

**Painting in New Media**

by

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*for mom and dad—*

*it is because of your absolute certainty  
I would accomplish great things that I dared to try,  
and your absolute commitment  
to opening every door of opportunity  
that has enabled me to.*



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## **ABSTRACT**

### **Painting in New Media**

by

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Chair: Alexander D. Potts

This project is a reappraisal of the accepted view that radical new forms of art dominating the New York art scene from the late fifties, such as assemblage and installation, represent a rupture with painting. On the contrary, as contemporary criticism and artists' writings show, these new forms should be understood as extensions of painting. Robert Rauschenberg, as the link between abstract expressionism and the new art, is a key figure in this reconceptualization of painting.

This dissertation examines the first decade of Rauschenberg's art, when he experimented with using new media such as junk found on city streets to make paintings. A recurrent misperception of these early paintings is that they signaled the end of painting as a viable practice, and prefigured the postmedium condition of later postmodern art. He always stressed that his works were paintings no matter how far they strayed from the conventional easel picture—a fact that has been suppressed in the accepted view of Rauschenberg's work, a view heavily biased towards postmodernist discourse, and which figures the main thrust of his project as negation. I challenge this

fundamental misunderstanding of his art, showing that his acceptance of nonart objects as painter's materials was a consequence of his unique way of thinking about painting—and indeed life—in non-hierarchical terms, rather than oppositional in intent. As such, his artistic project did not reject painting, but rather worked towards an expanded notion of painting.

Rauschenberg's "hidden" practice of photography played a key role in his artistic experiments. He used photography, I argue, as a way of reconceiving his work in the mind's eye and of picturing its interactions with its immediate environment. His work behind the camera shaped a far looser, intermedial conception of "picture" that referred to anything from paintings, photographs, and imagery in an everyday context; to actual objects serving as images (of) themselves. This pictorial awareness, which I term pictoriality, is the basis of painting's eventual extension into new media and multiple dimensions, which enabled it to weather the crisis posed by Modernist medium-specificity and the easel picture.

## **Introduction**

### **“Is Easel Painting Dead?”**

In 1966, an unlikely group of painters were brought together by art historian Barbara Rose in a symposium held at New York University entitled, “Is Easel Painting Dead?”<sup>1</sup> On the panel sat Darby Bannard, Donald Judd, Larry Poons and Robert Rauschenberg. Bannard was a critic and artist of some note during the sixties and seventies, although his public prominence waned in the following decades.<sup>2</sup> Rose’s aim in having Judd on the panel was to represent an ex-painter who had rejected painting for three-dimensional works, a foil to would-be apologists for painting such as Poons, who found the whole premise of the symposium questionable: “Why do you keep referring to reviving something as if something is dead? ... how could this question be asked in a serious way?”<sup>3</sup> Rauschenberg’s self-fashioned role was to play devil’s advocate, rebutting any statement that veered too close to categorical, regardless of which position it supported. This ostensible unfaithfulness to painting is in keeping with his track record

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<sup>1</sup> “Is Easel Painting Dead?” (10 November 1966) transcript, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (hereafter cited as “Is Easel Painting Dead?” transcript).

<sup>2</sup> In fact, it seems Bannard won more renown for his work in ceramics than in painting. His progression from paint to clay makes sense given his interest in sculpting with paint, as it were, by smoothing large areas with a trowel or some such instrument, which displaced excess paint up off the canvas, forming smooth, shiny hedges.

<sup>3</sup> Poons, “Is Easel Painting Dead?” transcript, p. 8.

for working in a number of mediums: painting, sculpture, drawing, printmaking, photography, set design, and performance.<sup>4</sup>

After thirty minutes of “unpacking” what exactly the question meant, Judd gets to the heart of the matter: “Easel painting is a cut-and-dried case by now. It is decidedly gone, and gone for twenty years, and there is no question about it. The question of whether painting in general is in good or bad shape is something else, and it is certainly very debatable.”<sup>5</sup> And “anyway,” he adds, “we need a better definition of painting because obviously it is changing and it can change.”<sup>6</sup> The motley panel of ex-, sometimes- and still-painter was testament to the fact that the terms on which a painter could claim to be painting had indeed changed.

The “dictionary” of “new vocabulary” compiled by the artists in the group show *Art 1963: A New Vocabulary*, which served as the exhibition catalog, offers the following definition:

**paint-ing** n. one can paint with and in spite  
of, everything. --B.K. 7

Rauschenberg was among the group of artists showing in this landmark exhibition, the first exhibition outside of New York of the new forms of art being made with junk

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<sup>4</sup> Incidentally, Rauschenberg participated in the 1965 “Once Again” festival here in Ann Arbor, a city “tucked away in America’s heartland,” “an unlikely site for...a major avant-garde [music] festival.” The indiscriminate lover of animals strapped flashlights onto the backs of turtles and set them loose. The turtles’ meanderings created a wobbly and languid light show for the spectators assembled at Ingalls Mall, where the performance took place. See Leta E. Miller, “ONCE and Again: The Evolution of a Legendary Festival,” New World Records, <http://www.newworldrecords.org/linernotes/80567.pdf> (accessed 1 April 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Judd, “Is Easel Painting Dead?” transcript, p. 11.

<sup>6</sup> Judd, “Is Easel Painting Dead?” transcript, p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> B[illy]. K[lüver]., C[laes]. O[Idenburg]., R[obert]. R[auschenberg]., J[ean]. T[inguely]. et al., *Art 1963: A New Vocabulary* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Arts Council, 1962). The exhibition was sponsored by the Young Men’s/Women’s Hebrew Association (YM/YWHA) of Philadelphia,

salvaged from city streets.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps in anticipation of some resistance to the idea of making art with junk, three related entries for “junk” were included:

**junk** n. 1. chinese boat. 2. household, industrial material objects which have been discarded, used by the artist in a work of art. --B.K. + OTHERS

**junk art** n. 1. ~~painting~~ ~~junks~~. 2. an art which makes use of materials of industry or household which have been thrown out. 3. an aesthetic of the above. --B.K. + OTHERS

*paintings  
made on  
Chinese  
boats*

**junk culture** n. growing of mushrooms on ~~junks~~. *CHINESE BOATS*

The inclusion of “chinese boat” as one of the meanings both performs the junk aesthetic by putting together two unrelated ideas, and embodies the playfulness of the form.<sup>9</sup> The catalog was printed as a marked-up galley proof to further signal the informality and improvisational nature of the artists’ method.

Importantly, painting still has a place in the new vocabulary of art that these artists were developing, and without it, our understanding of the radical new practices that ostensibly break with the convention is partial. Medium-specificity and the post-medium condition are two extremes in the material conception of artistic practice in the 1950s and 1960s. The type of work included in *Art 1963* fell somewhere in between these diametric opposites, and thus has fallen outside of (and compromised) these theoretical concerns. That painting can happen “in spite of everything” acknowledges the current debates on painting after abstract expressionism, and at the same time identifies their position on the matter: painting remains viable. Then again, if “one can paint with

<sup>8</sup> Also included were Allan Kaprow, Jim Dine, Claes Oldenburg and George Brecht, among others.

<sup>9</sup> Kaprow would later comment on how it bothered him that the audience didn’t take environments and happenings seriously. It seems the artist invited this impression.

everything,” it is not painting as we have known it—the single flat oval or rectangle of the Western tradition.

\* \* \*

### ***“The Crisis of the Easel Picture”***

Clement Greenberg had already foreseen the demise of this traditional form of painting in 1948, when he wrote “The Crisis of the Easel Picture.”<sup>10</sup> As he identified painting more generally with the specific form of the easel picture, this crisis spelled no less than the end of painting. The “new kind of painting” threatened (easel) painting’s identity by what might be characterized as a democratization, or even treatment of the surface. That is to say, paint, rather than differentiating forms (no matter figurative or abstract) “kept in dramatic imbalance,” instead “knit together [the surface with] a multiplicity of identical or similar elements...without strong variation from one end of the canvas to the other.”<sup>11</sup> Such painting was compromised by the double threat of being unable “to say enough about what we feel to satisfy us quite” with such an attenuated range of expression, and veering towards decoration (the focus of his concern about the new painting earlier in the fifties).

Greenberg’s theory of Modernism was an attempt to forestall these dire predictions for the future of painting as “compromised in its very nature,” subject to “an uninterrupted process of attrition,” “infected with ambiguity,” and being “destroyed” by the “advanced” artists of the day who, nevertheless, continued to (ab)use it as “the vehicle of ambitious art.”<sup>12</sup> Indeed, much of what Greenberg has to say about

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<sup>10</sup> Clement Greenberg, “The Crisis of the Easel Picture” (April 1948); reprinted in John O’Brian, ed., *Clement Greenberg: the collected essays and criticism*, vol. 2 (1945-1949), pp. 221-25.

<sup>11</sup> Greenberg, “The Crisis of the Easel Picture,” p. 222.

<sup>12</sup> Greenberg, “The Crisis of the Easel Picture,” pp. 221-25.

contemporary painting in the years leading up to the publication of “Modernist Painting” (1960), wherein his ideas are most clearly laid out, centers on the divestiture of the illusion of depth and attendant articulation of the surface.

The “essence of Modernism,” as Greenberg wrote in the article, lay in the neo-Kantian principle of self-criticism, or criticism “from the inside, through the procedures themselves of that which is being criticized,” which turned out to “coincide with all that was unique to the nature of its medium.” In the case of painting, this logic demanded that it abandon “the representation of the kind of space that recognizable objects can inhabit” and orient itself to flatness, “the only condition painting shared with no other art.”

The major achievement of “Modernist Painting” was to provide a rationale for “how most of the very best art of the last hundred-odd years came about, [without] implying that that’s how it *had* to come about.”<sup>13</sup> American abstract expressionism was thereby strategically positioned at the forefront of advanced art. Greenberg does admit, however, that in order for his theory of Modernist painting to work, he “had to simplify and exaggerate,” focusing on abstract and near-abstract painting: modernist and abstract painting *had* to be one and the same.<sup>14</sup> Thus the project of advanced painting was figured in the reductivist language of abstraction—renunciation (of illusion), noncommunication (with other orders of experience), disintegration (of recognizable images), irreducibility (the “crucially important” orientation and aim), and purification. It was therefore only a matter of time before painting exhausted all permutations of autonomous internal relations. Paradoxically, Greenberg’s attempt to “rescue” painting with the principle of

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<sup>13</sup> See editor’s note to “Modernist Painting” (1961), in O’Brian, ed., vol. 4 (1957-1969), p. 94.

<sup>14</sup> Greenberg, “Sculpture in Our Time” (June 1958); reprinted in O’Brian, ed., vol. 4, p. 59.



medium specificity rather limited the ambition of advanced painting to what was in effect a dead end.

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Abstract expressionism suggested to the younger artists coming onto the scene in the early fifties a very different future for painting than Greenberg's formalist prescription. Allan Kaprow, also included in *Art 1963*, gave voice to this new kind of painting in the text "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock," written in 1956 and published by *ARTnews* in 1958. His characterization of the situation facing the post-abstract expressionist generation is widely cited: "There are two alternatives. One is to continue in this vein [of abstract expressionism]. The other is to give up the making of paintings entirely." The caveat that follows—"I mean the single flat rectangle or oval as we know it"—is often elided, however. As such, critical attention has been concerned to delineate how and why radical new forms of art such as assemblage and installation represented a rupture with painting, when in fact, as contemporary criticism and artists' writings show, they were understood as coterminous to a degree, which this study is concerned to recuperate.

Whereas Greenberg charts the development of twentieth century art through the channel of abstract or non-representational painting, Kaprow goes through collage, which he characterizes as an "escape hatch" for those who, like him, were "looking for a new way of working that would avoid restrictions imposed by 'pure' [abstract, Modernist] painting."<sup>15</sup> For Kaprow, this history of a different breed of painting, of "not-quite-painting" in his terms, effectively begins with cubist collage.

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<sup>15</sup> Allan Kaprow, *Assemblage, Environments & Happenings* (New York: H. N. Abrams, 1966), pp. 158-59. Kaprow is writing this in the early sixties, aided by hindsight.

By 1912 or 1913, the medium of collage really began to break the rules, though, by our standards, modestly....

It took the Cubist constructions, and thereafter their Dada and Surrealist modifications, to predict a clear break with painting without simply going to sculpture, although painting surely still dominated the scene.

Since World War II, with the collages and constructions created in the United States, a big step was taken. Unencumbered by ancient local traditions, and fortified by a recent graft of Surrealist adventurousness, these works immediately became freer in scope, looser in form, and larger in scale than anything Europe had produced....

Once this took place, the very qualities which make painting a distinct medium vanished....<sup>16</sup>

It was in trying to extend the possibilities of collage (note that Kaprow considers collage a form of painting) that the artists arrived at the new forms of assemblage and environments dominating the New York art scene from the late fifties. As the link between abstract expressionism and the new art, Rauschenberg represents an important turning point in this alternate history of painting, establishing a continuity that undermines, or at least problematizes, Greenberg's instrumentalization of modern American painting. In Kaprow's view,

Pollock, as I see him, left us at the point where we must become preoccupied with and even dazzled by the space and objects of our everyday life.... Not satisfied with the suggestion *through paint* of our other senses, we shall utilize the specific substances of sight, sound, movements, people, odors, touch. *Objects* of every sort are materials for the new art: *paint*, chairs, food, electric neon lights, smoke, water, old socks, a dog, movies, a thousand other things that will be discovered by the present generation of artists.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Kaprow, *Assemblage, Environments & Happenings*, pp. 157-58.

<sup>17</sup> Kaprow, "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock" (1958); reprinted in Jeff Kelley, ed., *Essays on the blurring of art and life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 8-9, emphasis mine. Brandon Joseph suggests that Kaprow's article was partially inspired by a visit to Rauschenberg's studio; see "The Gap and the Frame," *October* 117 (summer 2006), pp. 48-49. "Old socks" are particularly Rauschenbergian, appearing in his famous statement for the exhibition catalog of *Sixteen Americans* at the Museum of Modern Art: "Painting relates to both art and life. Neither can be made. (I try to act in that gap between the two.)/ A pair of socks is no less suitable to make a painting with than wood, nails, turpentine, oil and fabric." Dorothy C. Miller, ed., *Sixteen Americans* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1959), p. 58.

Paint is but one object among countless others that can be used for painting, a far more radical democratization of painting than the all-over paintings of the New York School. To characterize paint as an object constitutes a major shift in the conception of the medium, one that denies paint's transfigurative properties, or its specialness. Paint is no more and no less than old socks. Perhaps more significant is how the use of actual objects makes the thorny issue of abstract *versus* figurative or representational painting moot.

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### ***The rise of collage in American art***

As the abstract expressionists had taken cues from the European abstract and surrealist work being shown in New York galleries of contemporary art and the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in the thirties and forties, the generation of artists coming of age in the late forties and early fifties were influenced by exhibitions of dada and collage. The 1948 exhibition *Collage* at MoMA marked a turning point in collage's acceptance as a viable medium in the United States.<sup>18</sup> The show signaled to the American public that despite being made of expendable materials, collage held an important place within the development of contemporary art. The term originates from the French verb *coller*, which means "pasting, sticking, or gluing," and thus is most relevant to works made with paper and paper-like materials. However, "Collage cannot be defined adequately as merely a technique of cutting and pasting," wrote curator Margaret Miller,

for its significance lies not in its technical eccentricity but in its relevance to two basic questions which have been raised by twentieth-century art: the nature of reality and the nature of painting itself. Collage has been the

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<sup>18</sup> MoMA Exh. #385, 21 September-5 December 1948; curated by Margaret Miller.

means through which the artist incorporates reality in the picture without imitating it.<sup>19</sup>

There are two takes on collage, both of which are alluded to in Miller's definition. On the one hand, it is framed as "in defiance of" painting, the title of Christine Poggi's important and comprehensive study of the beginnings of collage, which she borrows from the title of Louis Aragon's 1930 text on the same subject.<sup>20</sup> On the other, we have what may be characterized as a more straightforward and practical-minded approach, which sees collage as a convenient way to bring extra-aesthetic material into the realm of art.

Historical accounts that treat collage as a sort of anti-painting simultaneously reinscribe it a type of postmodern painting, or more accurately a poststructuralist deconstruction of modernist painting, which, it goes without saying, is anachronistic. The "invention" of this formalist conception of collage is attributed to Picasso and Braque, who in the spring of 1912 began experimenting with "pasted paper" works. These *papiers-collés*, because of their systematic exploration of and play with representational conventions, have been especially germane to semiological analysis.

"In the Name of Picasso" (1980), Rosalind Krauss's missive against what she terms the "art-history of the proper name," is an early reading of cubist collage as a system of signs.<sup>21</sup> By "art-history of the proper name" Krauss is referring to the tendency

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<sup>19</sup> Margaret Miller, cited in William C. Seitz, *The Art of Assemblage* (New York: Museum of Modern Art; distributed by Doubleday, Garden City, N.Y., 1961), p. 6.

<sup>20</sup> Christine Poggi, *In defiance of painting: cubism, futurism, and the invention of collage* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1992). Louis Aragon, "The Challenge to Painting," in Pontus Hultén, ed., *The Surrealists look at art: Éluard, Aragon, Soupault, Breton, Tzara* (Venice, CA: Lapis Press, 1990), pp. 47-74. The Aragon text will be discussed in greater depth in the final chapter.

<sup>21</sup> Rosalind Krauss, "In the Name of Picasso," presented as a lecture on 12 October 1980 at a symposium on the cubist legacy in twentieth-century sculpture. Subsequently published in *October* 16 (spring 1981): 5-22, and reprinted in Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985), pp. 23-41; page numbers in the following citations refer to the last. Krauss credits Pierre Daix's 1980 *catalogue raisonné, Picasso: 1907-1916*, as the first to make explicit the connection between cubist collage and structural linguistics.

to conflate signified with referent, which presumes a transparent connection between a sign and what it refers to, wherein signification is a matter of “positive identification”: e.g., the text fragment “EAU” that appears in a number of Picasso’s collages is really Beaujolais, and “JOU” is Journal. Krauss adheres to a more rigorous and “exacting notion of reference, representation, and signification,” which draws on Ferdinand de Saussure’s configuration of the linguistic sign.

Saussure made the key distinction between the *material* signifier and the *immaterial* concept that it signified, thus making the sign “a function of absence rather than presence,” and “a coupling...to which there may be no referent at all (and thus no *thing* on which to affix the label).”<sup>22</sup> To use something as a collage element—i.e., as part of a representation in the medium of collage—alters its original condition as a sign. The link between the signifier and signified is complicated because the sign itself now functions as a signifier. Collage is therefore the perfect demonstration of what has been termed the “originless play of the signifier.” A collage-element, by being roped into the job of signifying for a “larger,” composite sign, is decoupled from its origin—the necessarily *a priori* concept or thing for which it had stood. “Play” came from the ambiguity that was not only purposefully and consciously effected in Picasso’s and Braque’s compositions, but also a consequence of the inherently fragmented nature of collage, and the fact that one cannot ignore the indelible marks of the fragments’ former life in the world of objects.

Yve-Alain Bois elaborated on Krauss’s thesis some years later, identifying the Grebo mask in Picasso’s personal collection as the catalyst for the artist’s realization of

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<sup>22</sup> Krauss, “In the Name of Picasso,” pp. 32-33.

the conventionality of pictorial representation. That is to say, the decidedly non-mimetic idiom of African statuary, where “a cowry can represent an eye but also a navel or a mouth,” demonstrated that signifiers in Western pictorial art could similarly be “liberated” from what they had traditionally signified. Hermetic cubist canvases (1910-1912) systematically dismantled these conventions, remnants of which are present in Picasso’s first collage, *Still life with chair caning* (spring 1912). The contrast of shadow and light, for example, is traditionally used to translate three-dimensional form into a flat painting. In Picasso’s collage, however, shadow not only signifies depth or recession but a whole range of pictorial relations. Shading appears where one expects a light passage, such as the line on the wineglass to the right of “JOU,” which in a mimetic painting would be white to signify the transparent and reflective properties of glass. The shading also fades in the wrong direction to model roundness—another common subversion in hermetic cubist paintings. Shadows often extend from the wrong side of an object’s edge, such as the shading of the cut lemon to the right of the composition that, were it to fade “in” towards the cut side, would denote how the rest of the lemon curves out of sight. Here, it looks like a contrived shadow (Picasso’s aim, no doubt), or a stock “shadow” collage element, which is also used for the base of the glass. Sometimes shadows stand independent of anything, counterintuitively seeming to float above the adjacent areas, such as the one at the top center of the composition. At other times, there is a shadow where one has no business being—under abstract lines or text, for example.

The absence in collage elements of a significative anchor or their “originless play of the signifier” is, in Krauss’s and Bois’s—what we might term Octoberite—view,

decidedly postmodernist.<sup>23</sup> As such, “the whole structure of postmodernism has its proto-history in those investigations [e.g., cubist collage] of the representational system of absence that we can only now recognize as the contemporaneous alternative to modernism.”<sup>24</sup> Poggi’s study considerably expands this line of argument:

This alternative tradition emphasizes heterogeneity rather than material or stylistic unity, and a willingness to subvert (rather than affirm) the distinctions between pictorial, sculptural, verbal, and other forms of expression. A rejection of modernism can also be seen in the Cubists’ recognition of the conventionality, and therefore iterability, of pictorial signs.<sup>25</sup>

The collages also “redefine originality: no longer is it the immediate expression of a unique self, but rather the manipulation of preexisting conventions and schemes.”<sup>26</sup> In short, collage is seen as a deliberate strategy to undermine the cornerstones of modernism: the distinction between mediums and genres, and the notion of authenticity. More pointedly, collage challenges the “horrible canvas” and associated tradition of easel painting, which I discuss further in the second chapter.

As we shall see, Rauschenberg’s deployment of collage was neither a “deliberate strategy to undermine” modernism, nor concerned with representation in a (proto-) semiological sense as the cubists were. Both of these views reflect recent critical interpretations of Rauschenberg’s work that are heavily biased towards postmodernist discourse, which I argue in the following chapter is anachronistic and limits understanding of his early experiments in painting. He never conceived of his practice in such oppositional terms, though there is most definitely a measure of irreverence to his

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<sup>23</sup> Krauss, “In the Name of Picasso,” pp. 38-39. As stated in the inaugural issue of *October*, the editors founded the journal to fill the lacunae in critical writing on theory, and to renew and strengthen critical discourse through intensive review of different methodologies. See “About *October*,” *October* 1 (spring 1976): 3-5.

<sup>24</sup> Krauss, “In the Name of Picasso,” p. 39.

<sup>25</sup> Poggi, *In defiance of painting*, p. xiii.

