# The Conservation Treatment of Robert Rauschenberg's *Untitled (Venetian)*, 1973

by Christine Frohnert and Julia Sybalsky
Cranmer Art Group

***Figure 1:***
Robert Rauschenberg, *Untitled (Venetian),* 1973, Cardboard boxes, wood branch, and lace curtain, 86 x 26 x 105 inches, Estate of Robert Rauschenberg.

***Figure 2:***
Robert Rauschenberg, *Untitled (Venetian),* 1973, Archival Photography (Photo: Eric Pollitzer), Courtesy of the Archives of the Estate of Robert Rauschenberg.

## History of Untitled (Venetian) (1973):

**Robert Rauschenberg's work is known for variability and use of a huge variety of different materials and techniques. Accordingly, his 'Venetian Series' (1972-1973) comprises artworks that include materials in their found state.**

Rauschenberg let the history of the objects inform the content and aura of the works, and he increased the range of materials and expanded the three-dimensionality of the artworks. The assemblages - in this case - found driftwood, fabric and cardboard, are poetic impressions of Venice, a city whose decaying beauty struck a cord with Rauschenberg's own aesthetic.

## Condition of the Sculpture:

**The conservation of Robert Rauschenberg's, Untitled (Venetian) (1973) necessitated an innovative approach due to the fragile condition of its non-traditional media.**

The artwork consists of a weathered tree branch, four cardboard boxes, and a lace curtain. The cardboard boxes are pierced by the branch, and the four elements maintain their relative positions by means of their physical engagement without the use of hardware or adhesive. Over time, gravity and mechanical action involved in the installation and exhibition of 'Untitled (Venetian)' have enlarged the holes in the cardboard so that the boxes no longer support themselves in their original positions on the branch.

***Figure 3:***
Robert Rauschenberg, *Untitled (Venetian),* 1973, Before Treatment Photography. Photo: Julia Sybalsky, 2010.

## Treatment Methodology:

**Treatment required a minimally invasive, reversible, and visually unintrusive means of providing structural reinforcement to the cardboard. A method was developed based on the use of thin, lightweight rods made from various synthetic resins.**

Once inserted into the corrugation layer of the cardboard, the rods provide internal support, permitting further superficial repair. Various resins impart a range of flexibility, offering the versatility needed for different applications. Rods are commercially available in several colors, including shades of yellow and brown that are close to the color of cardboard.

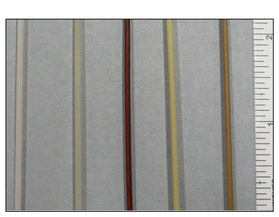


***Figure 4:***
Various resin rods.

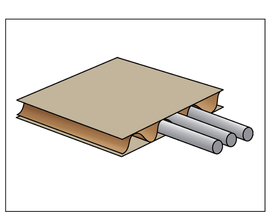


***Figure 5:***
Drawing of rods inserted into corrugation layer. Drawing: Julia Sybalsky, 2010.

## Reinforcement of Crushed and Delaminated Cardboard:

**The cardboard surrounding holes on the top and bottom of each box was badly damaged. The paper liner sheets and corrugation layer were torn and delaminating from one another. Resin rods were used to create an internal framework to which the paper could be secured.**

The crushed layers of paper around each hole were carefully separated, flattened, and realigned. Rods were trimmed to the appropriate length and fed into troughs in the corrugation layer. Approximately three to six rods were inserted on either side of the tree branch depending on the access available. Once inserted, the rods were nearly completely hidden from view by the overlying cardboard liner sheet. Methylcellulose was applied to degraded paper surrounding the hole to restore cohesive strength and rigidity. Using a PVA emulsion, the consolidated paper layers were then attached to one another around the rods.


***Figure 6:*** A hole in one of the cardboard boxes before treatment. The cardboard is badly crushed and delaminating. Photo: Christine Frohnert, 2010.

***Figure 7:*** The same hole before repair, with the branch removed. Photo: Christine Frohnert, 2010.

***Figure 8:*** The repaired hole. The inserted rods are completely hidden from view by the overlying layers of consolidated paper. Photo: Christine Frohnert, 2010.

## Mending and Tear Repair:

**Prominent tears in the cardboard sheet were mended using a series of rods inserted into the corrugation layer to span the damage.**

Torn edges and detached fragments were carefully aligned and rods inserted throughout the length of each tear. By carefully selecting the appropriate diameter rod, it was possible to secure the join by means of friction alone. Planar distortions associated with these damages were accommodated by substituting flexible nylon rods for semi-rigid rods made from phenolic resin. Once each join was positioned, toasted cellulose powder was applied locally to fill gaps and visually integrate the repair.

***Figure 10:***
The detached and damaged flap of cardboard in various stages of repair. Photo: Christine Frohnert, 2010.

***Figure 9:***
A cardboard flap, originally secured by staples, had been torn from the sculpture. Photo: Christine Frohnert, 2010.

***Figure 11:***
The mended flap, reattched with original staples. Photo: Christine Frohnert, 2010.

***Figure 12:***
Robert Rauschenberg, *Untitled (Venetian),* 1973, After Treatment Photography. Photo: Christine Frohnert, 2010.

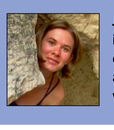
## Conclusion:

**The treatment was successfully designed to meet the goal of using a non-invasive, completely reversible approach that prioritizes the integrity of the work with the highest respect.**

## Acknowledgements:

This treatment was undertaken in summer of 2010 at Cranmer Art Group and carried out by Christine Frohnert and Julia Sybalsky.

**Christine Frohnert**
has been a Conservator of Contemporary Art at Cranmer Art Group in New York since 2005, and an Adjunct Professor at the New York University, Institute of Fine Arts, Conservation Center since 2010.



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