue in the essay, Rauschenberg certainly adds his own stylistic flair to the *Inferno*, bringing the epic poem into his era. Oftentimes, Rauschenberg even uses contemporary historical figures, like JFK and Richard Nixon, in the drawings. Thus, not only were two formally different works at play in writing this essay, but so were two different historical periods. As a writer, I had to make sure that I made the separation and also the relationship between these two works and periods very clear throughout my analysis.

Editor Commentary

Emily de La Bruyere

As Eliza herself notes, this paper is a remarkable juggling of Dante and Rauschenberg; close textual analysis and broader comparison; theory and detail. It is no easy task to combine all of those elements into one paper, but Eliza manages to do so gracefully. She carefully examines Rauschenberg's role in his piece while comparing it to Dante's in the original *Inferno* and building to a broader argument about the relationship between artist and work.

We see that layered argument here, as Eliza introduces a claim concerning Rauschenberg's role in his work and then defends it with a close reading—a reading that at the same time homes in on the minute details of a footprint and extends to embrace the larger artistic context in which Rauschenberg operated.

Hers is in many ways the graduated version of a lens paper. She looks at Rauschenberg’s work in terms of Dante’s original text and, in so doing, shines new light on both. Take the analysis of the red foot included above. Eliza examines the tracing both as a stand-alone window into Rauschenberg’s conception of the artist’s role, and in the context of Dante’s poetry as a commentary on the work. The first involves close reading of the footprint, the second a connection to the *Inferno*. Together, Eliza uses them to support her thesis that a.) Rauschenberg is more than just a “reporter” (his foot is in the collage!) and b.) he, like Dante, is not against breaking rules.