<sup>26</sup> Poggi, *In defiance of painting*, p. xiii.

attitude towards painting, as captured in his famous provocation that “A pair of socks is no less suitable to make a painting with than wood, nails, turpentine, oil and fabric,” included in his statement for the exhibition “Sixteen Americans” (1959).<sup>27</sup> However, he did not regard painting as an “either/ or” or “for/ against” affair: “Painting relates to both art and life. Neither can be made. (I try to act in that gap between the two.)” As his reference to the “gap” makes clear, Rauschenberg was unwilling to choose between art-as-art, the modernist view, or art-as-life, the more incendiary ethos that informed artistic practice in the late fifties. In this dissertation I challenge the prevailing tendency to read oppositionality into Rauschenberg’s painting, arguing that on the contrary his acceptance of socks as painter’s materials was a reflection of his unique way of thinking about painting—and indeed life—in non-hierarchical terms.

Rauschenberg subscribed to the second, more straightforward and practical-minded school of thought regarding collage mentioned above, which his chief interpreters attribute to the influence of Kurt Schwitters; Rauschenberg admits to as much: “everyone was talking about Schwitters and I had to find out about him.”<sup>28</sup> In October 1952 the Sidney Janis Gallery mounted a large retrospective of Schwitters’s work covering every phase of his career from 1913 to 1947. Schwitters coined the term *Merz* for his genre- and medium-defying artistic output, which incorporated painting, collage, sculpture, theater, architecture, typography and poetry. *Merzbilder*, the more specific name for small collage works, dramatically extended the possibilities of collage by moving beyond paper to the most prosaic and “inartistic” material, in effect combining the ready-made with the painterly collage. Tristan Tzara, in his introductory statement for the show,

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<sup>27</sup> *Sixteen Americans*, p. 58.

<sup>28</sup> *An Interview with Robert Rauschenberg by Barbara Rose* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987), p. 57 (hereafter cited as “Rose interview”).



“remembers seeing Schwitters pick up in the streets, scraps of old iron, broken watchworks, bizarre and absurd materials which even junk men would have discarded.”<sup>29</sup> Significantly, Schwitters managed to “remov[e] from the commonplace [object] its figurative quality and at the same time keep its representative value.”<sup>30</sup>

Schwitters’s increasing visibility was complemented and put into context by a number of surveys of dada. Robert Motherwell’s edited volume, *The Dada painters and poets: an anthology*, was published in 1951, and made a comprehensive body of documents available in English for the first time, including manifestos, articles, reviews and works by key figures of the movement. And in May of 1953, the Sidney Janis Gallery was the venue of an exhibition of dada that was “brilliantly installed” by Duchamp.<sup>31</sup> Exhibitions of collage became more numerous in the following years and, in the mid-fifties, gave way to assemblage, whose understanding was shaped by the dada exhibitions earlier in the decade, thus giving rise to the term “neo-dada” to describe these new works utilizing ostensibly familiar—some would argue too familiar—strategies.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Tristan Tzara, “Kurt Schwitters 1887-1948,” foreword to *Sidney Janis presents an exhibition of collage, painting, relief & sculpture by Schwitters*, exh. cat. (New York: Sidney Janis Gallery, 1952).

<sup>30</sup> Tzara, “Kurt Schwitters 1887-1948.”

<sup>31</sup> Exhibition review Belle Krasne, “A Wake for Dada,” *Art Digest* 27, no. 15 (1 May 1953), pp. 14-15.

<sup>32</sup> Catherine Anne Craft, in her dissertation *Constellations of Past and Present: (Neo-) Dada, the Avant-Garde, and the New York Art World, 1951-1965* (PhD thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 1996), identifies Robert Rosenblum’s review of a group show at the Leo Castelli Gallery in 1957 as the first use of the term, in which he “suspects” of Jasper Johns’s painting of the American flag “a vital Neo-Dada spirit.” Craft notes that Rosenblum’s review predates by about half a year the citation usually given as the word’s first occurrence in “Cover,” *ARTnews* 56 (1958): 5. In both instances, “neo-dada” was used primarily in reference to Johns’s work. See especially chapter three, “Looking for the Dada in Neo-Dada,” pp. 129-75, for her extensively researched historiography of the term. The relationship of the new art to dada became the central topic of heated debate in the symposium held on 19 October 1961 at MoMA in conjunction with the exhibition, “The Art of Assemblage.” The transcript of the symposium is reprinted in John Elderfield, ed., *Essays on Assemblage* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1992), pp. 118-59. Roger Shattuck, who was the historian on the panel that included Lawrence Alloway, Marcel Duchamp, Richard Huelsenbeck and Rauschenberg, described the “spirit of Dada” as characterized by “gleeful destructiveness” and “spectator participation. The perfect gallery-goer was the one who handled everything, broke what impressed him most, and used the urinal on display.” In spite of good-natured objections by Huelsenbeck, an “original” Berlin dadaist, Shattuck continued: “The permanence of art was sacrificed for the excitement of a performance that would either shatter or repulse. It is this aspect of cultural fireworks that cannot be

***“The Art of Assemblage”***

William Seitz’s seminal 1961 show of assemblage art at the Museum of Modern Art endeavored to situate the various iterations of assemblage made by contemporary artists within a developmental history of art and literature. Dore Ashton, reflecting on the importance of Seitz’s show, describes it as a “serious appraisal of the breakdown of conventional categories.”<sup>33</sup> The work included in the show were bracketed by the following conditions:

- 1) They are predominantly assembled rather than painted, drawn, modeled, or carved.
- 2) Entirely or in part, their constituent elements are preformed natural or manufactured materials, objects, or fragments not intended as art materials.<sup>34</sup>

Seitz’s choice of terms suggests that assemblage sits somewhere between painting (“painted,” “drawn”) and sculpture (“modeled,” “carved”). However he stresses, in a tactic not unlike his predecessor Margaret Miller discussing collage, that assemblage is not only a specific technical procedure and form, but also “a complex of attitudes and ideas” stemming from a decidedly “modern” predisposition.<sup>35</sup>

“Modernist” is more like it, as Seitz’s history of assemblage is quite deliberately grafted onto the history of modernist painting, starting with the archetypal modernist

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recaptured today, and there are few new sparks to replace the old.” Shattuck, who distinguishes between dada as “principally an historical movement” and the new or “neo” works as attempting to recapture the former’s “fireworks” but failing to, subscribes to the more pejorative connotation of neo-dada. In *Art 1963* “neo-dadaism” is defined as “a loose term describing the work of artists whose various degrees of iconoclasm, wit, irony, uses of assemblages, etc. appear to relate them to some of the same characteristics of the Dadaists. c.f. non-art.”

<sup>33</sup> Dore Ashton, *American Art Since 1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 105-07. Cited by Roger Shattuck in “Introduction: How Collage Became Assemblage,” which precedes the transcript for the symposium held in conjunction with the exhibition *The Art of Assemblage*. Reprinted in John Elderfield, ed., *Essays on Assemblage* (New York: Museum of Modern of Art, 1992), 119.

<sup>34</sup> Seitz, *Art of Assemblage*, p. 10.

<sup>35</sup> Seitz, *Art of Assemblage*, p. 10.

painter, Édouard Manet. In *Portrait of Emile Zola* (1867-68) [fig. 0.1] Seitz observes, “On the table below, a decorated inkwell and its feathered quill, soft yellow, pink, and blue paper books, and other objects have been *arranged with far more regard for color and pattern than for accessory significance.*”<sup>36</sup> The arrangement of words in Symbolist poetry is analogous to the collage method, with each word carrying with it “an image or idea surrounded by a vague aura of associations.”<sup>37</sup> Cézanne gave the cubists license to supplant “pictorial composition” by another kind of structural order. Picasso and Braque took apart representational conventions and put them back together in arbitrary-seeming reassignments of shading and highlights to articulate the volume of forms.

The *papiers-collés* of 1912 “initiate[d] the absorption of the activity of assembling objects into the method, as well as the subject matter of painting.”<sup>38</sup> A major point of distinction between collage and assemblage is evidently whether the outcome is two-dimensional or three-dimensional. Dubuffet, in 1953, further restricted the term “collage” to those made by the Dadaists, Picasso and Braque, etc. in the period 1910-20.<sup>39</sup> The French artist felt that “assemblage” better served as “*un terme générique désignant n’importe quel ouvrage ou intervient de la colle*” [“a generic term referring to any work where glue is used”].<sup>40</sup> The term “assemblage” dissociated such works from the more “painterly” concerns of collage; Esteban Vicente, considered “one of the best new collagists” in the fifties, embodies this painterly understanding of collage, organizing the “non-paint” collaged surfaces in a thoroughly pictorial way.<sup>41</sup> It is most telling when

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<sup>36</sup> Seitz, *Art of Assemblage*, p. 10, emphasis mine.

<sup>37</sup> Seitz, *Art of Assemblage*, p. 13.

<sup>38</sup> Seitz, *Art of Assemblage*, p. 9.

<sup>39</sup> Seitz, *Art of Assemblage*, p. 93.

<sup>40</sup> Jean Dubuffet, in a letter to Seitz, 21 April 1961. Seitz, *Art of Assemblage*, p. 150, n5.

<sup>41</sup> Lawrence Alloway, “...some London exhibitions,” *Art International* 3, nos. 1-2 (1959), p. 30.

Vicente insists on the verb “to paint” over “to make” in referring to the activity of collage:

MS. TUCHMAN: You know what else I wanted to ask you about, Elaine de Kooning’s article “Vicente Makes a Collage.”<sup>42</sup>

MR. VICENTE: Paints a collage.<sup>43</sup>

In September of 1958, Greenberg explicitly addressed the question of collage’s relationship to painting and, more to the point, Modernism, in his article “The pasted-paper revolution.”<sup>44</sup> The byline reads: “Collage: a modern critic’s view on how the technique, a purely twentieth-century innovation, changed the entire esthetic of modern painting and sculpture.” Greenberg, in an earlier article, argued that cubist collage and paper sculptures had changed the direction of sculpture, not painting, towards a linear, open form more akin to construction that in fact drew its logic from painting, thus representing painting’s

most spectacular triumph over sculpture by delivering out of itself an almost entirely new convention and tradition of sculpture.... It was called Constructivism at first, and drew in air with line, plane and color to create cage- or machine-like structures not solid bodies. It did not shape or form solid matter so much as manipulate space—organize and render significant its emptiness. It had emerged directly from Cubist painting, when Picasso first let the bas-relief construction rise above the physical surface of collage.... [T]he curious feature of the new, “open” sculpture... is that its means and forms, as pictorial as they are, tend to converge toward architecture, in its modern, functional manner.... And yet this is all painting’s doing.<sup>45</sup>

As Greenberg’s understanding of collage oriented itself more towards the direction of painting, the early *papier-collés* were, in this revised view, exercises in fusing illusion (or

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<sup>42</sup> Elaine de Kooning, “Vicente paints a collage,” *ARTnews* 52, no. 5 (September 1953): 38-41, 51-52. De Kooning offers a definition and history of collage as it stood in 1953; see pp. 51-52.

<sup>43</sup> Oral history interview with Esteban Vicente, 6 April 1982, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>44</sup> Greenberg, “The pasted-paper revolution,” *ARTnews* (September 1958): 46-49, 60-61.

<sup>45</sup> Greenberg, “Cross-Breeding of Modern Sculpture” (1952); reprinted in O’Brian, ed., vol 3., p. 111.

illusionary depth) with the picture plane (or the surface). “The strips, the lettering, the charcoaled lines and the white paper begin to change places in depth with one another, and a process is set up in which every part of the picture takes its turn at occupying every plane, whether real or imagined in it.”<sup>46</sup> In referring to the space “behind” the picture’s surface as “planes,” he underscores the shallowness of pictorial space in a cubist collage, which, literally, is as thin as the paper pasted onto the surface. These planes are parallel to the picture’s surface, and layered one on top of one another.

However, because Greenberg maintains that the collage is unified, the “picture” (or picture plane) remains “behind” the physical surface of the picture; “the picture as a whole brought still closer to the physical surface.”<sup>47</sup> As such, “Pictorial illusion begins to give way to what could be more properly called optical illusion.”<sup>48</sup> By alluding to the “optical,” he not only captures the “shuttling” and “shuffling” motion of the planes, but also sidesteps the fact that the elements composing the picture are sitting *on top of* the physical surface. It is as though he surreptitiously moved up the proverbial transparent picture plane up to reassert collage’s primary concern—like painting’s—with flatness. Furthermore, Greenberg presumes a unified image—“the picture as a whole” that Picasso intended from the outset to “paint” using papers.

It seems rather that Picasso was more interested in *lateral* as opposed to optical movement, of manually slipping sheets under, over or between others [fig. 0.2], which Braque alludes to when he speaks of the centrality of a tactile sense of space in his paintings: “I began to make above all still lifes, because in nature there is a tactile space, I would say almost a *manual* space. Moreover, I have written: ‘When a still life is no

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<sup>46</sup> Greenberg, “The pasted-paper revolution,” p. 48.

<sup>47</sup> Greenberg, “The pasted-paper revolution,” p. 48.

<sup>48</sup> Greenberg, “The pasted-paper revolution,” p. 48.

longer within reach of the hand, it ceases to be a still life' .... For me this corresponded to the desire that I have always had to touch the thing and not only to see it."<sup>49</sup> Indeed, the *papiers-collés* are more accurately provisional arrangements of a picture, the surface on which the composition was worked out.

Poggi suggests that Picasso left the pins he had used to work out his composition in place in order to emphasize their constructed character. The pins not only make plain the fact that they *were* constructed, but *how* they were constructed as well. The process was one where each collage element was provisionally laid out and pinned so that the pieces would stay in place when placed onto the wall. The collage was then further articulated with drawings. The planes did indeed shuttle around, but not optically as Greenberg argues. It is evident that they were *handled*. Apollinaire conceives of the project of cubist collage in such overtly material and concrete terms in *The Cubist Painters*, and prefigures the extension of painting-as-assemblage that the current study explores: "You may paint with whatever material you please, with pipes, postage stamps, postcards or playing cards, candelabra..."<sup>50</sup>

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### ***Post-assemblage***

Seitz's definition appears near-verbatim as the definition for "assemblage" in the *Art 1963* dictionary of new art terminology, in essence ratifying the MoMA exhibition:

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<sup>49</sup> Braque cited in Poggi, *In defiance of painting*, p. 98.

<sup>50</sup> Seitz, *Art of Assemblage*, p. 13.

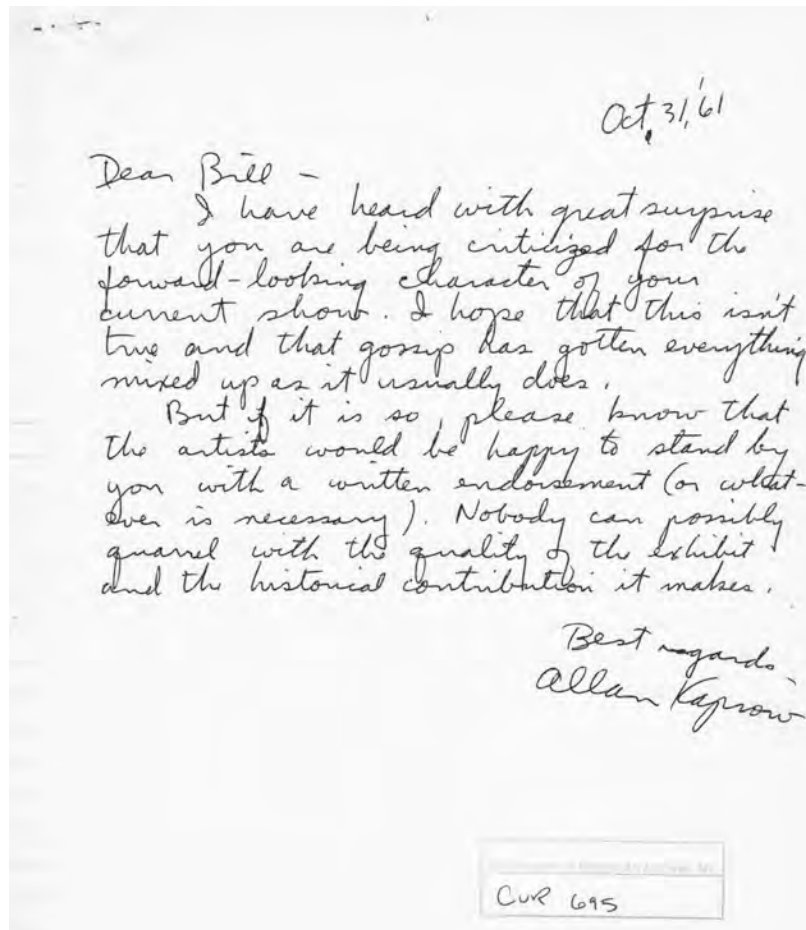
do you  
want  
this  
word?  
use  
synonym

**art** n. what is not something else. --B.K.

**as-sem-blage** n. a work of art primarily assembled rather than painted, drawn, modeled or carved. 2. Entirely or in part, the constituent elements of an assemblage are performed, natural or manufactured materials (not intended originally as art materials). syn. agglomerate.

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Perhaps even more significant is that “collage” has dropped out of the lexicon, suggesting that by then, assemblage had completely supplanted collage as the dominant aesthetic paradigm. Kaprow offered words of encouragement to Seitz in a letter, affirming the exhibition’s “historical significance”:



<sup>51</sup> Kaprow, letter to Seitz, 31 October 1961, *The Art of Assemblage* (1961) curatorial files, acc. # MoMA 695x, Museum of Modern Art Museum Archives, New York.

By the early sixties, objects were readily accepted as “painter’s materials,” albeit “unconventional,” confirming Kaprow’s appraisal six years earlier, as *ARTnews* writer Gene Swenson does in his several visits to Rauschenberg’s studio in preparation for a monthly feature on artists at work. “[Rauschenberg’s] major concern... was with unconventional painter’s materials (such as doors and mirrors) and fully three-dimensional objects—very little with paint or color.”<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, “He [Rauschenberg] does not use [objects] as pure form and color, destroying our sense of their origin.... Rather he seeks to retain or reinstate some quality of the object possessed in its original environment.”<sup>53</sup> In other words, Rauschenberg did not use the objects as *though* they were paint but in place of paint, as an alternative to paint.

Rose asked Rauschenberg at the symposium to discuss why he stopped painting:

I didn’t really stop in the sense of just stopping. I found that by doing something other than painting in the studio, I had some experience that seemed to me useful just in the general category of keeping alive. I never was convinced of the divine space of the canvas. I always recognize any canvas as a piece of cloth. It is just through the economy of lumber and structure that a fabric is woven horizontally and vertically and it stretches most expediently in those directions. But I never had a concept to change that shape.<sup>54</sup>

On the contrary, he always stressed that his works were paintings no matter how far they strayed from the conventional easel picture, which was exactly the point of his combine-

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Dear Bill—

I have heard with great surprise that you are being criticized for the forward-looking character of your current show. I hope that this isn’t true and that gossip has gotten everything mixed up as it usually does.

But if it is so, please know that the artists would be happy to stand by you with a written endorsement (or whatever is necessary). Nobody can possibly quarrel with the quality of the exhibit and the historical contribution it makes.

Best regards,  
Allan Kaprow

<sup>52</sup> G[ene]. R. Swenson, “Rauschenberg paints a picture,” *ARTnews* 62 (April 1963), p. 66.

<sup>53</sup> Swenson, “Rauschenberg paints a picture,” p. 64.

<sup>54</sup> “Is Easel Painting Dead?” transcript, p. 2.



paintings. He explains that he had to invent the term for those hung up on the three-dimensionality of these sometimes free-standing works of actual objects “combined” with painted surfaces. Rose’s assumption that Rauschenberg abandoned painting is a recurrent misperception of his early paintings, given their seemingly incendiary nature. In the chapter that follows, I show the extent to which this fundamental misunderstanding of the main thrust of his project as about negation, especially with respect to his early monochromatic paintings, has shaped the literature. In so doing, I refocus attention on their more constructive aspects.

## Chapter One

### *White, or the “specter” of (post-) Modernism*

In October 1951, Robert Rauschenberg wrote a letter to Betty Parsons [fig. 1.1], one of the few gallerists showing contemporary American art at the time, entreating her for an opportunity to exhibit a new series of paintings.<sup>1</sup> For an artist who is named as one of the key exponents of a so-called “aesthetic of indifference,”<sup>2</sup> the letter’s tone is uncharacteristically heated and insistent:

I have since putting on shoes sobered up from summer puberty and moonlit smells. Have felt that my head and heart move through something quite different than the hot dust the earth threw at me. The results are a group of paintings that I consider almost an emergency. They bear the contradictions [*sic*] that deserves them a place with other outstanding paintings and yet they are not Art because they take you to a place in painting art has not been. (therefore it is) that is the the [*sic*] pulse and movement the truth of the lies in our peculiar [*sic*] preoccupation. They are large white (1 white as 1 GOD) canvases organized and selected with the experience of time and presented with the innocence of a virgin...<sup>3</sup>

“I was so innocently and indulgently excited about the pieces,” Rauschenberg recalls about the large white paintings he speaks of in the letter.<sup>4</sup> The words do indeed trip over

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<sup>1</sup> *ARTnews* characterized Betty Parsons as “the den mother of abstract expressionism”; *TIME* magazine credits her with “bringing abstract art to its present status.” Her gallery, which opened in 1946, famously took over Jackson Pollock’s contract when Peggy Guggenheim closed *Art of This Century* to decamp back to Europe in 1947, and showed fellow artists of the so-called first generation of the New York School: Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still, Barnett Newman, Hans Hofmann, and Ad Reinhardt.

<sup>2</sup> See Moira Roth, “The Aesthetic of Indifference,” *Artforum* 16 (November 1977): 46-53.

<sup>3</sup> The letter is reproduced in facsimile in Walter Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg: the early 1950s* (Houston: The Menil Collection, 1991), p. 230.

<sup>4</sup> See Rauschenberg’s discussion of these and the black paintings in Rose interview, pp. 45-46.

themselves in their haste and urgency, alternating between poetic ekphrasis and statements of conviction.

The letter's significance rests on both its subject, a rare statement by the artist about his work, and its early date. Rauschenberg did not comment on the nature and function of his art because he was "always afraid of explaining what I am doing, because my mind works so perversely."<sup>5</sup> Written statements are even fewer. Rauschenberg confessed that "I d[o]n't write very much, since it's so difficult for me to write."<sup>6</sup> He nevertheless deferred any personal misgivings and fears to attempt explaining the paintings anyway. The intensity of feeling palpable in the letter is even more peculiar if one considers that the paintings Rauschenberg refers to, the *White Paintings* (1951) [fig. 1.2], are among the paintings for which his aesthetic stance has come to be known as cool, ironic and detached.

