Paxton wrote in a catalogue essay for Rauschenberg’s 1997 retrospective, ‘Movement can be generated in a variety of ways, not just as a means of activating or inhabiting patterns of movement already inherited or rigorously set in place. Performance today, where dance is treated less as a means of self-representation. We are divided. 

Ties between accelerated technological change, image distribution and political disorder have precedent. The 1960s saw huge advances in the quality, rapidity and range of broadcast technologies and print media, which enabled the swift relaying of images of labour strikes, protests and the civil rights movement, alongside those of the war in Vietnam. Different domains of social unrest became interconnected. There was great change in art, too, and the media artists adopted to make sense of it all. “MY FASCINATION WITH IMAGES OPEN 24 HOURS,” wrote Robert Rauschenberg in a short, aphoristic note in 1966. “Technological excitement jostled with unease about the potential reach and damage of widely circulated images.”

Influenced by his experiences at Black Mountain College in 1949 and 1951–52, with its assimilation of Bauhaus principles and ‘stage studies’, Rauschenberg worked for many years with Merce Cunningham, John Cage and the Judson Dance Theater as a set, costume and lighting designer. He performed with the Parisian Danse de Nuit and, in Faust (1967), in front of an enormous, silk-screened backdrop featuring the introductory colour-plate for his book, Performing Image, from Robert Rauschenberg to Our Social Media Age. Published earlier this year by MIT Press.

Guggenheim Museum retrospective, ‘(and [Rauschenberg] generated his by couching people within images and then allowing images to exist, collide and follow one another.’ Distinct from Judson’s task-orientated movements plotted for non-proscenium environments and the moderately interactive arrangements of Happenings, Rauschenberg’s was a dynamic, non-narrative image performance, not just a site for a competition between artists but one that mobilized images and sounds within the locomotion. These methods also appear in Lijia Lewis’s more recent work (2016), albeit in ways critical of how images-in-circulation have worked to objectify or exclude black bodies, using lighting to illuminate and estrange her dancers’ movements. Boris Charmatz, like Imhof and Lewis, seems acutely aware of the potential reach and damage of widely circulated images and, in Danse du Nuit (Night Dance), 2016, explored their function in crimes of terror. Imhof and Charmatz manipulate their viewers’ lines of vision while dancers purposefully disperse crowds around ever-expanding stages. Finally, all have collaborated with different artists of compatible resolve, working across media with movement, sound and light. Rauschenberg presented a choreography of image circulation, long before this strategy seemed so socially and politically resonant. So vital.
WHEN IMAGES MOVE

Dancer and choreographer Steve Paxton recognized Rauschenberg’s own unique qualities as a choreographer: ‘Movement can be generated in a variety of ways.’ Paxton wrote in a catalogue essay for Rauschenberg’s 1997 Guggenheim Museum retrospective, and ‘(Rauschenberg) generated his by couching people within images and then allowing images to coexist, collide and follow one another.’ Distinct from Judson’s task-oriented movements plotted for non-proscenium environments and the moderately interactive arrangements of Happenings, Rauschenberg’s was a dynamic, non-narrative image performance-aided, but not defined, by dance. His compositions of overlapping and co-existing images responded to a new density of media visuals filling up the living spaces of the 1960s.

A new wave of choreographic strategies in galleries and museums reflects these activities, the compulsions behind them and the cultures that foster them. Exhibition architectures afford visitors a different depth of perspective than the arm’s length between smart screens and users’ eyes. Artists choreographing images-in-circulation abdicate one great contradiction of our time: a creeping sense of social exclusion despite proliferating platforms for self-representation. We are divided.

Ties between accelerated technological change, image distribution and political disorder have preceded. The 1960s saw huge advances in the quality, rapidity and range of broadcast technologies and print media, which enabled the swift relaying of images of labour strikes, protests and the civil rights movement, alongside those of the war in Vietnam. Different domains of social unrest became interconnected. There was great change in art, too, and the media artists adopted to make sense of it all. ‘MY FASCINATION WITH IMAGES OPEN 24 HOURS,’ wrote Robert Rauschenberg in a short, idiosyncratic note in 1963. Technological excitement jostled with unease about the future as he moved towards performance, a medium that was a dynamic, non-narrative image performance oiled, but not defined, by dance. His compositions of overlapping and co-existing images responded to a new density of media visuals filling up the living spaces of the 1960s. Image combinations were evocative. In Rilkean (1963), Rauschenberg and Per Olof Ultvedt glided on roller skates, stilted parachutes attached to their backs, swooping like odd-winged creatures around Carolyn Brown’s elegant hal- letic phrasings. This was accompanied by a sound collage of telephones, car horns, crickets stridulating, pop songs and classical music, a combination that, Paxton recalled, ‘sounded like it was being broadcast in a parallel universe’. Dedicated to the Wright Brothers, the piece interlaced different human attempts at flight in an ode to technology.

In Urban Rund (1967), in front of an enormous, silk-screened backdrop featuring the introductory colour-film of a film or videotape, and dispersed photographic images transferred from various news sources, performers were carried around and through the seated crowd on brightly coloured stretchers. They read aloud, backwards, from selected newspaper articles, performers switching places after every article, on rotation. Garbled information, like the performers themselves, was in constant circulation. Approaches by a number of contemporary artists correspond fascinatingly with aspects of Rauschenberg’s output of this period. In Anne Imhof’s recent body of work (see, 2019, Faust, 2017, and Angst, 2016), performers appear as, or within, images, while new technologies mobilize images and sounds within the locomotion. These methods also appear in Ligia Lewis’s minor matter (2016), albeit in ways critical of how images-in-circulation have thus far been used to objectify or exclude black bodies, using lighting to illuminate and estrange her dancers’ interactions. Boris Charmatz, like Imhof and Lewis, seems acutely aware of the potential reach and damage of widely circulated images and, in Danse de Nuit (Night Dance), 2016, explored their function in times of terror. Imhof and Charmatz manipulate their viewers’ lines of vision while dancers purposely disperse crowds around ever-expanding stages. Finally, all have collaborated with different artists of compatible resolve, working across media with movement, sound and light. Rauschenberg presented a choreography of image circulation, long before this strategy seemed so socially and politically resonant. So vital.