The *White Paintings* consisted of five different configurations of canvases: one 4' x 4' square panel, two 4' x 6' panels, three 3' x 6', four 3' x 3' panels arranged in a square, and seven 1½' x 6' panels.<sup>7</sup> Per the brief instructions written in 1965 for his then-studio assistant Pontus Hultén to (re)make them in Stockholm for an exhibition [fig. 1.3], the paintings were on "smooth (not grainy or rough) canvas, stretched tight and painted evenly flat white, canvas pulled around back leaving sides free of nails or staples. Stretcher should be between 1½" + 2" deep. Sides are painted too."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Rauschenberg, interview with Alain Sayag, in *Robert Rauschenberg, photographs* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), unpaginated (hereafter cited as "Sayag interview").

<sup>6</sup> Rauschenberg is here apologizing for the note-like form of the "speech" that he prepared for the symposium, "Art of Assemblage." Elderfeld, ed., *Essays on Assemblage*, pp. 118-60. He has attributed his strained relationship to the written word to his severe dyslexia.

<sup>7</sup> The measurements of the panels are given width x height.

<sup>8</sup> The original concept of the *White Paintings* was that they should be periodically repainted or remade in order to keep them fresh and free of any sign of age. As Rauschenberg stated in an unpublished interview with Hopps, "I didn't want their past to be a mark on them," which is reflected in his letter to Parsons:

Rauschenberg explained to Barbara Rose that he did the all-white paintings “as an experiment to see how much you could pull away from an image and still have an image.”<sup>9</sup> His own characterization of them was “no-image monochromes.”<sup>10</sup> Judging from their reception when they were first exhibited at the Stable Gallery in 1953, Rauschenberg had pulled too much from the *White Paintings*, their “image” too reduced to register as an image. Dore Ashton described them as “seven pure white panels of sized canvas.... untouched by any instrument.”<sup>11</sup> We know from Rauschenberg’s notes that the canvases were in fact “touched” by a roller.<sup>12</sup> Hubert Crehan also mistook the *White Paintings* for blank canvases “unsullied by even a freckle of paint,” and was extremely critical of them: “White canvas conceived as a work of art, is beyond the artistic pale. If anything, it is a *tour de force* in the domain of personality gesture.”<sup>13</sup>

Clement Greenberg, in “After Abstract Expressionism” (1962), quipped that, while a blank canvas could in theory function as picture if hung on a wall, it was not necessarily a successful picture.

By now it has been established, it would seem, that the irreducible essence of pictorial art consists in but two constitutive conventions or norms: flatness and the delimitation [*sic*; delimitation] of flatness; and that the observance of merely these two norms is enough to create an object which can be experienced as a picture: thus a stretched or tacked-up canvas already exists as a picture—though not necessarily as a successful one.

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“Today is their creator [*sic*].” He considers the second, complete set painted by Brice Marden in 1968 the current “official version” of the works, and has ascribed the date 1951 to them. See Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg: the early 1950s*, p. 80.

<sup>9</sup> Rose interview, p. 45.

<sup>10</sup> Cited in Branden Joseph, *Random Order: Robert Rauschenberg and the neo-avant-garde* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003), p. 63. He does not footnote the citation.

<sup>11</sup> D[ore]. A[shton]., “Fifty-seventh Street: Bob Rauschenberg,” *Art Digest* 27, no. 20 (September 1953), p. 21.

<sup>12</sup> Joan Young and Susan Davidson specify in the chronology compiled for the Guggenheim retrospective of Rauschenberg’s work that the paint was applied with a roller. Joan Young with Susan Davidson in Walter Hopps and Susan Davidson, eds., *Robert Rauschenberg, a retrospective* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1997), p. 552.

<sup>13</sup> Hubert Crehan, “The See Change: Raw Duck,” *Art Digest* 27, no. 20 (September 1953), p. 25. Crehan was also an artist exhibiting in New York galleries.

(The paradoxical outcome of this reduction has been not to contract, but actually to expand the possibilities of the pictorial: much more than before lends itself now to being experienced pictorially or in meaningful relation to the pictorial: all sorts of large and small items that used to belong entirely to the realm of the arbitrary and the visually meaningless.)<sup>14</sup>

The difference between a blank, unpainted canvas and a flat white-painted one is not negligible. For one, raw canvas is off-white rather than pure white, and the natural fiber flecked with brown. Furthermore, as Rauschenberg pointed out, “Oil paint really does look like oil paint even in the most photographic painting.”<sup>15</sup> The reviewers likely did not mean that Rauschenberg had *literally* hung unpainted, stretched canvases on the wall, but rather that he may as well have. Moreover, there is a fundamental difference between a blank canvas and a monochrome. A blank canvas represents the as-yet unborn painting; a monochrome represents a particular type of gesture within the history of modern painting: the “terminal point” or “degree zero” of painting.

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### ***The monochrome***

Both Ashton and Crehan pointed to the avant-garde gambit of the monochrome as a challenge to orthodoxy in painting in their assessment of Rauschenberg’s *White Paintings*. Ashton named the Russian artist Kazimir Malevich, the first to use the monochrome as a gesture of negation with his *Black Square* of 1913-15 [fig. 1.4], as an historical precedent, and is rather dismissive of both: “Rauschenberg has decided to find and speak of his own experience. (Think of the many before him. Malevich: ‘I have invented nothing... I have only felt the night.’ Rauschenberg, too, has invented

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<sup>14</sup> Greenberg, “After Abstract Expressionism” (October 1962); reprinted in John O’Brian, ed., vol. 4, pp. 131-32.

<sup>15</sup> Swenson, “Rauschenberg paints a picture,” p. 47.

nothing.)”<sup>16</sup> *Black Square* announced the end of the old order of representational painting, and the birth of the new “non-objective” (i.e., abstract) language of Suprematism. The cracks visible on the surface of the painting as it exists now suggest Malevich painted over a pre-existing painting. Thus the black square literally blacked out the Renaissance tradition of painting conceived as a transparent window.

*Black Square* is, technically speaking, not a monochrome, but rather a black square painted onto a canvas. Malevich’s contemporary Aleksandr Rodchenko would be the first to paint true monochromes, covering the entire surface of a canvas with a single primary color—*Pure Red Color*, *Pure Yellow Color*, and *Pure Blue Color* (1921) [fig. 1.5]; thereby making what he called the “last paintings.” Rodchenko, along with his Constructivist comrades, “abandoned” painting for three-dimensional constructions in common, everyday materials, which they considered to be a truer path to the new art and more representative of the collectivist ideals of the new Soviet social order than Malevich’s Suprematism [fig. 1.6].

For the Russian artists, the monochrome was a self-conscious gesture with a very specific art political meaning. As Herta Wescher points out in her important article on Malevich, published in 1939 in the French journal of abstract art *Plastique*, Malevich’s *Black Square* (1913-15) and *Suprematist Composition: White on White* (1918) [fig. 1.7] intersected with—and indeed represented “the essence” of—“a broad movement of

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<sup>16</sup> Ashton, “Bob Rauschenberg,” p. 21. The Museum of Modern Art, whose collection she would most certainly have been familiar with, acquired several paintings by Malevich in 1935, including *Suprematist Composition: White on White* (1918), a white off-kilter square “floating weightlessly” on a larger off-white-painted square canvas. The Museum’s website lists the following oil paintings [unless otherwise noted] as 1935 acquisitions confirmed in 1999 by agreement with the Estate of Kazimir Malevich: *Woman with Pails: Dynamic Arrangement* (dated on verso 1912), *Reservist of the First Division* [oil on canvas with collage of printed paper, postage stamp, and thermometer] (fall-winter 1914), *Suprematist Composition: Airplane Flying* (dated on reverse 1914), *Painterly Realism: Boy with Knapsack—Color Masses in the Fourth Dimension* (1915), *Suprematist Painting* (1916-17), and *Suprematist Diagonal Construction 79* [drawing] (1917).

public interest” when they were shown at the Tenth State Exhibition in Moscow in 1919.<sup>17</sup> She anticipates that the reader, on the other hand, will immediately write off the monochrome paintings as the “idiosyncrasies” of “two eccentrics” (Rodchenko’s *Non-Objective Painting no. 80 (Black on Black)* (1918) [fig. 1.8], was also included in the show), which suggests that her contemporary audience was not as sympathetic or receptive to abstract art as the small avant-gardist audience that would have attended the State exhibition.<sup>18</sup>

The critical response to Rauschenberg’s *White Paintings*, scant as it was, proved that in the early fifties the American audience was also largely hostile to such radically abstract pictures, even though abstraction was clearly the dominant trend in contemporary American painting. Paul Bird, editor of *Art Digest*, remarked in 1950, “the swing to abstraction is reaching bandwagon proportions.”<sup>19</sup> His use of the verb “swing” suggests that this trend is rather abrupt, and (he hopes) would soon pass. Bird also intimates that artists were taking up the abstract style unthinkingly, without the same sense of purpose that had characterized the projects of early twentieth century abstract art—they were just jumping on the latest bandwagon.

Rauschenberg is, in Crehan’s opinion, no exception, gamely jumping on board with the rest. The difference with the *White Paintings*, in Crehan’s view, is that they took abstract painting’s quest for autonomy from the world through the progressive elimination of pictorial elements too far, indeed making a mockery of it: “They are a

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<sup>17</sup> Herta Wescher, “Malewitsch in Memoriam,” *Plastique* no. I (1937), pp. 5-10. James Johnson Sweeney, in his review of the current literature on painting and sculpture, described Wescher’s article as “One of the rare recent notes of any value on Malevich’s work that has appeared in English.” See “Periodical Literature on Painting and Sculpture since 1880, 1938-42,” *The Art Bulletin* 24, No. 4 (December 1942), p. 402, n37.

<sup>18</sup> Wescher, “Malewitsch in Memoriam,” p. 5.

<sup>19</sup> Paul Bird, “The Editor’s View,” *Art Digest* 25 (December 1950), p. 5.

climax to an esthetic that began to enchant a cult of painters some time ago—I mean the esthetic of the purge, with its apparatus of elimination, its system of denials, rejections and mortifications, reduced to their ultimate plastic reality.”<sup>20</sup> The white monochrome represented “the point of no return,” a dead-end for painting.

Crehan’s judgment bears out Greenberg’s reservations that with such an attenuated range of expression, abstract painting may not be able “to say enough about what we feel to satisfy us quite.”<sup>21</sup> At the same time, Crehan’s use of the word “image” suggests that, even purged of all content, Rauschenberg’s paintings “represented” (“imaged”) something, even if it was the dead-end of painting. He further judges each *White Painting* as an individual statement, as *a* monochrome, rather than as part of a series of one-, two-, three-, four- and seven-paneled modular compositions. Although the complete set was not exhibited together until 1968, Rauschenberg did not conceive of any one white painting as a statement in and of itself. He rather considered them “an experiment to see how much you could pull away from an image and still have an image,” as we have seen.<sup>22</sup>

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### ***The White Paintings and Cage***

Branden Joseph argues that Rauschenberg’s original conception of the *White Paintings* as “no-image monochromes” shifted over the course of the artist’s close association with John Cage, between 1951 and 1953. Rauschenberg was first introduced to the composer during his first one-man show at the Parsons Gallery in 1951 (14 May-2

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<sup>20</sup> Crehan, “The See Change,” p. 25.

<sup>21</sup> See Greenberg, “Abstract and Representational” (1954), in O’Brian, ed., vol. 3., pp. 186-93, wherein he uses the metaphor of grammar for abstract pictorial language.

<sup>22</sup> Rose interview, p. 45. The entire series was exhibited at Leo Castelli Gallery, New York, *White Paintings 1951* (12-27 October 1968).



June). By then, Cage was already well known in New York artistic circles. The composer left with a painting given to him by Rauschenberg, *Number 1* (1951).<sup>23</sup> At this stage, however, the two were merely acquaintances; their relationship would solidify at Black Mountain College in the summer of 1952.

Rauschenberg started the *White Paintings* later that year, when he returned to Black Mountain in late summer. He worked concurrently on two series that seem to contradict the all-white paintings' austerity. Plant-like forms simultaneously emerge from and sink into the vast blackness of the *Night Blooming* series [fig. 1.9] (at six by eight feet, these were his largest works to date). The rough surfaces of these paintings, which were achieved by pressing them into a dirt road while the paint was still wet, added to their atmospheric effect. The black paintings [fig. 1.10], made by overlaying paint on newsprint "sculpted" into textured relief, are of a similar vein.

Rauschenberg was equally engaged with the medium of photography this summer. Harry Callahan, Aaron Siskind and Ben Shahn joined the faculty that year, and I do not think it coincidence that Rauschenberg devised his project to photograph the United States "inch by inch" among this group of photographers whose aesthetic had been indelibly shaped by the social documentary culture of which they, as young

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<sup>23</sup> As relayed in Young and Davidson's chronology, *Robert Rauschenberg: a retrospective*, p. 551. Rauschenberg's memory of the circumstances under which he met Cage for the first time—at Black Mountain in 1949 or 1950—contradicts their account. The painting given to Cage consisted of a hand outline, a leaf from a fortune teller's notebook, and a black arrow on a silver background, which a couple of years later he made over into a black painting. See Calvin Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors: the heretical courtship in modern art* (New York: Viking Press, 1965), p. 205; and Roni Feinstein, "The Unknown Early Robert Rauschenberg: The Betty Parsons Exhibition of 1951," *Arts* 59 (January 1985), p. 129.

photographers in New York in the thirties, were a part (albeit ambivalently).<sup>24</sup> Indeed, 1951 was Rauschenberg's summer of photography, as I argue in chapter three.<sup>25</sup>

Nineteen fifty-two, on the other hand, was definitively the summer of painting. As Rauschenberg's photography had been stimulated by the presence of prominent photographers, so his painting was by the painters in residence that year, Jack Tworok [fig. 1.11] and Franz Kline [fig. 1.12].<sup>26</sup> Rauschenberg was "consumed," as Walter Hopps puts it in his indispensable monograph on the early period of the artist's work, by a new approach that differed markedly from the first black paintings of the previous year. Whereas the newspaper in the earlier paintings had been completely saturated and covered over with black paint, sections were let to show through in the 1952 paintings, such that the newspaper stands more as a collage element, rather than being used only to build texture [fig. 1.13].<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> As Sara Blair pointed out in the defense, Siskind's and Shahn's photography was an uneasy balance or tension between their documentary practice and modernist ambitions. In her recent book *Harlem Crossroads: Black Writers and the Photograph in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), she reconsiders Siskind's work for the New York Photo League in the mid-thirties, distinguishing the "embedded" documentary practice he developed from the more "objective" FSA documentary style. His post-documentary aesthetic seemed to be a complete reversal, as Joseph Entin notes: "Siskind's concern with (and rejection of) a photography of social reference—the shift in his work from a social materialism to an aesthetic materialism—represented a response to documentary work, in which photography is so often facilitated by a social interaction or exchange." In "Modernist Documentary: Aaron Siskind's *Harlem Document*," *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 12, no. 2 (1999), p. 357-382. Shahn produced documentary photographs of the rural southern and midwestern United States for the Historical Section of the Resettlement Administration/ Farm Security Administration (RA/ FSA). He opted for the handheld thirty-five millimeter Leica camera, which enabled him to photograph on the sly, giving his pictures an "exciting" if amateurish look compared to the large-format, formal pictures of his contemporaries.

<sup>25</sup> Recent scholarship has focused on Rauschenberg's developing relationship with Cy Twombly this summer, whom he'd met at the Art Students League earlier that year, or perhaps even earlier, in 1950—the young man whose bare torso Rauschenberg photographed on a Staten Island beach that year could possibly be Twombly.

<sup>26</sup> The feeling was evidently mutual: they were supportive of Rauschenberg's work, especially Tworok, whose efforts to secure exhibitions for the young artist were instrumental in getting Rauschenberg's paintings in a couple of group shows in New York.

<sup>27</sup> I will go further into detail regarding this distinction in how Rauschenberg used newsprint in the black paintings in the following chapter.

It would seem that the highly active surfaces of the *Night Blooming* paintings and the black paintings are antithetical to the pure, uninflected *White Paintings*. The three series can be reconciled to a single investigative thread when considered from the perspective of incorporation of the environment within their material form. Cage's reading of the *White Paintings* in particular has given rise to this notion of the environment entering into Rauschenberg's paintings. The composer famously credited his conceptual breakthrough *4' 33"* [fig. 1.14] to the *White Paintings* in his 1961 article, "On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and his Work": "the white paintings came first; my silent piece came later."<sup>28</sup> The title represented the length of time—i.e., four minutes and 33 seconds—during which a musician would sit at and *not* play the piano. Incidental noises made by a restless and perplexed audience and other ambient sounds became a part of the "piece" of silence.

Cage evidently got the idea of using silence to "give voice" to sounds from the environment from the *White Paintings*, which he described in the same article as "airports for the lights, shadows, and particles."<sup>29</sup> That is to say, the paintings' white-painted surfaces were like screens for light, and the shadows cast by other things and people occupying the room. They "caught whatever fell on them," and dust—that constant index of time—was especially visible on such a spotless ground.<sup>30</sup> As such, it seemed the paintings' *sine qua non* was to register their environment, rather than stand as paintings in and of themselves. This fact was ostensibly made clear by their role in *Theater Piece*

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<sup>28</sup> John Cage, "On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and his Work," *mETRO* 2 (1961), pp. 36-51.

<sup>29</sup> Cage, "On Robert Rauschenberg," p. 43.

<sup>30</sup> Cage, "On Robert Rauschenberg," p. 50.

*no. 1*, the multimedia event Cage composed to be performed by students and teachers at Black Mountain that summer.<sup>31</sup>

Various firsthand accounts suggest that some of the white panels were hung at an angle above the audience and used as screens for film and slide projections. Carolyn Brown gives a particularly vivid description in her recent memoir *Chance and Circumstance*:

Cage's recipe for theater-music-art included a wild mix: Eastern philosophy; Antonin Artaud's ideas of a nonliterary theater involving all the senses, devoid of narrative, rich with sound, movement, and light; a dash of Duchamp...; a sprinkle of Dada...; plus a dollop or two of Cage's own deadly-earnest moralizing.... This whole concoction was served up to the Black Mountain community in its dining hall in a collaborative non-collaboration that involved John Cage, David Tudor, M. C. Richards, Charles Olson, Merce Cunningham, a dog, and a twenty-six-year-old painter named Bob Rauschenberg. Cage delivered a timed lecture, with silences, on a ladder; Richards and Olson read their own poetry from another ladder at different times; David Tudor played the piano; Rauschenberg played old records on an antique wind-up phonograph, and his white paintings were suspended at various angles above the audience; Cunningham danced in the aisles and around the audience, improvising his material—all the while being followed by a barking dog (whose presence was completely fortuitous)....

These separate and unrelated activities were structured into time brackets, which were determined by Cage's use of chance operatives, and the collage of events was presented in an unusual seating and performance-area arrangement.... Cage had the people in the audience face one another in four triangular blocks whose apexes pointed in to the center, with four aisles between them; the performance took place for the most part outside and around the audience, as well as in the aisles and center section....

Reactions were mixed...<sup>32</sup>

Rauschenberg has denied that the paintings ever served as projection screens during the event.<sup>33</sup> Given that he meant for the paintings to function as images in and of themselves,

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<sup>31</sup> *Theater Piece no. 1* is generally considered to be the first "happening," a new radical form of artistic practice that presented an "event" composed of various activities to a live audience.

<sup>32</sup> Carolyn Brown, *Chance and circumstance: twenty years with Cage and Cunningham* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), pp. 20-21. See also Nancy Spector, "Rauschenberg and Performance, 1963-67: A 'Poetry of Infinite Possibilities,'" in *Robert Rauschenberg: a retrospective*, pp. 229-30.

it makes sense that he would reject the notion that images were projected onto them, which are of a different order than flickering shadows. Film projections would not only completely obliterate the delicate, pristine whiteness that characterizes the paintings, but also render them subordinate. In his “autobiographical statement” for the three-panel color offset lithograph, *Autobiography* (1968), he attributes agency to the *White Paintings* so that they are not simply passive screens, but open compositions that “respond to the activity within their reach.”<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, the *White Paintings*’ resemblance to screens does not guarantee they will function in this way. For a shadow to be projected onto a painting, the angle and placement of the light source must be such that a body can pass in front of the beam of light, thereby casting a silhouette of the figure.<sup>35</sup>

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### ***The aesthetic of indifference and the critique of representation***

Putting aside the question of whether images were projected onto the *White Paintings* during the performance of *Theater Piece no. 1*, Cage composed 4’ 33” soon

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<sup>33</sup> Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg: the early 1950s*, pp. 65-66. Kaprow would do something very similar to this in *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* (1959). Slides were projected onto panels of white fabric that served as the partitions between the rooms of the performance space.

<sup>34</sup> *Autobiography* was a 2,000-edition lithograph published by Broadside Art, Inc., New York.

<sup>35</sup> I came to this realization in front of the three-panel *White Painting* at San Francisco’s Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA). The lights at SFMOMA hung from ceilings that were quite high, higher than those at Parsons, Egan and Castelli Galleries according to installation views, where the *White Paintings* were exhibited. I stood at the painting, expecting to see my shadow, but the light was too diffuse; a flood rather than spot was likely used to light the work. Furthermore, the interesting curatorial decision to hang a blue Dan Flavin piece (*The Diagonal of May 25, 1963*) on the wall just right of Rauschenberg’s painting suffused the three panels with the fluorescent bulb’s gorgeous blue glow so that they did indeed embody “the plastic fullness of nothing,” as Rauschenberg described the *White Paintings* to Parsons. Flavin’s statement on the work in question reads: “The diagonal of May 25, 1963 is the divulgation of a dynamic plastic image-object. A common lamp becomes a common industrial fetish, as utterly reproducible as ever but somehow strikingly unfamiliar now. This light, in ‘endless’ shadow, abides in the spirit of Brancusi.” See Samuel Wagstaff’s correspondence file for Flavin, box 1, folder 23, Archives of American Art. Most of the collection can be accessed online at <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collectiononline/wagssamu/series1.htm>.

thereafter, in August of the same summer.<sup>36</sup> The following year, Cage wrote what Moira Roth describes as a “haikulike,” “poetic manifesto of the Aesthetic of Indifference” for the gallery guide to Rauschenberg’s show at the Stable Gallery in September 1953, the paintings’ first showing in New York:

No subject  
No image  
No taste  
No object  
No beauty  
No message  
No talent  
No technique (no why)  
No idea  
No intention  
No art  
No feeling  
No black  
No white (no *and*).<sup>37</sup>

Roth argues that the negative form of Cage’s statement—fifteen “No’s” to characterize the *White Paintings*—is a reflection of the sense of utter political inefficacy that many artists felt under McCarthyism (1950-54):

[B]igoted conviction and embittered passivity...were in many ways characteristic of America’s state of mind during the McCarthy period, when those with right-wing commitments pursued their goals with a blind and ardent zeal that was often channeled into the cause of anti-Communism. Others of a more liberal and self-critical persuasion found themselves paralyzed when called upon to act on their convictions, and this paralysis frequently appeared as indifference.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Cage also visited Harvard’s anechoic chamber that summer, a soundproof and reverberation-free environment, which forms the other half of the myth surrounding the creation of *4’ 33”*. He later described the experience: “I heard two sounds, one high and one low. When I described them to the engineer in charge, he informed me that the high one was my nervous system in operation, the low one my blood in circulation.” Thus he realized “that silence is not acoustic. It is a change of mind, a turning around”; that pure silence is physically impossible. Cage, “An Autobiographical Statement,” written for the Inamori Foundation and delivered in Kyoto as a commemorative lecture in response to having received the Kyoto Prize in November 1989, <http://www.newalbion.com/artists/cagej/autobiog.html> (accessed 3 March 2010).

<sup>37</sup> Reprinted in Richard Kostelanetz, ed., *John Cage: An Anthology* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1991), p. 111.

<sup>38</sup> Roth, “The Aesthetic of Indifference,” p. 57.

In Roth's view, indifference took the form of anarchism for Cage; she quotes his vision of a future in which "economics and politics as we knew them would disappear and people would be in a position, so to speak, to live *anarchistically*."<sup>39</sup> Rauschenberg's black paintings and *White Paintings* were likewise (mis)understood as "antipaintings," evidence that he was "sick unto death of 'good painting'," as Ashton put it.<sup>40</sup> Yet Rauschenberg insisted, "None of those early things was about negativism or nihilism."<sup>41</sup>

Caroline A. Jones and Jonathan D. Katz have challenged Roth's reading of silence as mere apolitical indifference, arguing that it was rather, as Joseph restates, "a strategy of resistance—formulated within the context of masculinist abstract expressionism and McCarthyite political repression—that opposes hegemonic cultural values by opening the processes of perception and interpretation to other voices and points of view."<sup>42</sup> Joseph's own turn reinvesting Rauschenberg's "silent" paintings with a subversive politics looks to Cage's anarchism:

Although the *White Paintings* were always nonrepresentational, what changed between 1951 and 1953 was that they came to be understood not as an image of nothing but in terms of a *critique of representation*. Rather than being the product of an arbitrary or anarchic negation, the *White Paintings* and 4' 33" might more properly be understood along the lines of Cage's developing anarchism. For, as the philosopher Todd May has indicated, the critique of representation—on a philosophical as well as a political level—is fundamental to any anarchist position: "What motivates the critique of political representation," writes May, "is the idea that in giving people images of who they are and what they desire, one wrests from them the ability to decide those matters for themselves."<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Cage in Kostelanetz, "Conversation with John Cage," in *John Cage: An Anthology*; cited in Roth, "The Aesthetic of Indifference," p. 49, emphasis mine.

<sup>40</sup> Ashton, "Bob Rauschenberg," p. 21.

<sup>41</sup> Emile de Antonio and Mitch Tuchman, *Painters painting: a candid history of the modern art scene, 1940-1970* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1984), p. 9.

<sup>42</sup> Joseph, *Random Order*, p. 67.

<sup>43</sup> Joseph, *Random Order*, p. 68.

Rauschenberg's philosophy, which was of a more extemporaneous and quotidian sort than May's, would agree with the general implications of the philosopher's statement. That is, political representation, in giving people *specific* images of who they are and what they desire, closed off their ability to imagine and manifest the otherwise "infinite possibilities" available to them. Rauschenberg once declared, "I have never believed in just one possibility."<sup>44</sup>

Judith Butler's own critique of political representation looks at the issue from the perspective of this as-yet unarticulated domain of infinite possibilities. She argues in *Bodies that Matter* (1993) that the "incapacity" of a political signifier such as *woman* "to include the social relations that it provisionally stabilizes through a set of contingent exclusions," is the very reason that those exclusions are capable of being rearticulated and brought into symbolic discourse. Representation's strategy to recuperate those exclusions as fixed terms by attributing a false uniformity, integrity and intelligibility to these terms only serves their reification and appropriation into the symbolic they seek to exclude.<sup>45</sup> That is, naming the exclusions—to use the same example, what a woman is *not*—renders them more coherent, even if in the negative sense, as *not-woman*'s.

The same goes for any categorical distinction. In Butlerian terms, works such as the *White Paintings*, *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953) [fig. 1.15], and the combine-paintings [fig. 1.16] are a catachresis of *painting*, and thereby reconfigured painting. The questionable status of these works as paintings compelled the naming of exclusions—why they were *not* paintings—in order to secure the boundaries of the normative term. As

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<sup>44</sup> Rose interview, p. 77.

<sup>45</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: on the discursive limits of "sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 221.



Tworkov noted, Rauschenberg's attitude allowed one "to see beyond what others have decided should be the limits of art."<sup>46</sup>

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### ***Rauschenberg's relationship to abstract expressionism***

In the early fifties, however, Rauschenberg evidently pushed the limits of painting too far beyond the frame of reference, and so his work, as Hopps points out, "was viewed as a challenge to, rather than a reflection of, Abstract Expressionism."<sup>47</sup> When Rose alludes to Rauschenberg's "big break you made from the abstract expressionists," he replies: "I wasn't being critical of them. John Cage and I were talking about the fact that there was enough room for every mind to have a different thought."<sup>48</sup> Warhol would recall (with a measure of gratitude) that Rauschenberg was one of the few established artists of the New York scene who encouraged new artists in their work, rather than writing them off.<sup>49</sup>

It would seem, then, Joseph's contention that the *White Paintings* were meant to be critiques of representation is too strong of a characterization. Furthermore, reference to representation within the discursive field of painting inevitably calls forth the binary of abstract and representational. This "crux" of modernist painting was not an issue for Rauschenberg, and precluded by the use of real objects in his later paintings. The *White Paintings*, as Rauschenberg described them, were not concerned with abstraction as a pure form of painting but rather demonstrated certain fundamental assumptions about the

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<sup>46</sup> Tworkov, cited in Michael Kimmelman, "Robert Rauschenberg, American Artist, Dies at 82," *New York Times* (14 May 2008), <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/14/arts/design/14rauschenberg.html> (accessed 5 March 2010).

<sup>47</sup> Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg: the early 1950s*, p. 33

<sup>48</sup> Rose interview, pp. 90, 94. She is referring to his comment that he wants to keep out or occlude the "history of...the process of putting it [a work] together"—what he elsewhere calls "not bragging about its sophisticated anatomy": "I never like that 'struggled' look."

<sup>49</sup> See Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, *POPism: the Warhol '60s* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983).

nature of and expectations surrounding painting: “They bear the contradictions [*sic*] that deserves them a place with other outstanding paintings and yet they are not Art because they take you to a place in painting art has not been. (therefore it is) that is the the [*sic*] pulse and movement the truth of the lies in our peculiar [*sic*] preoccupation.”<sup>50</sup>

Scholarship has tended to overstate the pointedness of the demonstration, framing the stark austerity of the all-white paintings as a direct challenge to the fraught surfaces and “soul-searching” of abstract expressionist painting. Rauschenberg saw things quite differently. The abstract expressionists opened up new ways of thinking about painting for him: “the freedoms that the abstract expressionists indulged in changed the possibilities and limitations of every artist. Pollock particularly.... When he started dripping, I think his whole body was engaged in the process. It became very personal then. And if he could *drip* paint, de Kooning could *smear* it. That really had to change the scene.”<sup>51</sup>

The work that Rauschenberg produced between the Parsons show in May 1951 and 1953 encompasses an extraordinary range of mediums and processes, and show him experimenting with a number of different ways one can conceivably make a painting, from erasing a drawing to literally growing a painting from dirt [fig. 1.17]. Before he began working on the red paintings [fig. 1.18] late in 1953, transitional pieces that soon thereafter evolve into the first combine-paintings, he worked on no less than three different series at a time. He explained,

It pulls back and forth all the time, and always has, even before I thought about it. I would work flat for a while and then I would start doing sculpture. The old thing about the internal dialectic of contradicting yourself, which is cathartic—the only thing that leads to something new. I

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<sup>50</sup> Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg: the early 1950s*, p. 230.

<sup>51</sup> Rose interview, pp. 50-51.

have to use contradiction in my work not only to achieve something but to avoid something else. That sets me up for some schizophrenic tension. It must go with my being a Libra cusp on Scorpio.<sup>52</sup>

In addition to the three series of paintings already mentioned (the white, black and *Night Blooming* paintings), photography, and participation in a number of performance-type events at Black Mountain, Rauschenberg also made *Erased de Kooning Drawing* and *Automobile Tire Print* (1951) [fig. 1.19], which have been characterized as proto-conceptual works. The sculpture he alludes to above is his *Elemental Sculpture* [fig. 1.20], simple combinations of material that bring to mind “the elements,” such as stones, wood and rope.<sup>53</sup> These were “contradicted” by the *Elemental Paintings*, small-scale monochromes in which he substituted gold and silver leaf [fig. 1.21], “moss-dirt-and-ivy,” and clay for paint. One *Elemental Painting* consisted of tissue paper ensconced in a glass display case. The *Elemental Paintings* were quite obviously extensions of Rauschenberg’s exploration of one-color painting, at the same time that they took both form and material from the window display jobs that he took on in order to support himself.<sup>54</sup> Finally, Rauschenberg produced a group of collages and assemblages while abroad in Europe and North Africa from the summer of 1952 to the following spring, which will be the subject of the final chapter.

Despite the varied forms, all of the works from this period, even those explicitly referred to as sculpture, are part of the same project: to radically redefine the nature of his

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<sup>52</sup> Rose interview, p. 59.

<sup>53</sup> I discuss this important body of work further in the following chapter, which focuses on the Stable Gallery exhibition of Rauschenberg’s and Twombly’s work.

<sup>54</sup> Rauschenberg carefully saved the leftover bits of expensive gold and silver leaf while on site. Gene Moore speculates that Rauschenberg and Johns adopted the pseudonym “Matson Jones,” “which I think they made up from their mothers’ maiden names, when they began to get recognition as artists—they didn’t want their commercial work confused with what they considered their real art.” See Gene Moore with Jay Hyams, *My time at Tiffany’s* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990), p. 70.

art within the parameters of painting.<sup>55</sup> The following sections of this chapter will explore further the significance of the *White Paintings* to Rauschenberg, which the letter suggests was the product of a new (“something quite different”) and serious (“sober”) commitment to painting. In order to get a sense of why he considered them “almost an emergency,” and the transition that they represented for him, we must revisit the body of work that this incredible surge of creativity ostensibly supplanted, and the artistic environment that gave rise to his developing aesthetic.

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### ***Beginnings***

Until 1951, Rauschenberg’s then (soon to be ex-) wife Susan Weil was his principal collaborator in art. He had only recently made the decision to be an artist when the two met in the summer of 1948 in Paris, where they were both attending the Académie Julien and boarding in the same house on Rue Stanislas.<sup>56</sup> The classes at the Académie placed too much emphasis on the fundamentals of representing the figure for Rauschenberg’s taste, so he would often play hooky with Weil to look at the “real stuff” in the Paris galleries and museums, by artists like Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso—his first exposure to European avant-garde art. He was 22 at the time, and no doubt swept up in the emotions of his shared experience living in Paris with another young bohemian artist, flouting the Académie, and painting—often with his hands rather than brushes—on the streets where every great modern artist had walked. It would be exceedingly difficult to temper the perceived fatefulness of this romance, as their feelings for each other were

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<sup>55</sup> Hopps makes the point that Rauschenberg’s project is concerned with painting. See *Robert Rauschenberg: the early 1950s*, p. 33.

<sup>56</sup> Rauschenberg was among many young American men in Paris during the late forties and early fifties. Susan came from a very wealthy patrician family—“real aristocrats from the Chicago suburbs,” as Rauschenberg described them. See Rose interview, p. 35.

based on shared convictions, and fanned by unrestrained “pubescent,” as he described himself to Parsons as having been, enthusiasm.

Having served some time in the military, Rauschenberg was able to enroll at the Kansas City Art Institute on the G.I. Bill, where his education as an artist started in February 1947.<sup>57</sup> The classes he would have been obliged to take as a first year student were more practically (or commercially) orientated.<sup>58</sup> Further experience came with the odd day jobs he worked to support himself, which included preparing window displays [fig. 1.22], building movie and photography sets, and constructing models for an industrial designer.<sup>59</sup> The ambition to be more than a well-trained artist was already there when he took off for Paris, though he did not see it as ambition so much as “having nothing to lose,” which “gave me the right to do anything that I damn well pleased.”<sup>60</sup> The notion of failure had no place in the absence of expectations.

The Académie Julien did not offer Rauschenberg the “kind of control or technique that would make the best use of my facilities,” “the mental and physical exercises that I

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<sup>57</sup> It is possible that Rauschenberg went to Paris on the G.I. bill as well. Arnold Herstand offers a “slice of life” of the average G.I. bill student in Paris. As one G.I. put it, “We are in Paris for many different reasons: because of a certain kind of freedom here, because of the low cost of living and the G.I. Bill; in hopes of finding the future of modern art; but mostly just because it’s Paris.” See “G.I. students show the Left Bank” in *ARTnews* 48, no. 4 (summer 1949): 20-21, 64.

<sup>58</sup> The KCAI course catalog for 1947 lists Drawing I, Design and Composition I, Modeling I, Museum Research, Lettering, Perspective, Anatomy and History of Art as the curriculum for first year students. Drawing I and Design and Composition I met at the same time (Monday-Wednesday-Friday, 7-9:30 P.M.), so it follows that Rauschenberg chose to take the course in design over the introduction to drawing. Young and Davidson specify that Rauschenberg attended classes at night, and worked odd jobs during the day, in which case, it is possible that the design class was the only class he took, since modeling I met daily 1-4 P.M., museum research Fridays 1-3 P.M., and lettering Tuesdays and Thursdays, 4-5 P.M. This seems in keeping with the course of his career.

<sup>59</sup> Rauschenberg evidently found “his experience working with a miscellany of materials in his outside jobs” far more formative than his formal education. See Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg: the early 1950s*, p. 15.

<sup>60</sup> Rose interview, p. 85.

needed”—in a word, discipline.<sup>61</sup> For this he looked to Josef Albers, whose intervention Rauschenberg acknowledged as having been “monumental,” though not necessarily in an affirmative way. As he put it, “Albers was the best teacher that I ever had. Simply because we had revoltingly nothing in common. And so he sped up the process of my finding out who I was.”<sup>62</sup>

Rauschenberg claimed to have read about Albers in an issue of *Time* magazine, and was drawn to his rigorous teaching method, which began with the fundamentals: “he starts beginning students off by teaching them to draw straight lines.”<sup>63</sup> An article that may have been the one that was read describes Albers as “a granitic perfectionist,” and his non-spontaneous, “reticent craftsmanship” as “a welcome change of diet” to the “syrup, tar, mustard, muscle and a soup spoon” abstractions of his peers [fig. 1.23]. The writer’s description of the latter was likely the sort of “indulgent” quality that Rauschenberg was looking to avoid. Convinced that Albers was his man, Rauschenberg returned Stateside with Weil in the fall of 1948, and enrolled at the “progressive” Black Mountain College, where Albers had been teaching since 1933, that October.

It is not a mere contrivance to say that Rauschenberg’s horizons were vitally expanded by his on-off residency at Black Mountain between 1948 and 1952. He found

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<sup>61</sup> Rose interview, p. 22. He said of himself, “to be disciplined is so against my character, my general nature anyway, that I have to strain a little bit to keep on the right track.” Robert Rauschenberg interview, 21 December 1965, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (hereafter cited as “Seckler interview”).

<sup>62</sup> “Notes from a Meeting with Robert Rauschenberg” (14 August 1998), SFMOMA curatorial files for *Collection*, accession number 72.26.

<sup>63</sup> Young and Davidson specify that it was an August issue of *Time*; chronology, p. 551. Hopps only mentions the magazine, with no reference to the month, p. 16. A preliminary search brought up a review of two simultaneous exhibitions in Manhattan galleries in the 31 January 1949 US edition of *Time*, where these citations are taken from. There is no other article in *Time* between 1947 and 1949 that mentions both the College and Albers. In Italy, at least, the original American editions of popular picture magazines such as *LIFE* and *Vogue* circulated. One expects the same to be true for France as well (i.e., that European editions weren’t the norm yet, as they are today). See Germano Celant and Anna Costantini, *Roma-New York, 1948-1964* (Milano: Edizioni Charta, 1993), pp. 17-18,

there “a new world of creative individuals,” in Hopps’s words. In that first year, however, he remained close to Weil, which would have limited the amount of time he had for that newfound world, though not necessarily unhappily or unwillingly. Given that Rauschenberg joined Weil at the family compound on Outer Island, Connecticut after finishing their first year at Black Mountain, it seems that he was quite content to be with her. The couple enjoyed another blissful summer sharing discoveries in art and collaborating on projects, this time in the idyllic setting of a private island in the Atlantic.<sup>64</sup> Most significant to the art historical record, Susan taught Rauschenberg how to expose blueprint paper; *Life* magazine [fig. 1.24] ran a photoessay of the process.<sup>65</sup>

In the fall of 1949, Rauschenberg and Weil established themselves in Manhattan. He recalls his “excitement about the way in the city you have on one lot a forty story building and right next to it you have a little wooden shack. One is a parking lot and one is this maze of offices and closets and windows where everything is so crowded.”<sup>66</sup> The urban environment would prove to be an invigorating flux of energies. Another potential world of creative individuals was available to Rauschenberg when he and Weil enrolled at the Art Students League, but no formative relationships were forged that year. Hopps suggests they were perhaps compelled to keep to themselves because their work was so different from the work of students and faculty at the League, and they “fear[ed] the

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<sup>64</sup> In 1955, there was a fire on the island that destroyed all of the work that Rauschenberg had been storing there, which represented a significant portion of his output in the preceding years. The island is now used by Southern Connecticut State University for ecological studies and is part of Stewart B. McKinney National Wildlife Refuge, which should give some impression of what that summer on the island must have been like.

<sup>65</sup> “Speaking of Pictures,” *LIFE* 30, no. 15 (9 April 1951): 22-24. I discuss these works in the context of Rauschenberg’s photography in the third chapter.

<sup>66</sup> Seckler interview.

vagaries of the student studios.”<sup>67</sup> In their spare time Rauschenberg and Weil resumed their Parisian pastime of visiting galleries, especially those representing the new American painting now known as “abstract expressionism” and “the New York School.”<sup>68</sup> He tried to relate to Seckler something of the quality of his first impressions of the new art he was seeing in New York: “I was in awe of the painters; I mean I was new in New York, and I thought the painting that was going on here was just unbelievable.”<sup>69</sup>

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*The Parsons paintings: first attempts at a non-hierarchical field of painting*

Rauschenberg was particularly keen on the Parsons Gallery. He “had the idea that so many fantastic things were happening,” that “something [wa]s going on up there.”<sup>70</sup> What exactly that “something” was he could not say, but it “intrigued,” “seduced” and “baffled” him, and of this he was certain: he wanted to be a part of it. The desire to know “if there *was* something I was doing that was remotely related to what they were doing, not *like* what they were doing, but in the spirit with which they did it” is what drove Rauschenberg into the gallery to ask Parsons her opinion of his paintings. “I said that all I was doing was painting, and this was the place where I thought something was happening. I wanted to know what she thought. ‘Is this “something” or isn’t it?’”<sup>71</sup> Parsons’s answer was to give him a show, but not without some hesitation, and not for

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<sup>67</sup> See Hopps’s discussion of Rauschenberg’s poor reception among his peers at the League in *Robert Rauschenberg: the early 1950s*, pp. 26-27.

<sup>68</sup> Susan Landauer notes the New York-centrism of the term “New York School” for the trend developing in American art in her study of its manifestation in San Francisco. Going against the common misconception that New York initiated the move to what one reviewer she cites described as “abstraction, together with a moody form of expressionism” that then swept the nation, Landauer argues that the developments in New York followed a broader pattern and sequence. See especially pp. 3-13, in *The San Francisco School of Abstract Expressionism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

<sup>69</sup> Seckler interview.

<sup>70</sup> Rose interview, p. 41.

<sup>71</sup> Rose interview, p. 44. It seems to have been important to Rauschenberg to have it on record that he had not gone to Parsons to get a show. “You have to believe that. I just wanted to know...”



some months. In other words, it was not the unequivocal affirmation that he had perhaps been hoping for. Rauschenberg's nervous deference to Parsons for feedback suggests that, at this stage, he had not yet fully worked out his artistic project, or the broad parameters that would guide his practice. Parsons undoubtedly felt Rauschenberg's paintings held promise, but she, like him, was ambivalent about their direction. Some years later she recalled, "I was instantly fascinated by his work. Oils mostly, and predominantly white. I could see right away that he was on his own tangent—that he wasn't influenced by anyone else."<sup>72</sup>

Hopps sets the New York vanguard art scene in 1949-50 as one of transition: after "the energy and attendant activity surrounding the European expatriate Surrealists based in New York during the war years had subsided," and before the radical liberties taken with painting by the so-called New York School garnered critical and then public attention. "Contemporary articles or reviews addressing Abstract Expressionism were rare, limited for the most part to *ARTnews*, where the young Thomas Hess was an editor." Rather, "Major exhibitions of Picasso, Henri Matisse, and Paul Klee were the dominant events," as far as the reigning orthodoxy for modern art was concerned. Further, "the range of artists actually at work in New York City was far more pluralistic than subsequent historical chronicles ever acknowledge."<sup>73</sup> This would remain true throughout the fifties, when those disparate tendencies Hopps lists by way of example—"the realist painting of Hopper or Rafael Soyer, the hard geometric abstractions of Fritz Glarner and Ilya Bolotowsky, and imagist art such as the romantic Surrealism of Pavel Tchelitchew or

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<sup>72</sup> Parsons cited in Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors*, pp. 201-02. She also remembers his childlike enthusiasm.

<sup>73</sup> Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg: the early 1950s*, pp. 17-18.

the poetic objects of Cornell”—found further articulation by the younger artists coming onto the scene.

Rauschenberg made it clear that he identified with “the spirit” of what the abstract expressionists were doing. According to Hopps, Rauschenberg was a quick study. In his view the early paintings—commonly referred to as the Parsons paintings since many were included in Rauschenberg’s first solo exhibition at the Parsons Gallery—demonstrate the young artist’s “seemingly instant understanding and absorption of advanced Abstract Expressionist modes of painting.”<sup>74</sup> The motif of circles and lines appears in several of the Parsons paintings, and even features on the exhibition announcement [fig. 1.25] that Rauschenberg designed.<sup>75</sup> He dismissed these compositions as comically simple, calling one such painting, *Eden* (1950) [fig. 1.26], a “mickey-mouse” picture of “a bunch of black lollipops,” explaining that they “were depicting a time sequence within the image.... I was dealing with images in sequence, an idea that was not being taught by Kantor [at the Art Students League].”<sup>76</sup> Seriality and temporality (or duration) is further emphasized by the horizontal lines of the mattress ticking that Rauschenberg stretched onto a frame and painted white to serve as his canvas, which combined with the quarter-note-shaped “lollipops” are suggestive of bars of music.<sup>77</sup>

Hopps takes them more seriously, understanding the repetition of the motif to be rudimentary expositions of one of the main principles of painting: the differentiation of

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<sup>74</sup> Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg: the early 1950s*, p. 26.

<sup>75</sup> Rauschenberg seems to have noticed the motif everywhere in the world. A photograph of a bare bulb [fig. 1.31] coming down from the ceiling—white against the blackness of the otherwise dark room, with its cord hanging down—echoes the formal pattern of a circle juxtaposed against a vertical line. These early photographs will be discussed in further detail in chapter three.

<sup>76</sup> Rose interview, p. 44.

<sup>77</sup> The mattress ticking is faintly visible under the white paint at the top right corner. Rauschenberg also left little strips of the fabric showing by leaving the stems of some of the lollipops unpainted, which further supports my argument that these early paintings show him attempting to re-negotiate the relationship between figure and ground.

figure from ground. A hierarchy of focus is implicit in this distinction. The ground fades back and becomes incidental to the image composed by the figures “on top.” Pictorial space is thus divided into hierarchically distinct registers. I would go one step further than Hopps to say that what is significant about the Parsons paintings is not the ordering of pictorial space *per se*, but rather how Rauschenberg tries to preempt the settling of pictorial space into the conventional hierarchy of figure and ground.

Rauschenberg explored several strategies for getting around the figure-ground “conflict.” In a painting such as *Untitled (with dark forms)* (1950) [fig. 1.27], the image was made by inscribing and scraping away the top layer of black paint to reveal the lighter layer underneath. The effect is of the figures’ (co-) existing within the ground, rather than their resting on top of and thus covering it. Rauschenberg avoided painting over sections by color-blocking. The white triangular strip that divides the composition in two has been wedged in between the black, which one can tell by the areas of bare Masonite near the top of the image. A dry brush of black paint was then run along the left edge of the white section, at places crossing over the “line” between them, thus confusing the line between figure and ground. This technique of blurring the ostensive edge between figure and ground is especially pronounced in *Mother of God* (c 1950) [figs. 1.28-1.29]. An explicit tension is set up between the impression that the large white circle at the center of the composition has been torn out of the collage of maps that covers most of the white-painted board, and the just-as-likely possibility that the circle has been painted on. The wavering edge is in fact made of both maps torn to follow the curve of the circle and white paint.

One can see that Rauschenberg often sketched out a composition in pencil directly on the canvas from the lines left visible in the finished painting, as they are in *Trinity* (c 1949) [fig. 1.30]. The pencil lines blocked out areas to be filled in with color. However, because Rauschenberg did not paint all the way to the line, they become pictorial elements themselves at the same time they act as “buffer zones” to keep one block of color from dominating another. Rauschenberg also experimented in this painting with a framing device he picked up from de Kooning, who would paint the edges of a canvas silver to restrict the image. The silver-painted edge was particularly effective in the white-grounded canvases, such as the bottom edge of *Mother of God*, acting as both a literal and depicted border that made the mostly white painting stand out from the white wall on which it hung. Rauschenberg even claims, “Noticing how well that worked, I had painted my house silver inside, thinking that it might improve my own paintings.”<sup>78</sup>

Finally, conversion of the painting’s surface into a quasi-diagrammatic field reinforced the “flatness” of the image. As was often the case with Rauschenberg’s “diagrams,” the lines drawn across the canvas from one element to another alluded to associations that never quite added up. One example, *Stone, Stone, Stone* (c 1951) [fig. 1.32], contains three distinct pictorial registers. On the far left, five rectangular fields covered by glass or plastic five “frame” found objects: locks of hair, postage stamp, printed form, printed reproduction of crested bird, and drawn maze-like grid.<sup>79</sup> On the right are three circular forms against black. The topmost circle is a small circular mirror,

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<sup>78</sup> Rose interview, p. 45.

<sup>79</sup> I’m relying on Hopps’s description of the work, since it is no longer extant and exists only in rather poor reproductions. See *Robert Rauschenberg: the early 1950s*, p. 52. Rauschenberg is probably speaking of this or another work very much like it here: “I did crazy things in those early Betty Parsons days—like cutting off my hair and putting it behind plastic and gluing it in.” In Rose interview, p. 56.

a sliver of which has been painted over.<sup>80</sup> A “diagram” takes up the rest of the picture, which seems to be a graphic schema of the more representational area to the left. However, there is an extra box in the chart, squeezed between the bottom two boxes of the image column. Otherwise, the line drawing would correspond exactly. It looks as though Rauschenberg intended to have six “frames”—one can see the outline of a box just above the lowest one filled with a small drawing of the maze-like grid from *22 The Lily White* (1950) [fig. 1.33]. The lines that connect the six boxes on the left to the two boxes (or three lines) on the right suggest some sort of relationship between them. This only heightens the desire for correspondence between the image column and its *faux ami*.

Rauschenberg admitted to “a short lived religious period” to explain the religiosity of the titles of works from this period: *Mother of God* [fig. 1.28], *Trinity* [fig. 1.30], *Eden, Crucifixion and Reflection* (c 1950) [fig. 1.34], and *The Man with Two Souls* (1950) [fig. 1.35]. It has been suggested that the reference to Christian themes is “symbolic of the divine,” and “resonates synchronistically” with the mystical spirituality that was a subtext of some abstract expressionist painting and the works of the contemporaneous Beats.<sup>81</sup> One might also consider the theological conception of the Trinity as it might apply in a more secular or prosaic sense to Rauschenberg’s paintings. The Trinity unites three distinct, nonhierarchical manifestations of God— Father, Son, and Holy Spirit— within a single entity or “Godhead.” As I have argued, Rauschenberg

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<sup>80</sup> It is conceivable that the three stones in the title refer to these circles. The word “stone” is also inextricably linked to “thingness”: the author of *A Short History of Structural Linguistics* uses the example of “stone” to illustrate the “ancient view...that words are names for ‘things’.” See Peter Matthews, *A Short History of Structural Linguistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 18. By extension, Rauschenberg may have meant to emphasize the “thingness” of the collage elements incorporated into the painting, thereby prefiguring the objects used in the combine-paintings.

<sup>81</sup> See Joseph’s discussion of this body of work, *Random Order*, p. 26, and related footnotes. He connects the explicit references to Christian themes to Rauschenberg’s analogy, “1 white as 1 GOD,” in the Parsons letter. Hopps discusses these works in *Robert Rauschenberg: the early 1950s*, pp. 29-30.

seems to have played with ways to render the pictorial field nonhierarchical. One method was to introduce a third term, which destabilized and defused the figure-ground dichotomy.<sup>82</sup> The Parsons paintings are indeed comprised of several trinities: the reduced palette of (off-)white, black and red; the limited repertory of forms of circles, boxes and lines; and the fact already mentioned that he intentionally worked on several—usually three—different series at a time, precisely in order to keep himself from settling into too predictable a pattern.

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### ***From neo-dada to the neo-avant-garde***

The common perception of the Parsons show is that it was a demoralizing failure for Rauschenberg. Hopps writes, “The sparse critical response to the Parsons Gallery show was cool at best, expressing reservations or bewilderment. Nothing sold. A deeply disappointed Rauschenberg did not realize that Parsons was selling little work by her major artists.”<sup>83</sup> Reading the reviews again, while by no means “glowing,” they are nevertheless not so “cool” as Hopps describes them. They’re more encouraging, and agree with Parsons’s assessment that he was “on his own tangent.” Hopps’s overstatement perhaps reflects the general consensus among chief interpreters of Rauschenberg’s art that he was “ahead of his time,” and recognition, belated.

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<sup>82</sup> Even Rauschenberg’s personal affairs were beset by the destabilizing factor of a third party. It is likely that his separation from Weil in the fall of 1951, a little over a year after their marriage and a few months after the birth of their son, was precipitated by his deepening relationship with Twombly. Thomas Crow characterized Rauschenberg and Twombly’s relationship as a dyadic bond in a paper given at a symposium that aimed to countervail the refusal by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York to acknowledge the fact of Johns’s personal (gay) relationship with Rauschenberg and its significance to the series of work on view in the exhibition “Jasper Johns: Gray.” When Johns entered the picture in 1953, the dyad turned into “a triad of unstable southern gentlemen.” Johns brought his own third term, Rachel Rosenthal, who in turn was “hopelessly in love” with him and remembers the situation of “a lot of murkiness, and games being played, and cross signals” as being “sort of god-awful”; see Calvin Tomkins, *Off the Wall: Robert Rauschenberg and the art world of our time* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1980), p. 112.

<sup>83</sup> Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg: the early 1950s*, p. 28.

When Roni Feinstein was writing her landmark dissertation on the first fifteen years of Rauschenberg's art, the field was of the opposite mind, considering him an unserious artist. Her strategy for countering this view was to distinguish Rauschenberg from his contemporaries, at the same time that she located his practice within a specifically American tradition of art:

There was a fundamental lack of criteria—of a critical vocabulary and framework—with which to discuss and evaluate his art. Prevailing conceptions about what art should be obscured all but the most superficial qualities of his art.

Intervening art movements, from the Minimalism of the mid-sixties to the Neo-Expressionism of the 1980s, and the emergence of Postmodernism, have raised those issues and generated those criteria that make a reevaluation of Rauschenberg's art both possible and necessary. The emergence of interest through the years in literalism and objecthood, in theatricality and kinesthesia, in language and conceptuality, in allegory and metaphor, reading and meaning, and in photographs and reproductions, have all shed new light on Rauschenberg's art. Rauschenberg's ideas and art attitudes, out of step with the concerns and developments of his own time, have emerged as the precursors of principles underlying much recent art.<sup>84</sup>

New York artists who were coming of age in the fifties made no secret of the important role that Rauschenberg's combine-paintings played in the development of their own critical practice, which questioned the limits of the art object.<sup>85</sup> And his art did indeed meet with what one writer for the *Village Voice* referred to in a related context as “the ‘deep freeze’ that so frequently attends the early years of a radical and sometimes difficult art.”<sup>86</sup> The danger in a retrospective understanding, however, is that it tends to be

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<sup>84</sup> Roni Feinstein, *Random Order: the first fifteen years of Robert Rauschenberg's art, 1949-1964* (PhD thesis, New York University, 1990), pp. 2-3.

<sup>85</sup> Allan Kaprow and Donald Judd wrote extensively on the respective developments with which they were associated—happenings for the former, minimalism for the latter. Both cite Rauschenberg's paintings as critical turning points, which will be further discussed in the epilogue.

<sup>86</sup> Theodore Tucker, “Art: Kaprow's ‘Apple Shrine,’” *The Village Voice* (12 January 1961).

construed so as to accord with an historical narrative already in place. In Rauschenberg's case, his art anchors the postmodernist tradition.

Leo Steinberg was the first to use the term "post-Modernist" in reference to Rauschenberg's paintings in his seminal essay "Other Criteria" (1972). The curious orthography used by Steinberg, where the "M" in "modernist" is capitalized and separated from the prefix "post" by a hyphen, should signal to the reader that what he means by the term differs markedly from what "postmodernist" has come to mean in current art historical discourse. The shift from Modernist to post-Modernist painting that Rauschenberg's paintings represented for Steinberg is from pictures that "simulate vertical fields" to

opaque flatbed horizontals.... The pictures of the last fifteen to twenty years insist on a radically new orientation, in which the painted surface is no longer the analogue of a visual experience of nature but of operational processes.... I tend to regard the tilt of the picture plane from vertical to horizontal as expressive of the most radical shift in the subject matter of art, the shift from nature to culture.<sup>87</sup>

Rauschenberg founded a new artistic language that dealt with a new order of experience.

"Yet," Steinberg cautions, "this internal change is no more than a symptom of changes which go far beyond questions of picture planes, or of painting as such. *It is part of a shakeup which contaminates all purified categories.*"<sup>88</sup> The "shakeup" evidently had Greenberg at its center. As Steinberg recalls thirty years after the fact:

[Clement] Greenberg insisted that subject matter simply didn't exist for the intelligent person. He was running a whole empire of younger critics—Rosalind Krauss (before her own turn away from Greenberg), Michael

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<sup>87</sup> Leo Steinberg, "Other Criteria," in *Other Criteria: confrontations with twentieth-century art* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 84. I further unpack Steinberg's notion of the flatbed picture in the final chapter, wherein I discuss the combine-paintings that gave rise to the conception.

<sup>88</sup> Steinberg, "Other Criteria," p. 91.



Fried, and others—all intelligent people, all writing in his vein. I was up against them, as well as very powerful dealers and curators.<sup>89</sup>

“Other Criteria” therefore stood in opposition to the reigning orthodoxy of Greenbergian Modernism; the extent to which Steinberg’s notion of the flatbed picture hinges on Greenberg’s notion of the flat picture plane will be examined more closely in the final chapter. To be fair, the text was also representative—a culmination if you will—of Steinberg’s career-long battle against “almost a century of formalist indoctrination,” which Greenberg’s Modernism was party to.

“Other Criteria” opened the door to a new line of critical reception of Rauschenberg’s work that extended its claim of a “radically new” type of painting to the level of paradigm shift. Put another way, the developing discourses of postmodernism as a new epistemological condition eclipsed the relatively narrow stakes of Steinberg’s post-Modernism. Douglas Crimp’s formulation is representative of this shift in discursive frames:

Foucault’s archaeology involved the replacement of such unities of historicist thought as tradition, influence, development, evolution, source, and origin with concepts such as discontinuity, rupture, threshold, limit, and transformation. Thus, in Foucauldian terms, if the surface of a Rauschenberg painting truly involves the kind of transformation Steinberg claims it does, then it cannot be said to evolve from or in any way be continuous with a modernist painting surface. And if Rauschenberg’s flatbed pictures are experienced as producing such a rupture or discontinuity with the modernist past, as I believe they do..., then perhaps we are indeed experiencing one of those transformations in the epistemological field that Foucault describes.<sup>90</sup>

The new criticism worked against the prevailing view that art like Rauschenberg’s combine-paintings, which used everyday materials, was “neo-dada”—facile repetitions of

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<sup>89</sup> Katy Siegel, “March 1972,” *Artforum* 40, no. 7 (March 2002), p. 48.

<sup>90</sup> Douglas Crimp, “On the Museum’s Ruins” (1980); reprinted in Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-aesthetic: essays on postmodern culture* (Port Townsend, Wash.: Bay Press, 1983), p. 45.

the earlier avant-garde.<sup>91</sup> As German literary critic Peter Bürger argued in *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974; Eng. trans. 1984), the neo-avant-garde merely rehearsed earlier avant-garde strategies within an institutional context, thereby nullifying their radical oppositionality: “the neo-avant-garde institutionalizes the *avant-garde as art* and thus negates genuinely avant-gardiste intentions.”<sup>92</sup> In order for Rauschenberg’s production to be critical in intent and effect, the problem of appropriation inherent to the concept of the neo-avant-garde—and his importance in the postwar revival of collage, which Bürger regarded as the archetypal historical avant-gardist strategy in its disruption of and damage to the integral unity of the artwork’s form—needed to be confronted.

Rosalind Krauss argued in her 1974 article “Rauschenberg and the Materialized Image” that Rauschenberg’s use of common junk objects challenged the fate of the art object’s absorption as a commodity.<sup>93</sup> Furthermore, she makes the point that for Steinberg to attribute a change of major consequence to the history of art to what were, with their layered clutter and disarray, anti-masterpieces, was itself an indication that the premises of contemporary art had radically changed. Craig Owens, Crimp and others, in light of the work of contemporary artists who explicitly conceived of their projects in terms of institutional critique, framed Rauschenberg’s paintings as likewise engaged in the radical

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<sup>91</sup> The increasing prevalence of assemblage on the New York art scene in the mid-fifties, coupled with a resurgence of interest in dada earlier in the decade, gave rise to the term “neo-dada” to describe these new works utilizing ostensibly familiar—some would argue too familiar—strategies. The theory of the neo-avant-garde lifted the critical debate to a new level.

<sup>92</sup> Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 58.

<sup>93</sup> Rosalind Krauss, “Rauschenberg and the Materialized Image,” *Artforum* 13, no. 4 (December 1974): 36-43.

disarticulation of the institution of art, in particular the destruction of the art of painting, which I demonstrate throughout this dissertation is simply not tenable.<sup>94</sup>

Postmodernism made for a particularly compelling case in establishing the criticality of Rauschenberg's—and neo-avant-gardist—work, as Joseph found. Postmodernism provided a new historical framework in which to reconceptualize avant-garde practice by rendering moot the issue of an historical avant-garde. That is to say, if the new avant-garde was borne of a new historical era, then this first avant-garde would in effect become, by default, the new historical avant-garde, which is the basis of Joseph's argument in *Random Order*:

[R]ather than being seen as the end of a long and increasingly impoverished line of avant-garde history, Rauschenberg should be viewed as among the first avant-gardists of an era of control, or what Hardt and Negri have more recently termed "Empire." As Hardt and Negri describe them, the discourses of postmodernism in which Rauschenberg has been so pivotal (though they do not mention Rauschenberg) are most productively understood as critiquing the transcendent and dialectical structure of modern sovereign or disciplinary power."<sup>95</sup>

Joseph, too, is prone to overstatement, in this case the centrality of Rauschenberg to *all*, as he implies, discourses of postmodernism; Rauschenberg has been important to the discourses of postmodernism *in art*. The postmodernity of Rauschenberg's practice rests in its heterogeneity, or in the artist's own terms, "random order," which for Joseph is tantamount to a critique of autonomy, totality and subjectivity. The motivation for Joseph's claim that the *White Paintings* are a critique of representation, cited above, should be more apparent now. In continually offering each viewer something different to

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<sup>94</sup> Joseph has compiled many of these texts in his edited volume, *Robert Rauschenberg* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002).

<sup>95</sup> Joseph, *Random Order*, p. 17.

see, they offered “an experience aimed at subverting any sense of stable or autonomous individuality rather than falsely buttressing it.”<sup>96</sup> He continues,

The indeterminacy initiated in the *White Paintings* and *4' 33"* also significantly opposed those forms of individualism characteristic of commercialism, spectacle, and other of the “countless economic interests” that, as Michel Foucault has made clear, ensure and benefit from the very conjunctions of sexuality and power that produce structures of inequality and control.<sup>97</sup>

Joseph anticipates resistance to his claims: “this argument demands a theorization of Rauschenberg’s work that pushes toward its furthest and most radical implications, placing weight on his images and statements that some readers may initially find untenable.”<sup>98</sup> I don’t find issue with Joseph’s original premise—of the necessity to state in more precise and specific terms the radical nature of Rauschenberg’s work. What I find untenable is Joseph’s claim that his resituation of Rauschenberg’s position into the new historical framework proposed by Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and more recently, Hardt and Negri, leads to an understanding of the impact that Rauschenberg’s work had “*in its time.*” The idea of “a world everywhere totalized such that capitalism has effectively liquidated any stable or autonomous realm of the outside” and thus transformed “from a disciplinary society to a society of control,” is not only anachronistic, but far, far removed from Rauschenberg’s intuitive understanding of and approach to the world.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Joseph, *Random Order*, p. 68.

<sup>97</sup> Joseph, *Random Order*, pp. 67-68.

<sup>98</sup> Joseph, *Random Order*, p. 16.

<sup>99</sup> Joseph, *Random Order*, p. 17.

## *“Zen” painting*

Rauschenberg’s sensibility aligned more with the plain, simple truths of Zen Buddhism. One particular passage in Alan Watts’s widely read book, *The spirit of Zen* (1936), stresses the fundamental non-intellectual and all-embracing—democratic, one could say—nature of Buddhist philosophy:

[T]o the question ‘What is Enlightenment?’ a Zen master replied, ‘Your everyday thoughts,’ while another when asked, ‘What is the Tao?’ answered, ‘Usual life is the very Tao.’ Master Po-chang said that Zen meant simply, ‘Eat when you are hungry, sleep when you are tired,’ while Lin-chi declared that ‘the truly religious man has nothing to do but go on with his life as he finds it in the various circumstances of this worldly existence. He rises quietly in the morning, puts on his clothes and goes out to work. When he wants to walk, he walks; when he wants to sit, he sits. He has no hankering after Buddhahood, not the remotest thought of it. How is this possible? A wise man of old says, If you strive after Buddhahood by any conscious contrivances, your Buddha is indeed the source of eternal transmigration.’<sup>100</sup>

In formulating my own thesis, I have tried to honor Rauschenberg’s plain-spoken and direct approach to art and life, while maintaining an academic rigor that enables its concerns to intersect with existing critical understandings of his practice. As I state above, Joseph saw Rauschenberg’s practice as a (postmodernist) critique of autonomy, totality and subjectivity. Although what Joseph means by “totality” is somewhat different from what I take it to mean, my project can nevertheless be seen as dealing with this particular aspect of Rauschenberg’s so-called postmodern agenda.

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<sup>100</sup> Alan Watts, *The Spirit of Zen: A Way of Life, Work and Art in the Far East* (New York: Grove Press, 3rd ed., 1958), p. 48. *The Spirit of Zen*, first published in 1936, was one of the first books to introduce the basic foundation of Zen Buddhism to English-speaking audiences. It provides concise explanations in plain language of the origins and defining principles of Zen, which he culled from the writings of D. T. Suzuki, the Japanese scholar of Buddhism, Zen and Shin, and translator of Chinese, Japanese, and Sanskrit literature. Suzuki, who held visiting professorships in several American universities, was instrumental in spreading interest in Far Eastern philosophy to the West.

Both the specific meaning of totality within modernist discourse as the unified work of art and the more colloquial meaning of the term, which implies a closed, overarching system or idea, are correct. Rauschenberg's was not a critique, which we've already seen did not accord with his way of thinking. Rather, Rauschenberg pursued what can be considered the opposite of totality: radical openness—"the fact that there was enough room for every mind to have a different thought," as he put it; for several possibilities to co-exist at the same time, any of which could change at any given time. His artistic project was informed by the cornerstones of Buddhist thought: renunciation of the notion of essential difference, or the separateness of Self from the universe; total acceptance, or the principle of controlling things by going along with them, of mastery through adaptation (as in how we might call a very laidback, non-controlling person "zen-like"); and awareness of the impermanence of any given situation—or, as we say in "pop zen," "The only constant is change."

The "natural Zen-ness" of Rauschenberg's practice is not a novel proposition within the literature. It is a widely known fact that Cage was deeply involved in Zen Buddhism, and that he introduced his young, impressionable painter friend to the school of thought. Indeed, the influence of Eastern philosophy on New York School painting and poetry constitutes a specialized field of inquiry, given that several artists and writers were quite vocal about their commitment to "The Way of the East."<sup>101</sup> It has, however, met with some resistance—or silence—from scholars who find the association trite and

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<sup>101</sup> For example, see Neil A. Chassman, "Poets of the Cities: Leveling of Meaning," in the catalog for the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts exhibition, *poets of the cities of new york and san francisco 1950-1965* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1974), pp. 25-27; Gail Gelburd and Geri De Paoli, *The transparent thread: Asian philosophy in recent American art* (Hempstead, N.Y.: Hofstra University, 1990); Rodney Jack Roth, *Zen Buddhism and the New York school* (MFA thesis, University of Iowa, 1953).

superficial. Even Watts, in a later piece, weighed in on what he saw as the mischaracterization of Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* and Cage's silent piece as "zen":

Today there are Western artists avowedly using Zen to justify the indiscriminate framing of simply anything—blank canvases, totally silent music, torn up bits of paper dropped on a board and stuck where they fall, or dense masses of mangled wire. The work of the composer John Cage is rather typical of this tendency.... There is, indeed, a considerable therapeutic value in allowing oneself to be deeply aware of any sight or sound that may arise. For one thing, it brings to mind the marvel of seeing and hearing as such. For another, the profound willingness to listen to or gaze upon anything at all frees the mind from fixed preconceptions of beauty, creating, as it were, a free space in which altogether new forms and relationships may emerge. But this is therapy; it is not yet art.... Cage's work would be redeemed if he framed and presented it as a kind of group session in audio-therapy, but as a concert it is simply absurd. One may hope, however, that after Cage has, by such listening, set his own mind free from the composer's almost inevitable plagiarism of the forms of the past, he will present us with the new musical patterns and relationships which he has not yet uttered.<sup>102</sup>

Nevertheless, as Neil A. Chassman points out in his discussion of the writing style of Beat poets,

the nature of Zen makes it particularly suited to...the prevailing zeitgeist [of the Beat fifties]. As a religion it may strike us as strange when we learn that Zen has no scriptures. This is so because it denies the power of the sort of learning or knowledge which has calculative thinking as its mode and predictability and control of nature as its end. Zen emphasizes an intuitional leap and a transformation of perception.... Zen incorporates a new approach to the mundane and the debased and is in term of Christian moralism, severely amoral. It is direct, non-judgmental and enigmatic, espousing nothing in particular except perhaps the notion of letting things be.<sup>103</sup>

I do not mean to suggest that Rauschenberg's project was informed by Buddhist doctrines in a pedantic or self-conscious sense. Rather, as with any idea, they went through a process of being internalized and transmuted into a practical and personal understanding. His remark about Zen is doubly fitting: "When I met him [Cage], he said

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<sup>102</sup> Watts, *Beat Zen, Square Zen and Zen* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1959), pp. 11-12.

<sup>103</sup> Chassman, "Poets of the Cities," pp. 25-26.

that I was ‘natural’ Zen. I assume that’s a compliment, and I don’t really care if it isn’t—which might be ‘natural’ Zen. It doesn’t matter to me. I still have the same problems all the time.”<sup>104</sup> It is indeed “natural” Zen. Furthermore, it is not simply that he brought a Zen attitude to his artistic practice. Examining the form of his paintings through the lens of his Zen attitude, as I do in this study, enables us to think about painting in new and different ways that go beyond the limitations of formalist language. That is to say, he aimed in his paintings for a truly democratic, non-hierarchical pictorial configuration and surface, such that no one part dominated over another (renunciation of difference); approached the process in the spirit of collaboration rather than as the single-minded execution of a plan “set in stone,” as it were (total acceptance); and the provisionality offered by the collage method and modular compositions, so that any canvas, so long as it was at hand, could be altered or even used for a new work (impermanence and non-grasping).

I have already discussed how the Parsons paintings demonstrate Rauschenberg’s interest in preempting the conventional hierarchy of figure and ground—first steps towards the realization of a non-hierarchical pictorial configuration and surface. I also discussed the complicated relationship Rauschenberg had with the abstract expressionists. He remarked, “Looking at the painters that I knew at that time, however, I think only Jasper Johns and myself gave them enough respect not to copy them.”<sup>105</sup> It is worthwhile to consider Rauschenberg’s burgeoning interest in dehierarchizing the surface of painting in relation to what Greenberg characterized as the “all-over-ness” of abstract expressionist painting. As I mentioned in the introduction, Greenberg argued that the

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<sup>104</sup> Rose interview, p. 47.

<sup>105</sup> Rose interview, p. 51.



“new kind of painting” threatened the easel picture’s identity by what might be characterized as a democratization, or even treatment of the surface. Paint, rather than differentiating forms (no matter figurative or abstract) “kept in dramatic imbalance,” instead “knit together [the surface with] a multiplicity of identical or similar elements...without strong variation from one end of the canvas to the other.”<sup>106</sup> At this stage, the marks composing a typical abstract expressionist painting were not characterized as gestures, or the “dramatic action” that was popularized by Harold Rosenberg’s account of abstract expressionist painting.<sup>107</sup> On the contrary, Greenberg suggests that they are rather mechanically laid down, “every square inch is rendered with equal emphasis,” with the result being “an hallucinated uniformity,” in which he recognized something not unlike the dehierarchal configuration I am arguing for Rauschenberg’s paintings. Greenberg is far more skeptical of its merits, however:

This very uniformity, this dissolution of the picture into sheer texture, sheer sensation, into the accumulation of similar units of sensation, seems to answer something deep-seated in contemporary sensibility. It corresponds perhaps to the feeling that all hierarchical distinctions have been exhausted, that no area or order of experience is either intrinsically or relatively superior to any other. It may speak for a monist naturalism that takes all the world for granted and for which there are no longer either first or last things, the only valid distinction being that between the more and the less immediate. Or maybe it means something else—I cannot tell.<sup>108</sup>

Returning to the reviews of the Parsons show, Seckler described the paintings as “large-scale, usually white-grounded canvases naïvely inscribed with a wavering and whimsical geometry. On vast and often heavily painted expanses, a wispy calligraphy is sometimes added to thin abstract patterns and in other instances collage is introduced,

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<sup>106</sup> Greenberg, “The Crisis of the Easel Picture,” in O’Brian, ed., vol. 2, p. 222.

<sup>107</sup> Harold Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters” (1952); reprinted in *Tradition of the New* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1959), pp. 23-39.

<sup>108</sup> Greenberg, “The Crisis of the Easel Picture,” pp. 224-25.

either to provide textural effects—as in the picture whose background is made entirely of road maps—or to suggest a very tenuous associational content.”<sup>109</sup> One detects the same character of fascination to which Parsons confessed in the aspects of Rauschenberg’s paintings that Seckler chooses to highlight, such as the background made entirely of road maps in *Mother of God* (1950), as well as the terms used to describe them—“whimsical geometry” and “wispy calligraphy.” The latter were features of the abstract expressionist paintings Rauschenberg would have seen in galleries at the time, such as the dense, tight patterns in Mark Tobey’s aptly titled *Universal Field* (1949) [fig. 1.36], which nevertheless manage to remain delicate in feel. Yet Rauschenberg’s adaptations were not so similar to the paintings of the artists he admired as to elicit comparison, and thus were indeed “in the spirit of” rather than simply “*like* what they were doing.”

Stuart Preston placed Rauschenberg among the artists “working hard to fashion a new pictorial vocabulary in which to say things new to art.” He continues, “There is nothing niggardly in Bob Rauschenberg’s power to invent. His works at the Betty Parsons Gallery introduce bits of looking glass, stylish doodles in black and white, and liberal helpings of silver paint.” Preston commended Rauschenberg’s “nice feeling for spacing.” However, the astute reviewer also picked up on Rauschenberg’s hesitation and uncertainty about this work: “The fact that his pictures seem to be the spawning ground for ideas rather than finished conceptions give them a restless look.”<sup>110</sup> Herein lies the difference between the Parsons paintings and Rauschenberg’s subsequent work. The *White Paintings* were the first paintings that Rauschenberg *believed* in, which he felt sure

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<sup>109</sup> D[orothy]. S[eckler]., “Robert Rauschenberg,” *ARTnews* 50 (1951), p. 59.

<sup>110</sup> S[tuart]. P[reston]., “Varied Art Shown in Galleries Here,” *New York Times* (18 May 1951), p. 25.

were something rather than possibly something to be determined by an outside authority, the capacity in which Parsons had been asked to serve.

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### ***The White Paintings before Cage***

While Rauschenberg's hesitation and uncertainty about his first paintings are evident in his desire to get feedback from Parsons, the passionate conviction that pervades his letter is of an entirely different quality. The letter came in an envelope postmarked 18 October 1951, and was written while he was still immersed in the heady environment of Black Mountain College, where "there was an atmosphere of freedom."<sup>111</sup> The founders and faculty of Black Mountain were committed to an alternative form of education that encouraged experimentation—except, crucially, in the visual arts, as Rauschenberg recalls: "it was focused on discipline and control—and control of control."<sup>112</sup> This aversion to "control of control" marks a change in Rauschenberg's thinking from a year and a half ago, when he had actively sought out the rigor and discipline Albers was known for and sure to impart. It seems that Rauschenberg had had enough of what formal training had to offer, and was ready to strike out on his own in a more freely experimental manner, which in turn suggests that he was more confident of himself and trusted his ideas to be valid in and of themselves, rather than because they were confirmed to be by others.

It is tempting to attribute Rauschenberg's newfound confidence to the encouragement he found in Cage, as he himself suggested to Rose:

I met John Cage at Black Mountain. I think that was probably 1949 or 1950. Cage had a fantastic influence on my thinking. He simply gave me

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<sup>111</sup> Rose interview, p. 34.

<sup>112</sup> Rose interview, p. 34.

permission to go on thinking, and he was the only one who gave me permission to continue my own thoughts. From one thought to another I wondered if maybe now I was going to lose John's interest, but that was a necessary risk. You have to trust yourself more than anybody else in any relationship that you have.<sup>113</sup>

Cage's support of his thinking enabled him to cultivate his intuition—that is, to trust himself and find validation within rather than to seek affirmation from another, as he had from Parsons and his first exhibition in her gallery. However, Rauschenberg's memory is not quite accurate, for as we already know, he was introduced to Cage at the Parsons Gallery during his show in late May or early June of 1951. It is quite possible that Cage, who is often described as having been a great “proselytizer” (he even considered becoming a minister as a young man), spoke passionately about Buddhist-informed ideas at this first meeting. However, it is more likely that Rauschenberg was primed for Cage's “fantastic influence” by his experiences at Black Mountain in the summer of 1951, where such ideas were already in circulation due to the interest of many of the New York School painters in residence that year in Eastern thought, namely Robert Motherwell. Rauschenberg's explanation of the *White Paintings* to Parsons is therefore an even more significant document, for it precedes the enormous impact that Cage would have not only on his own understanding of these works, but of their subsequent critical reception.

Rauschenberg is most eager to prove the paintings, and is so worked up about them that he considers it “almost an emergency.” Proving himself seems secondary to proving the works themselves, which comes through in the letter when he swears to “forfeit all right to ever show again for their being given a chance.” Some lingering desire to overturn the negative estimation that he thought Parsons must have from the

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<sup>113</sup> Rose interview, p. 34.

disappointing first show at her gallery may have added to the urgency he felt. Without any hesitation this time, he ranks the *White Paintings* with “other outstanding paintings,” not self-evidently “outstanding,” but rather by the contradictions that they embody—their value as demonstrations next to “other outstanding paintings.” They reveal “the truth of the lies in our pecul[i]ar preoccupation,” identified unequivocally as the art of painting, though he does not specify what those lies are.

The next line of the letter conveys those contradictions as such: “Dealing with the suspense, excitement and body of an organic silence, the restriction and freedom of absence, the plastic fullness of nothing, the point a circle begins and ends.” That is to say: a silence with a corporeality, a nothing that is “full” and “plastic,” an absence that is both constraining and liberating, a point (presumably in the history of painting and Art) that is both a beginning and an end. They demonstrate “a natural response to the current pressures of the faithless.” Here, he may be critical of the current situation for modern art in America, which was invariably described as hostile to the most advanced and topical statements in painting.

As late as 1949, there was still no important museum collection or annual exhibition of contemporary art, which, a contemporary painter said, could not result in “anything but a deformed exhibition, in its omissions and emphases, of what is living in our art.”<sup>114</sup> Greenberg paints a similarly bleak picture for “American art in its new advance,” which society does “a great deal to discourage.” He is more optimistic of the situation than he was a year ago, however, finding a silver lining in the “attacks on abstract art and its related forms” on the principle that even bad publicity is good

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<sup>114</sup> Robert Motherwell, “A Personal Expression” (19 March 1949), in Stephanie Terenzio, ed., *The Collected Writings of Robert Motherwell* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 60.

publicity.<sup>115</sup> Rauschenberg steers the reader away from this trope (which is certainly tactful, as Parsons is one of the few “brave” *faithfuls* willing to show contemporary American art) by insisting that, on the contrary, they embody an “intuitional optimism.”<sup>116</sup> He closes with what is perhaps the most enigmatic yet revealing statement in the letter: “It is completely irrelevant that I am making them—Today is their creator [*sic*].” The emphatic claim impresses on the reader that these works are much larger than himself.

Joseph would have us believe that the “specter” of Greenberg, who in the previous summer had taught courses on the post-Kantian hermeneutical foundation of his theory of modernism, haunts Rauschenberg’s statements. (Rauschenberg was not present during this term.) It is rather unlikely that the critic’s ideas remained the central topic of debate given the strong personalities that came through the avant-garde enclave the following year. It is far more the case that the immediate circle of people Rauschenberg encountered at Black Mountain that summer contributed to his developing aesthetic philosophy.

Motherwell, although a reluctant spokesperson for the new painting, was a committed teacher, and therefore would have been more amenable to speaking about the

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<sup>115</sup> Greenberg, “The New York Market for American Art,” *Partisan Review* (11 June 1949); in O’Brian, vol. 2, p. 320. He also gives a useful snapshot of the New York gallery scene for contemporary art in 1949.

<sup>116</sup> Rauschenberg’s reference to intuition also evidences his absorption of the current debates on the role of theory in painting. According to Ashton’s account, “Many studio discussions in lower Manhattan centered on the blight of verbalization that tended to displace attention to the role of intuition in the creative process.” Ashton provides a succinct yet informative comparison of the cultural landscape in New York and San Francisco in her introduction to Landauer, *The San Francisco School of Abstract Expressionism*, pp. xxi-xxii. Barnett Newman (or “Barney,” as Rauschenberg and close friends called him) spoke of painting in similar terms: “The fact is, I am an *intuitive* painter, a direct painter. I have never worked from sketches, never planned a painting, never ‘thought out’ a painting before.” Cited in Yve-Alain Bois, “Perceiving Newman,” *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001), p. 190. Both Rauschenberg and Newman showed at Betty Parsons Gallery, New York. Newman’s first two solo exhibitions were 23 January-11 February 1950 and 23 April-12 May 1951; Rauschenberg’s own first solo exhibition immediately followed the second. Both artists’ shows were poorly received.

contemporary situation for art within the context of a classroom.<sup>117</sup> Neither Rauschenberg nor the literature has much to say about Motherwell's influence. Given the collegial and communal atmosphere of the college, however, and the fact that Motherwell was quite close to Cy Twombly, the fellow student with whom Rauschenberg was closest that summer (Motherwell wrote a favorable review of Twombly's first paintings), they were likely in constant contact. "Education at Black Mountain," explains Martin Duberman,

took place all the time, not merely in classrooms; individuals encountered each other in a wide variety of daily situations.... Those who weren't enrolled in Albers's courses not only heard about them constantly...but still more, saw and heard Albers himself in community meetings, at mealtimes, while lining up a row of seeds, or walking a mountain path. His views were continually quoted and argued about.<sup>118</sup>

Though Duberman's description refers specifically to Albers, one gets a sense of how ideas circulated around the small campus, and the extent to which both students and faculty were immersed in them—and Albers was hardly the only strong and opinionated faculty at the college. Albers himself said that Rauschenberg, and any student for that matter, "couldn't have overlooked what was going on."<sup>119</sup> It is not surprising, then, to find many of the ideas represented in Motherwell's writing from around 1949 to 1951, which the older artist undoubtedly would have shared with the community in residence there, echoed in Rauschenberg's letter to Parsons.

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<sup>117</sup> Terenzio writes that over the course of the fifties, Motherwell obliged "the demands on his growing reputation as the most articulate artist-spokesman of modern art." He lectured, judged exhibitions, served as visiting artist and critic at colleges, and participated on panels and in seminars—in addition to his duties as editor of the important series of "writings by artists themselves, or by their friends and associates," *The Documents of Modern Art*; as well as being a practicing artist. This is significant because in spite of his apparent equal standing and authority with Greenberg as articulator of the ideas behind the new painting, he has been completely marginalized. This may in part be due to Motherwell's complicated situation of being known as both a lesser painter (unfairly) of the New York School, a term he coined, and art historian.

<sup>118</sup> Martin Duberman, *Black Mountain: an exploration in community* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1972), p. 73.

<sup>119</sup> Duberman, *Black Mountain*, p. 71.

Motherwell's text, "The New York School," which was delivered at the College Art Association meeting in fall of 1950, deserves a close reading as a contemporary and firsthand account of the ideas giving form to the emerging aesthetic. In it Motherwell makes references to many topical concerns, such as medium, autonomy and process, as well as explaining the "living" art's relationship to art history. Of particular interest to the present discussion, Motherwell characterizes "traditional modes of expression" as part and parcel of the "lies" propagated by the ruling ideology. He says of present art,

There is an opposition to conventional composition, to anything that smacks of dogmatic certainty of what art or, for that matter, anything else is. It is this unconventionality of formal organization that leads the unlearned as well as the philistine to the notion that we modern artists do not know how to paint. What is omitted is that we know very well how to paint, but without traditional modes of expression, which in the Occident means the Renaissance tradition. It is interesting that the rejection of the lies and falsifications of modern Christian, feudal aristocratic, and bourgeois society, of the property-loving world that the Renaissance tradition expressed, has led us, like many other modern artists, to affinities with the art of other cultures.<sup>120</sup>

And again, later in the text, "Conventional painting is a lie—not an imposture, but the product of a man who is a living lie, who cannot help himself, since he does not know it."

Motherwell also acknowledged his own sympathies towards Buddhist thought and Eastern philosophy in general, an affinity that he found "interesting" though understandable as a natural response to the rejection of Western conventions. His language suggests some familiarity with the Buddhist concept of *sunyata*, which counters the lie of the ego/ self, or relative and conditioned existence. The meaning of *sunyata* is far subtler than the English equivalents—"nothingness" or "emptiness"—allow, and the reason that *sunyata* is commonly mistaken for nihilism. As written in the *Hridaya Sutra*

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<sup>120</sup> Motherwell, "The New York School" (27 October 1950); reprinted in Terenzio, ed., *The Collected Writings*, p. 80.



[“The Heart Sutra”], one of the most venerated texts in the Mahayana sect of Buddhism, “form is not different from emptiness (*sunyata*); emptiness is not different from form. Form is precisely emptiness; emptiness is precisely form.”<sup>121</sup> The definition Watts gives in *The Spirit of Zen* reads: “The emptiness of all separate things as such. The only abiding principle in life is the ‘Buddha-nature,’ which manifests itself in separate forms. These forms have no permanence or reality as forms, only as ‘Buddha-nature.’ For this reason Mahayana philosophy declares that they are empty.”<sup>122</sup>

One can see Rauschenberg struggling to articulate this contradiction of form-as-emptiness, emptiness-as-form in his letter to Parsons: “dealing with the suspense, excitement and body of an organic silence, the restriction and freedom of absence, the plastic fullness of nothing, the point a circle begins and ends,” seems to attempt to articulate this concept.<sup>123</sup> Subsequent statements about the early paintings agree with this understanding of a void as vibrant and brimming with all possibilities, rather than the more negative connotation of empty. Motherwell, in 1951, predicted that such a misconception of abstract art was liable: “One of the most striking aspects of abstract art’s appearance is her nakedness, an art stripped bare. How many rejections on the part of her artists! Whole worlds—the world of objects, the world of power and propaganda, the world of anecdotes, the world of fetishes and ancestor worship.”<sup>124</sup> The austerity and monochromism of Rauschenberg’s work during this period have indeed been read as “rejections,” and the reason why these paintings have been characterized as

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<sup>121</sup> Cited in Watts, *The Spirit of Zen*, pp. 29-30.

<sup>122</sup> Watts, *The Spirit of Zen*, p. 132.

<sup>123</sup> The letter in facsimile is reproduced on p. 230 of Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg: the early 1950s*.

<sup>124</sup> Motherwell, “What Abstract Art Means to Me” (5 February 1951), in Terenzio, ed., *The Collected Writings*, p. 86, emphasis mine.

demonstrations of the end encoded into the reductivist program of modernist painting, in spite of Rauschenberg's protestations that they had nothing to do with "negativism."

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### **Erased de Kooning Drawing**

*Erased de Kooning Drawing* [fig. 1.15] has also been misread as a destructive gesture. When Rauschenberg reiterated to Rose that there was no resistance to the abstract expressionists on his part, she begged to differ: "You once erased a de Kooning drawing." The insinuation is that Rauschenberg's literal wiping out the work of an older, established artist amounted to a symbolic wiping out, or patricide. Rauschenberg insisted that it was "not out of any negative response. I was working on the all-white and all-black paintings. I loved to draw and I did erasure drawings. It just didn't make much sense for me to erase my own marks, so I thought it made for a special situation. I was trying to make art and so therefore I had to erase art."<sup>125</sup> Rauschenberg couldn't just erase his own drawing because that would be a process of *undoing*, since he had done what was to be erased. On the other hand, to erase a drawing by another could be more conceivably seen as a process or act of making or doing via a subtractive method.

Rauschenberg was not naïvely unaware of the immediate relation his plan for erasing an older artist's drawing would bring him into with that artist. It is critical that a drawing by any artist would not do. According to Leo Steinberg, who was so moved by the work that he phoned the artist for further details, Rauschenberg would not have erased an Andrew Wyeth because he didn't "relate to him" [see fig. 3.17]. Erasing a

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<sup>125</sup> Rose interview, p. 51. Mary Lynn Kotz discusses some early sketches done by Rauschenberg during his first year in New York: "As Albers had instructed, no erasures were allowed and the lines were unbroken." She perhaps suggests that Rauschenberg's going against Albers's imperative was another layer to the patricidal imperative ostensibly structuring the work. See *Rauschenberg, art and life* (New York: H. N. Abrams, 1990), p. 70.

Rembrandt drawing “would have been too simple.” This indicated to Steinberg “that the gesture would have become unbalanced and that the element of vandalism would have been overwhelming.”<sup>126</sup> Although Steinberg ultimately assigns Oedipal intent to *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, which Rauschenberg would deny, he also recognizes that Rembrandt’s place within the history of Western art would not allow for any measure of complexity and nuance to the gesture. Rembrandt is “obviously” a founding father of modern art, whose significance has been proved over four centuries of art history. The erasure of a Rembrandt drawing would inevitably be read as the “obvious” symbolic gesture of wiping out tradition, which is, according to Rauschenberg, a misrepresentation of his aim in making the work.

Rauschenberg approached de Kooning with his proposal not only in order to procure the drawing to be erased, but also to ask for the subject’s permission; de Kooning obliged. Over the course of four weeks, Rauschenberg erased the drawing and used up to fifteen different types of erasers to tackle the problem that de Kooning made sure presented itself by giving Rauschenberg a drawing that was not only done with pencil. (“He said he wasn’t going to make it easy for me—and he didn’t!”)<sup>127</sup> And again: “It was

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<sup>126</sup> Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg: the early 1950s*, p. 161.

<sup>127</sup> As recounted by the artist to Rose in interview, p. 51. Leo Steinberg shared a more detailed account of this episode with his audience in a lecture given at MoMA in 1960. According to my transcription of the recording: “In another occasion which impressed me tremendously for its multilayered implications, he [Rauschenberg] got de Kooning to give him a drawing, which he then proceeded to erase. He got the drawing from de Kooning with the understanding that this was what he wanted to do. And he then exhibited it as an erased de Kooning drawing by Robert Rauschenberg. [Audience laughs.] This is very, very serious, the most morally fraught action in the history of art that I can remember. Its closest analogy is, I think, the relation between Zeus and Kronos. The whole thing is profoundly moving, I think... [Steinberg decided to call Rauschenberg.] We talked about it for an hour, because it had really worked on me in a terrifying way. It’s a terrifying sort of gesture for a man to make, to have the courage to do. And Rauschenberg confirmed this: it wasn’t easy. He did it every moment wishing that he weren’t doing it. Then, after an hour’s conversation, I said to him: you know, we’ve talked about this work for an hour, and I haven’t even seen it yet. I haven’t seen the object. In other words, it is all gesture. And I insisted on seeing it, just to see if the actual object would add anything to the impression. And I finally did get to see it, and it

nothing destructive.... It wasn't a gesture, it had nothing to do with destruction."<sup>128</sup>

Rauschenberg's use of the word "gesture" is meaningful in this context, acknowledging the fact that de Kooning, along with Pollock, is credited with giving rise to the gestural strain of abstract expressionism. The movement of Rauschenberg's arm back and forth in the motion of rubbing out a mark is, of course, not unlike how the arm might move to make a gestural abstract expressionist-style painting. Although he described the work as a "monochrome no-image," it is fallacious to consider the marks left behind as representing an image, even though the description of the work's material lists "traces of ink and crayon on paper." The prefix "no-" discourages one from looking for a latent or "accidental" image that abstract expressionism's use of surrealist automatist techniques would have conditioned the contemporary viewer to expect.<sup>129</sup> Neither is the work iconoclasm, since the image conveyed is not the (gesture of the) erased image in and of itself, but the resulting (no-) image that erasing an image has produced. Nor is it straightforwardly a monochrome, since the "color" is simply the color of the paper that became visible as a mostly unmarked surface once the drawing was erased.

There is the further suggestion that using an eraser as a medium produces a monochromatic eraser-colored "drawing." This no-drawing (following Rauschenberg's terminology) is not a copy of the de Kooning drawing, since the eraser "marks" would not correspond to the drawn marks. Erasing a mark is a far more all-over affair than

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didn't add anything. The whole work, in a sense, was exhausted in the gesture. The whole meaning was exhausted in it." MoMA sound recording 60.4, side A.

<sup>128</sup> Cited in Joseph, *Random Order*, p. 63. Rauschenberg was a huge fan of de Kooning's work, and went to the older painter's studio to watch and photograph him at work. A picture taken by Rauschenberg of the living space of his Fulton Street studio documents that he had another drawing by de Kooning in his possession, which he displayed among other artworks in an assemblage against one wall, including a Matisse lithograph and Cage score.

<sup>129</sup> This is further a danger because de Kooning drew on both sides of the sheet of paper that he gave to Rauschenberg, which meant that an unerased de Kooning drawing is on the backside of *Erased de Kooning Drawing*.

drawing a mark. The eraser has to be rubbed all around the mark, back and forth, up and down, and every other which way, covering a significantly larger surface area. It is, in fact, a highly inefficient medium. Its inefficiency is also how the beautiful, labored-over effects are produced. I do not think it a coincidence that Twombly began his technique of scratching with a stylus into the surface of a white-painted canvas at roughly the same time as *Erased de Kooning Drawing*. The inefficiency of a pencil (or other similar sharp-tip instrument) in displacing wet pigment on a vast surface is analogous to the inefficiency of erasing a densely-marked drawing. Crow describes these effects as “ghostly” to indicate their “hollowed out,” dematerialized, “used to be there” presence.<sup>130</sup>

The composite form of *Erased de Kooning Drawing* is, in fact, critical to its success and multivalence. It is comprised of not only the erased drawing itself, but also the frame, matting and label (which, incidentally, Jasper Johns hand-lettered). In fact, on the back of the work, now in SFMOMA’s collection, Rauschenberg wrote the following note: “DO NOT REMOVE DRAWING FROM FRAME. FRAME IS PART OF DRAWING.” He underscores the fact that the frame is part of the erased drawing. It seems that if the drawing were a drawn drawing, as opposed to an erased one, such a frame would be redundant. The draughtsman’s marks—the marks made by the actual artist—would be evidence enough that his drawing was art. When the artist’s marks—in this case, Rauschenberg’s eraser marks—are not rendered in a material whose function is to leave a mark but rather remove it, further information extrinsic to the ground on which the marks have been (un-) laid must be provided in order to place it within the context of art. As Rauschenberg’s cautionary note suggests, all of these elements are working in

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<sup>130</sup> Crow, “This is Now: Becoming Robert Rauschenberg,” *Artforum* 36, no. 1 (September 1997): 96. Cited in Joseph, *Random Order*, p. 65.

concert to manifest the work *Erased de Kooning Drawing*. It also perfectly falls into line with his radically democratic philosophy of art. He refused to value or privilege one element of a picture more than another. Therefore, in case anyone were to presume that the sheet of paper which used to be a de Kooning drawing was the point of the work (i.e., the most important part of the work), Rauschenberg's elevation of the frame to the level of a master drawing interrupts the usual (political) economy of art.

Walter Hopps, citing a conversation he had with Steinberg about the work, suggests *Erased de Kooning Drawing* is a proto-conceptual piece for these reasons. Conceptual art “uses hypothetical situations and events, and complex verbal texts, to inquire about underlying conditions of perception, representation and social conditioning.” This is a far more programmatic and developed understanding of the function and aim of art as deconstructive. One also sees the primacy of the concept in an artistic project thus figured.

When Steinberg asked if seeing the work would add to his appreciation of it, Rauschenberg replied that it probably would not. Steinberg recalls this conversation as a breakthrough in his own understanding of conceptual art. “This was my first realization that art could take on this new modality, spinning like a satellite through consciousness, rather than being physical fact.”<sup>131</sup>

Rauschenberg's supposition that looking at the work would do little to change Steinberg's appreciation led him to conclude that the whole work was “exhausted in the gesture,” that the work was “pure” gesture.

There is another conclusion to be drawn from Rauschenberg's comments. His understanding not only of the value of a work but also of what “work” refers to—i.e., the

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<sup>131</sup> For Hopps's discussion of *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, see p. 161 of *Robert Rauschenberg: the early 1950s*. It is possible that Hopps knew of Steinberg's discussion with Rauschenberg about the work from having attended Steinberg's lecture at MoMA in 1960 where he relays the anecdote. See n12.

process as opposed to the art object—is considerably different from Steinberg’s. For Rauschenberg, *Erased de Kooning Drawing* is nonessential, and in effect, interchangeable. The final line in Rauschenberg’s letter to Parsons is elucidating: “It is completely irrelevant that I am making them—Today is their creator.” Cage would echo this sentiment about *4’ 33”* in 1956: “If you want to know the truth of the matter, the music I prefer...is what we are hearing if we are just quiet. And now we come back to my silent piece. I really prefer that to anything else, but I don’t think of it as ‘my piece’.”<sup>133</sup>

Rauschenberg clearly demonstrated the “irrelevance” of the *White Paintings* by recycling them for new paintings. A canvas from the five-panel work was likely used to make the combine-painting that the Angora goat was attached to in the second version of *Monogram*, which in turn was incorporated into the 1959 combine-painting *Summerstorm* [fig. 1.37]. All seven units of the seven-panel *White Painting* were repurposed for the late (1961) combine-painting *Trophy II (for Teeny and Marcel Duchamp)* [fig. 1.38]. Four contiguous panels set upright with a fifth laid on its side across the top make up the main body of the work; note that four widths of an individual panel are equal to its height. Two “free-standing” panels flank the central piece, the left one “tethered” with a thin ball chain not unlike those used to attach a stopper to the bathtub faucet. The *White Painting* was soon thereafter remade so that both works could be shown in the 1963 Jewish Museum retrospective.

The reuse of the *White Paintings* for new paintings suggests that what Rauschenberg meant when he wrote in his letter to Parsons that they dealt with “the point a circle begins and ends” was that they are both blank canvases—the “beginning” of the

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<sup>133</sup> Cage in Kostelanetz, “Conversation with John Cage” (1968); reprinted in Kostelanetz, ed., *John Cage: An Anthology*, p. 12.

life-cycle of a painting—and the “end,” or the finished painting. This contradiction was made evident only when painting was stripped down to its simplest form, a white-painted canvas, which could still conceivably be called a painting because technically it *was* painted, whereas an unpainted canvas was not. In “Random Order,” another “manifesto” written a decade after the Parsons letter, Rauschenberg spoke of a similar effect when looking at what he felt were the elegant lines of pipes running through a building: “The intimidating clarity of plumbing as an image, occurs because of its unornamented structural rigidity. This unyielding quality makes it a difficult subject for sentimental thoughts.”<sup>134</sup> Likewise, Rauschenberg attached no sentimental thoughts to the *White Paintings*, and thus had no qualms about painting right over them.

One can see how this cannot constitute the end of a problem, i.e., that Rauschenberg had figured it out and could move onto the next one. The idea that a painting could be temporary—a finished work one day, a canvas the next—opened the doors to a whole new realm of inquiry: of finding the same sort of openness in the materials used to paint. The following chapter will examine his black paintings. In these paintings Rauschenberg experimented painting with newspaper, the ultimate disposable and devalued material, used for everything from wallpaper in poorer rural areas to wrapping up garbage. Nevertheless, yesterday’s newspapers considerably extended the material capabilities of paint, giving it a structure and rigidity that did not rely on the canvas proper. The newspaper ground served another crucial function: making irrelevant the order in which the paint strokes were laid down, and thus de-privileging “even the

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<sup>134</sup> Rauschenberg, “Random Order,” *Location 1*, no. 1 (spring 1963), pp. 27-31; reprinted in Joseph, *Random Order*, pp. 2-3.



first stroke in the painting,” which instead shared “its position in a gray map of words”  
[fig. 1.39].<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Rauschenberg, “How Important is the Surface to Design? Robert Rauschenberg—An Artist Explains...”  
*Print* 13 (January/ February 1959), p. 31.

## Chapter Two

### Black, or “a gray map of words”

In the previous chapter, I discussed the place of Rauschenberg’s *White Paintings* in current understandings of his larger artistic practice. It is clear from his impassioned letter to Parsons describing the paintings that Rauschenberg attached primary importance to these works. Although he was unable to articulate the nature of their import, the aspect that Cage fixed on—the paintings’ receptivity to their surrounding environment, as though they were “airports for the lights, shadows, and particles”—has become the dominant reading. Despite Rauschenberg’s excitement over these paintings, he also recognized that there was very limited potential for the *White Paintings* to grow into a serious aesthetic project.<sup>1</sup> As he stated in conversation with the curatorial staff at SFMOMA, which in 1998 acquired an art historically significant body of works from the artist’s personal collection that included the three-panel *White Painting*: “I did them [the *White Paintings*] to see how far you could push an object, and yet it still means something. But I didn’t want to spend the rest of my life doing that.... I mean, I didn’t want to spend the rest of my life doing something that was this easy.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A photograph in Hopps’s monograph documents the existence of another all-white painting, *White Lead Painting*. However, this work (now lost, as it was left in Rauschenberg’s Fulton Street studio because too large and heavy to move) is not a part of the *White Paintings*.

<sup>2</sup> “Notes from a Meeting with Robert Rauschenberg,” SFMOMA curatorial files. Rauschenberg said the works in SFMOMA’s 1998 accession were “somehow sort of the icons of eccentricities and exceptional, in the sense of that they didn’t fit into the art world at that time. And I just knew that they were unique. And they couldn’t be done again, and there was no reason to. And they were dear to me.... [T]he reason that I hadn’t sold any of the pieces individually was because I wanted to somehow keep them together.... [T]hey

As we know, Rauschenberg also worked on two series of paintings at the same time that were ostensibly similar experiments “to see how far you could push an object, and yet it still means something”: the *Night Blooming* paintings and the black paintings. Their dark and rough-textured surfaces are, however, in stark contrast to the pristine whiteness of their counterparts. Rauschenberg’s use of unorthodox methods and extra-painterly materials to achieve the highly articulated surfaces can be framed as part of the same project to incorporate the environment into painting, or, alternately, for moving painting off the wall and into the world—the proverbial gap between art and life, as they indeed have. However, to consider the black paintings only from the perspective of a postmodernist critique of medium-specificity on the one hand, and consumer capitalism on the other, misses a vital dimension of Rauschenberg’s experiments in combining newspaper with paint.

As we shall see, the black paintings were engaged in dialogue not only with contemporary art and culture, but also, more compellingly, with the larger body of his own work. Because we often think of black and white as antithetical, the black paintings have been misconstrued as likewise antithetical to the *White Paintings*. However, Rauschenberg stressed that the black paintings were not *reactions* to the white ones, but done at the same time, and thus, in his view, dialectical: “the internal dialectic of contradicting yourself, which is cathartic—the only thing that leads to something new. I have to use contradiction in my work not only to achieve something but to avoid

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seemed like a sort of a core of an attitude that only was responsible by me.. I mean—most of this work could not have been done by any other personality. And I was protecting it.... I’ve done other works that...I would have in series. And not to criticize the series or evaluate ‘em, but these seemed very special. In the sense of not fitting into what was going on in the art world.... [M]ost of the works in this collection scared the shit outta me, too. And they didn’t stop frightening me. And so there was a kind of courage that was built into them, in their uniqueness, that individuality that I didn’t wanna forget about, either.” Robert Rauschenberg interview (6 May 1999) in the SFMOMA galleries with David Ross and Walter Hopps, SFMOMA curatorial files.

something else.”<sup>3</sup> These self-described “polarities” were not for the purpose of cancelling one another out, but rather to leave the door open for more than one possibility.<sup>4</sup>

The role of the *White Paintings* in the development of Rauschenberg’s project for a democratized and dehierarchized painting was to enable him to think of paintings both as “blank” canvases and finished works, especially given his intention to keep them ever fresh by repainting them as necessary. The same principle carried over into the black paintings, which “are supposed to continue any time I want. That’s documented.”<sup>5</sup> This “continuation” often took place on old paintings, which was all but standard practice for Rauschenberg. However, the generally negative associations we have of black, coupled with compelling coincidences in his personal life, have given rise to the misperception that the black paintings were about negation. Focusing on Thomas Crow’s reading of the black painting that now covers the early Parsons work, *Should Love Come First?* (1951), we will review this literature. Rauschenberg countered the general idea of these claims—that the all-white and all-black paintings were in opposition to one another. It seems that for him, they rather functioned as foils or complements, a subtle distinction to be sure, but a crucial one for understanding the openness to more than one possibility that was so central to Rauschenberg’s thinking.

The simple fact of using newspaper was not in and of itself new to painting, as several contemporary examples show. However, what distinguished Rauschenberg’s use of newspaper was a consequence of his aesthetic philosophy, which was beginning to take shape in earnest during these years: “There’s no such thing as ‘better’ material. It’s

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<sup>3</sup> Rose interview, p. 59.

<sup>4</sup> Rose interview, p. 77.

<sup>5</sup> Rose interview, p. 46.

just as unnatural for people to use oil paint as it is to use anything else.”<sup>6</sup> Or, in the words of his more famous formulation for the exhibition catalog, *Sixteen Americans* (1959): “A pair of socks is no less suitable to make a painting with than wood, nails, turpentine, oil and fabric” [fig. 2.1].<sup>7</sup> Whereas newsprint was used by artists mostly as a source of text or as free and disposable scratch paper, Rauschenberg’s insistence “that whatever material I use remain true to itself” translated into what I show to be a far more sophisticated and synergistic “collaboration,” as he would call it, with newspapers.<sup>8</sup>

Rauschenberg often stated that the newspaper layout provided him with a ready-made compositional scheme that precluded any decision making on his part. He also used the printed words as a device for de-privileging “even the first stroke in the painting,” which would share “its position in a gray map of words,” thus reconceptualizing the painter’s canvas from the pregnant blank surface to a “never empty” canvas.<sup>9</sup> This reconfiguration also entailed de-privileging the center and edges of a canvas, those areas of the picture that we instinctively look to. It is in trying to achieve this that Rauschenberg first began to consider the possibility of moving painting into the room and interacting with its surrounding space, which is evident in his carefully staged photographs of the black paintings and other work as installed at the Stable Gallery. He also took several photographs of the black paintings as he worked on them, which signals

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<sup>6</sup> Rose interview, p. 58. Later in the same interview, when he recounts his travels to Tibet, he suggests that his philosophy is Tibetan—and by extension, Buddhist—in inclination. “They make no discrimination in value between one object and another. It could be a feather, a dog bone, an old chair, a rug, a cup of tea or a rock—and that’s where my philosophy is. That’s why I related so well to them.” See p. 104.

<sup>7</sup> *Sixteen Americans*, p. 58.

<sup>8</sup> Rose interview, p. 94.

<sup>9</sup> Rauschenberg, “How Important is the Surface to Design?” p. 31. Rauschenberg’s famous declaration, “A canvas is never empty,” also comes from his statement for *Sixteen Americans*. See n40 for a fuller discussion of this issue.

the increasing centrality of his photographic practice to his painting, which will be the subject of the following chapter.

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### ***Formal readings of the black paintings***

The *Night Blooming* series [fig. 2.2] has received only passing mention in the literature. Hopps's own summary discussion, which describes them as "akin to other Abstract Expressionist works" and to Kline's paintings in particular, suggests that their relationship to abstract expressionism was the primary cause for interest. Part of the silence is due to the regrettable fact that most of the paintings were lost in transit late in the summer of 1951, when Aaron Siskind took them to Chicago in the hopes of getting them into a show. As a result, only three of what Rauschenberg believes to have been over eighteen canvases remain. Furthermore, that he did not resume the series after the loss (unlike the black paintings, which he continued after a nine-month trip overseas) is telling. Nevertheless, Twombly recalls Rauschenberg's "feverish night-and-day engagement with the series."<sup>10</sup> His excitement was most likely over the unorthodox method he devised for achieving their grainy, tactile surface quality: the paintings were pressed into a dirt road while still wet, gravel and other debris "glued" to the surface with paint, which Rauschenberg subsequently covered with layer after layer of black paint until it was impossible to tell what gave them their rough texture.

Two extant *Night Blooming* paintings depict forms that "bloom" like algae across the inky field of paint [fig. 1.9]. Hopps and others suggest that the pristine natural setting of Black Mountain College inspired such allusions to organic form and "nature."

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<sup>10</sup> Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg: the early 1950s*, p. 64.

However, it seems Rauschenberg saw the blooming of darkness in the urban environment as well. A photograph taken in New York in 1951 of a stop sign painted onto asphalt bears a striking resemblance to these paintings, both in composition and effect [fig. 2.3].<sup>11</sup> The white paint is permeated by blackness and seems to sink into it at the bottom of the photograph, re-emerging near the “STOP.”

The pictorial and material issues explored in the *Night Blooming* series were likely absorbed into the project begun as the black paintings. There is the same interest in materializing and ossifying visual phenomena, and, after the first set of black paintings (matte black-painted analogs of the *White Paintings*), intensely tactile surfaces. However, the *Night Blooming* paintings still operate as depictions. The gravel embedded into the surface of the painting is completely obscured by black paint, and thus “night blooming” evoked by the interplay of lighter forms against a darker field. Indeed, when Rauschenberg stressed that the subsequent series of red paintings late in 1953 were a move away from “the black and white. Black *or* white, not black-and-white,” he in effect disavowed the *Night Blooming* paintings.<sup>12</sup>

The ground of a black painting was laboriously built up using old newspapers in a manner not unlike *papier-mâché*. Rauschenberg dipped both torn-up pieces and whole sheets in black paint and affixed them randomly to the canvas (in a few examples he stapled the paper directly to the wood support), which were then painted again.<sup>13</sup> In the earliest black paintings, the newspaper remains hidden under thick paint, resulting in an

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<sup>11</sup> The cigarette butt at the bottom right of the letter “S” tells us that this stop sign is painted on the ground rather than posted.

<sup>12</sup> Rose interview, pp. 52-53.

<sup>13</sup> Tomkins, *Off the Wall*, p. 71.

ambiguous surface texture much like the *Night Blooming* paintings.<sup>14</sup> Another work from the 1998 SFMOMA [fig. 1.10] acquisition is a beautiful example of a black painting from this period. Rauschenberg has managed to convey the nearly tissue-paper thinness of newsprint, the glossy black paint adding a brittleness to the paper so that torn bits look like flecks or shards of sheet metal. The care and thoroughness with which he covered the entire surface in black paint is evident when one looks underneath sections that lift up. The drips of black paint running down the center of the canvas provide further texture that, in the right light, forms a striking image [fig. 2.4]; and as they are most prominent in the left half of the canvas, seem to counterbalance the denser crinkling at the upper right. The long, thin, wavering ribbons of paint that wrinkled as they dried exert a strong sense of the painting's verticality or uprightness, in contrast to the crinkling that seems to spread horizontally across the surface like ice crystallizing on a windshield.

Another fine example of an early black painting in the collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art [fig. 2.5] presents not only an active surface but an active viewing experience as well, because of its size and high-gloss surface (Rauschenberg likely used commercial radiator paint) that is "hypersensitive" to light (a word he used to describe the *White Paintings*). One is compelled to continually reposition oneself in relation to the painting to see how it looks with the light hitting the glossy, uneven black surface at different angles. New aspects of the topography suddenly glint into view as one steps right, and when one moves in closer, goes dark once again. Such an image is never fixed or stable, depending as it does on the many different points of view that, when collaged together, constitute the experience, as fragmented and almost filmic as it is. As I

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<sup>14</sup> Hopps groups them into five or six successive phases. I am not so interested in the chronological order in which Rauschenberg carried out these experiments, for it seems incidental—what Rauschenberg calls "an unavoidable progression."



saw firsthand, it is truly amazing how the black painting can seem like two completely different pictures depending on where you stand. Viewed from the left [fig. 2.6], the painting looks smoother, the surface less worked and rippled because of the largely un-newspapered far-left panel. From the other side [fig. 2.7], however, the rich texture of the far-right panel gives one the impression that the surface of the painting is more highly wrought. Viewed head-on, the painting can read more white than black because of the lights reflected in a modern gallery.

The matte black painting with *Asheville Citizen* (c 1952) [fig. 2.8] is claimed to be the first black painting in which the newspaper is left exposed, rather than being used strictly as a support surface. The work is composed of two identically sized canvases (roughly 37" x 28 ½" each) painted in a matte black and stacked to create a single tall, vertical surface. Half of the surface area is covered by a sheet from the August 3, 1951 issue of the *Asheville Citizen* (the local newspaper of Asheville, North Carolina, where Black Mountain College was located) rotated ninety-degrees clockwise and positioned such that a band of black is visible at top.<sup>15</sup> The "right" two columns of the paper (if it were oriented properly) extend into the lower panel. The top portion of a second sheet was added to the left in order to span the width of the painting, which is approximately a sixth wider than a newspaper is tall.

Rauschenberg's decision to lay the newspaper sideways has been read as "abstracting" the newspaper, at the same time that the contents—sports columns, a crossword puzzle, and advertisements—remain legible. The matte black painting with *Asheville Citizen* is also, according to Hopps, "a quintessential example of what Leo

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<sup>15</sup> This may have been a variation of the technique of edging his earlier paintings in silver.

Steinberg has referred to as Rauschenberg's 'flatbed picture plane'" — "the flattest surface possible."<sup>16</sup> Perhaps "prototypal" is a more accurate term than "quintessential," as Steinberg credits the combine-paintings of two years later as the first instances of this new type of horizontally oriented painting. Hopps attributes the supreme and matter-of-fact flatness of the painting's surface to the newspapers that literally sit on top of the canvas and thus disallow any depth of space. "Usually such monochromatic areas allow the mind and eye to imagine spatial dimension. However, a similar perception is undermined here because both the newspapers and the surface of the paint conjoin as part of a whole, lacking any indication of angled lines" — or lines that suggest recession into fictive, pictorial space.<sup>17</sup>

Flat surface-ness is only half of Steinberg's notion of the flatbed picture. It also embodies the tilt of the picture plane from vertical to horizontal, and "symbolic allusion to hard surfaces such as tabletops, studio floors, charts, bulletin boards — any receptor surface on which objects are scattered."<sup>18</sup> Complicating Hopps's reading, the tall and slender proportions of the matte black painting with *Asheville Citizen* (over twice as tall as it is wide), as well as the vertical lines formed by the words that now run from top to bottom rather than left to right, confer an explicit verticality to the work which, in my opinion, tends to overpower the horizontal orientation one assumes of a newspaper laid open — and flat.

Furthermore, it seems that with *Asheville Citizen*, Rauschenberg was less interested in the tension between the legibility of newspaper-as-text and newspaper-as-collage-element, which would characterize the later black paintings, than in the pictorial

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<sup>16</sup> Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg: the early 1950s*, p. 67.

<sup>17</sup> Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg: the early 1950s*, p. 67.

<sup>18</sup> Steinberg, "Other Criteria," p. 84.

qualities inherent to the layout when the primary function of reading is precluded. One becomes aware of the different qualities of line and shapes of quadrangles that make up a paper: the dotted and broken line of text, advertisements outlined in bold, the crossword (a similar configuration of empty and filled-in squares appears in a few of the Parsons paintings), and the non-lines made up by column breaks and where the sheet was folded. Indeed, Rauschenberg has often stated that he relied on the newspaper layout as a ready-made compositional scheme. Contemporary artist Jorge Macchi shows quite clearly what that compositional scheme might look like in a work that was included in a recent group exhibition that took its conceptual point of departure from Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, "Cancelled, Erased & Removed" [fig. 2.9].<sup>19</sup> All of the text from a section of newspaper was removed except for one word from a headline on the third or fourth page, "nightmare," that is also the title of the piece. What one is left with is a blank template for your typical front page of the daily news. Without the distraction of news content, one can see that the architecture of a newspaper is quite elegant, like a piece of minimalist lace.<sup>20</sup>

Robert Mattison suggests, "The stories in a newspaper are presented with little hierarchy and there is often no relationship between one story and those adjoining it," following an "as it happens" logic.<sup>21</sup> In truth, of course, editors carefully planned the

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<sup>19</sup> Sean Kelly Gallery, New York. The show ran 21 June-1 August 2008. Press release can be accessed via the gallery's website: [http://www.skny.com/exhibitions/2008-06-21\\_cancelled-erased-and-removed/pressrelease/](http://www.skny.com/exhibitions/2008-06-21_cancelled-erased-and-removed/pressrelease/).

<sup>20</sup> That *Nightmare* (2007) was included in an exhibition of artists whose conceptual and formal practice involves canceling, erasing and removing elements from their work suggests continuity, not divergence, between Rauschenberg's thinking on works with a deductive process such as the *White Paintings* and *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, and the more agglutinative logic of the black paintings.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Mattison, *Robert Rauschenberg: Breaking Boundaries* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 51.

layout, no matter how random it seemed. As Loudon Wainwright writes of the “grab-bag” quality that characterized *LIFE*’s page layout from its inception in the mid-1930s:

*LIFE* had the quality of an album jammed with snapshots the collector couldn’t bear to throw away. Its look was earnest, amateurish and cluttered, its tone was variously wide-eyed, sentimental, smart-aleck, smug and foolish. Quite possibly these were just the qualities that in some magical, quite indefinable mix (though Luce and his editors spent the next 35 years trying to isolate, define and capture the recipe) would guarantee *LIFE*’s immediate and long-lasting success.<sup>22</sup>

The graphics expert who designed the dummy issue of the magazine described his task as “to make a better pattern of each page, conforming to a total ‘basic format’ character: to ‘sell’ each page for itself, each picture within that pattern; to suggest changes of pace; to clean up margins and gutters;... to eliminate sloppy disturbances and tricks from the page.”<sup>23</sup>

It is entirely fitting that Rauschenberg, who was from an early age fascinated by reproductions in picture magazines, would strive to achieve the same sort of disorderly-seeming order, or in his words, “random order,” that defined the pages of *LIFE* and like publications. (He remembered the green of the only painting he knew in his childhood, George Frederick Watts’s *Hope* (1886) [see fig. 3.17], as “that green you only get in reproductions!”<sup>24</sup>) Rauschenberg’s generation was the first to come of age during the media explosion in the period after the Second World War. Print and electronic media were revolutionized by advances in technology. Mass quantities of newspapers, magazines and comic books could be printed faster and in higher quality. Rapid turnover meant that a glut of this material was available daily. The growing “disposable culture”

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<sup>22</sup> Loudon Wainwright, *The Great American Magazine: an inside history of LIFE* (New York: Knopf, 1986), p. 75.

<sup>23</sup> Wainwright, *The Great American Magazine*, p. 39.

<sup>24</sup> “Artists with or against the past,” *ARTnews* (summer 1958), p. 56.

decisively altered the quality, pace and experience of life.<sup>25</sup> Artists could either deny the effects of these transformations on art, the modernist route, or embrace them, as Rauschenberg did—this is the very stuff his art is made of. Although he claims to have used “real objects” from the very start, I argue that the black paintings were the first works in which he established an equivalence between “real objects”—in this case newspapers—and paint. As such, he dispensed with the notion that a medium was governed by the “proper” use of materials and processes, encapsulated in his trademark statement, “A pair of socks is no less suitable to make a painting with than wood, nails, turpentine, oil and fabric.”<sup>26</sup>

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### *Contemporary examples of using newspaper*

Artists have used newsprint since at least the beginning of the century. Picasso and Braque used fragments of text from newspapers in their *papiers-collés* that were often juxtaposed so as to suggest readings that corresponded to the picture. Hopps, in speaking of the matte black painting with *Asheville Citizen*, identifies Man Ray’s work *Theatr* (1916) as the first instance of an artist using a complete sheet of newspaper as a ground.<sup>27</sup> Kurt Schwitters, whom we already know Rauschenberg very much admired, counted newspaper among the exhaustive list of prosaic and “inartistic” materials he used

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<sup>25</sup> As Wainwright tells it, the story of *LIFE* is also the story of the development of the technology to mass-print cheap color reproductions. In the mid-1930s, pictures were already seen in large numbers in newspapers and magazines, but they were still expensive to print in quality. When Henry Luce took on board the project to create a picture magazine in color available to the masses, the technological handicap that needed be overcome was the ability to print quickly without sacrificing image quality and at a cost that would allow for 5- to 10-cent issues. Paper companies developed the ability to make coated paper required for color inks in rolls that could be put through rotary presses with a folded delivery rather than in sheets. However, this in turn required special ink that dried instantaneously, which would otherwise smear. The solution was to attach gas ovens to the presses to “flash dry” the inks at high heat. The resulting toxic fumes were vented outside. See *The Great American Magazine*, pp. 22-30.

<sup>26</sup> *Sixteen Americans*, p. 58.

<sup>27</sup> Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg: the early 1950s*, p. 68.

for his *Merz*, or small assemblages. In the 1920 work *Disjointed Forces* [fig. 2.10], for example, the bold text of the newspaper fragment stands in stark opposition to the painterly blue passages and the very real objects that also comprise the picture, including a metal spring coil, corrugated cardboard, a piece of tulle and wood “nuts.”

Newspaper proved to be an incredibly versatile material at the hands of resourceful artists. An *Art News* feature article on Franz Kline’s studio practice, “Kline paints a picture,” includes photographs of the artist sketching forms onto the pages of a disused phone directory [fig. 2.11].<sup>28</sup> A caption to a close-up bird’s-eye view of Kline’s work bench, which shows only the artist’s hands smearing black paint on a thick section of a phonebook, explains that the artist used an old telephone book as a palette. One can also see what is described as “preliminary drawings,” which Kline “often [made] on telephone-book paper.” In the text itself, Robert Goodnough reports to the reader that Kline

does countless drawings, quickly in broad strokes; often on pieces of newspapers. Later he goes through these and may find a theme that has been unconsciously working its way into the open; something that is common to all or most of the drawings. He may then select one drawing that seems to contain this element most concisely and work directly from it on to the canvas. Or he may, as was the case in the painting shown here, set the drawings aside and work on the canvas with the general feeling he has gotten as a result of making the drawings, ready also to make changes, at any time necessary, as the picture develops.<sup>29</sup>

Rauschenberg was in close contact with the older artist in the formative summer of 1951, when he started the black paintings, and may very well have picked up on Kline’s habit.

It is evident in the photographs of the telephone-book sketches that Kline both used the

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<sup>28</sup> Robert Goodnough, “Kline paints a picture,” *ARTnews* 51, no. 8 (December 1952): 36-39, 63-64. Goodnough is widely cited as a second-generation New York School artist. Incidentally (or not), this is the same issue in which Rosenberg’s seminal article “The American Action Painters” appeared.

<sup>29</sup> Goodnough, “Kline paints a picture,” p. 37.

layout of the pages to guide his marks and as collage material, much as Rauschenberg would do with newspaper [fig. 2.12].

Jackson Pollock massed together wads of newspaper to create a sculpture [fig. 2.13], demonstrating the sculptural possibilities of the “medium,” of which Rauschenberg took advantage albeit in the context of painting: “Jackson Pollock stops the show with a writhing, ridge-backed creature composed of wire, padded with newspaper and covered with familiar Pollock drawings splashed with red and black and wrinkled to suggest the skin of some prehistoric monster.”<sup>30</sup> George Stillman, independently from Rauschenberg, began incorporating crumpled-up newspaper in his paintings as early as 1950 [fig. 2.14].<sup>31</sup> He gave one such painting the title *8-14-50*, alluding to the “dailiness” of the material used. Willem de Kooning, another artist whom Rauschenberg admired, used newsprint in a more indirect manner. What started as a convenient way to blot wet paint so it would dry became a transfer technique as the printed text and images appeared in reverse [fig. 2.15].<sup>32</sup> Twombly, to whom Rauschenberg was very close during this period, also experimented with using newspaper, such as in the small painting, *Landscape of 1951* [fig. 2.16]. One can just make out the text between the white sections and the black stroke in the right half of the painting. The fact that the painting is done on newsprint is not emphasized, suggesting Twombly used the material in place of or as a substitute for canvas, rather than for the “literal sensuality” of the material.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> B[etty]. H[olliday]., exhibition review: “Sculpture by Painters,” *ARTnews* 50, no. 2 (April 1951): 47. The sculpture is no longer extant. Given the disposable nature of newsprint, it may have simply been discarded rather than “lost.”

<sup>31</sup> It is interesting to note that Stillman had an extensive background in photography, but little knowledge of painting. One wonders whether this factored into an attitude more open to conflating painting with collage.

<sup>32</sup> Rauschenberg would use a similar technique for his transfer drawings.

<sup>33</sup> Rauschenberg refers to the quality of the objects he used for the small-scale boxed and hanging assemblages that were shown in Rome and Florence in these terms. I will discuss this body of work further in the following chapter.

Although newspaper as such was not incorporated in Susan Weil's collage, *Secrets* (1949) [fig. 2.17], this work may have been yet another precedent for Rauschenberg's use of the material. *Secrets* is quite appropriately an intimate work composed of a mosaic of torn bits of paper with words written in pencil. The title suggests that prior to being ripped, the document held secrets whose contents remain hidden at the same time that they are in plain view. The snippets of "secrets" contain only a word or two from two lines, but they are enough to set the mind off in trying to complete the thought. One fragment that is especially prominent, not only because it is at center but also because the top has been folded down, causing it to lift higher from the surface, reads "WHISPERS." It is a tantalizing morsel of the puzzle, and the eye moves restlessly across the words seeking out more clues to the secrets contained therein: "BALI," "ROCK TREMBLING," "WARM," etc. Martin Duberman attributes the handwriting to Weil. However, I suspect that it is actually Rauschenberg's hand (he always wrote in all capital letters).<sup>34</sup> One can imagine Weil and Rauschenberg delighting in the process of arranging the pieces in a "random order," and it is likely that the letter of secrets was orchestrated.

These contemporary examples, which only touch on the most relevant cases, make evident that the use of newspapers by painters was quite prevalent. Of course, the ready availability of the material on the streets of New York contributed to this fact, and artists were not the only ones repurposing the material.<sup>35</sup> Rauschenberg alluded to the

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<sup>34</sup> Duberman, *Black Mountain*, p. 153. "To make *Secrets*," Duberman writes, "Weil took a page from her journal."

<sup>35</sup> Mattison did extensive background research into the industries that produced the material Rauschenberg found discarded on the streets. He writes, "Manhattan was the core of New York's regional communications industry and one of the world centers for news media," which generated a daily supply of old news. See *Robert Rauschenberg: Breaking Boundaries*, especially pp. 47-57.



long history of reusing read newspapers when explaining to Seckler his reason for turning to the material. “A newspaper that you’re not reading can be used for anything; and the same people didn’t think it was immoral to wrap their garbage in newspaper. And I think, you know, that that’s a very positive use for a newspaper.”<sup>36</sup> Photographs taken by Farm Security Administration documentarians, for example, reveal that newspapers were used to paper walls [fig. 2.18].

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### ***“True to itself”***

At the same time, Rauschenberg’s philosophy insofar as keeping any object he used “true to itself” and recognizable as such made for a distinctive manner of using newspaper.<sup>37</sup> Whereas wrapping garbage or using it as scratch paper completely denuded the newspaper of its original form, Rauschenberg ostensibly preserved the “newspaper-ness” of it. As stated, in the earlier paintings in the series, Rauschenberg completely covered over the newspaper with several layers of black paint so that it was no longer visible. Nevertheless, the “paper-ness” of the underlayer is apparent to anyone. The outlines of the sheets, the varied rips and tears, as well as the different hefts of paper are all clearly discernible underneath, in spite of the paint slathered on top, and is perhaps all the clearer because of the high gloss enamel. There are sections of paper that seem

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<sup>36</sup> Seckler interview.

<sup>37</sup> Of his use of objects in combine-paintings Rauschenberg said, “I would like my pictures to be able to be taken apart as easily as they’re put together—so you can recognize an object when you’re looking at it. Oil paint really does look like oil paint even in the most photographic painting.” See Swenson, “Rauschenberg paints a picture,” p. 47. The notion of “truth to materials” in art, which is not quite Rauschenberg’s philosophy but must be mentioned herein, was first raised by John Ruskin in the mid-nineteenth century: “All art, working with given materials, must propose itself the objects which, with those materials, are most perfectly attainable; and becomes illegitimate and debased if it propose [*sic*] to itself any other objects better attainable with other materials.... The workman has not done his duty...unless he even so far *honours* the materials with which he is working as to set himself to bring out their beauty, and to recommend and exalt, as far as he can, their peculiar qualities.” Cited in Yuriko Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 117.

heavier in weight in the way they lie relatively smooth underneath the paint, with the thickness of a few sheets of newsprint [fig. 2. 19].<sup>38</sup> By contrast, we can tell where Rauschenberg used single newsheets because of the very recognizable wrinkled, snag-type of tear in the tissue-thin paper [fig. 2.20]. In short, the black paint cannot occlude the fact that paper lies underneath. As I suggest, the glossy black paint highlights the innate qualities of paper—how it buckles, wrinkles, bunches, unfolds, undulates; and the various edges it can have, from ripped and torn to pinked.

“I began using newsprint in my work,” explained Rauschenberg, “to activate a ground so that even the first strokes in a painting has its [*sic*] unique position in a gray map of words.”<sup>39</sup> That is to say, in laying newsprint down onto the canvas first, Rauschenberg’s painting began on a surface already bearing marks. Thus the first stroke of paint was de-privileged—it was no longer the originary mark that transformed a blank canvas into a painting, but just another mark among many on a surface already loaded with content. This is in marked contrast to the usual romanticized idea that the canvas is the pregnant blank surface lying in wait to receive and then preserve the painter’s feat of creation.<sup>40</sup> Motherwell’s essay for the early 1950 exhibition at Kootz Gallery, “Black or

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<sup>38</sup> Tomkins writes that Rauschenberg dipped pieces of newsprint in paint before affixing them to the canvas with glue. It is possible these “thicker” sections were pieces that received several coats of black paint before being applied. Alternately, Chris Ketchie, Offsite Storage Manager at the Whitney, surmised that paper bags were also used in the painting.

<sup>39</sup> Rauschenberg, “How Important is the Surface to Design?”, p. 31.

<sup>40</sup> The popular myth of the canvas contradicts or downplays the fact that painters, at the same time, thought of their support in more practical, material terms. Ralph Mayer’s serial column in *Art Digest* devotes a discussion to the reasons why panel may be preferred to canvas, demystifying the painter’s arena as hallowed ground. Mayer’s text firmly dispels this romantic notion of the canvas “as merely a blank surface upon which the artist’s intensions are projected.” Instead, he deals with a canvas’s “material properties”—which is to say, the “technical” question of its function as a surface that will take “pigment and mediums,” and more to the point, its permanence. Enfolded into this concern for permanence is the role of the painting as artifact of (art) historical significance.

White,” figures the canvas in such terms: “A fresh white canvas is a void, as is the poet’s sheet of white paper.”<sup>41</sup>

Contemporaneous artists, in statements about their studio practice, consistently framed the canvas as a site of mythic creation, the ground on which the “heroic” struggle between painter and inspiration transpired. Painter Paul Mommer’s initial encounter with the blank canvas is dramatized as a sort of “sizing up” of an opponent:

Before starting, he draws on a pair of rubber gloves and then for some time stands scrutinizing his canvas, studying the compositional potentials contained within its dimensions. His first strokes with a medium-sized brush dipped in black paint are tentative, but sensitive, indicating relationships between lines, space and forms which hint at future developments.<sup>42</sup>

Mommer’s first strokes are foundational and compel (“hint at”) subsequent strokes, suggesting that the success of the picture hinged on those crucial initial encounters between paint and bare canvas. Likewise, the artist Tamayo characterized his preliminary sketches directly on the canvas as “struggles.”<sup>43</sup> In Tamayo’s case, because he never painted from a model, the initial marks that determined the composition were manifestations of some inner quality, otherwise characterized as “the urge to create.” The

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<sup>41</sup> Robert Motherwell, “Black or White,” *Black or White: paintings by European and American artists*, exh. cat. (New York: Kootz Gallery, 1950), unpaginated. As Alex Potts points out, Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s conceptualization of the line on white paper as opening up the inert literalness of the support is a reversal of the more classical understanding of drawing, like Rauschenberg’s. Line activates and constitutes the “ground-ness” of the ground, which constitutes the line’s “figure-ness” in turn: “Figurative or not, the line in any case is no longer an imitation of a thing or itself a thing. It is a certain disequilibrium contrived in the indifference of the white paper, it is a kind of hole drilled into the in-itself, a certain constitutive emptiness.... The line is not, as in classical geometry, some entity that appears against the emptiness of a background, as in modern geometries, it is restriction, segregation, modulation of a pre-established spaciality.” Cited in *The Sculptural Imagination: Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 232. It seems to me that Barnett Newman thought of his zips in a similar way, which in his view did not divide the canvas so much as join the fields of color together as a zipper might.

<sup>42</sup> Nathaniel Pousette-Dart, “Mommer paints a picture,” *ARTnews* 50, no. 1 (March 1951), pp. 36-37.

<sup>43</sup> Geri Trotta, “Tamayo paints a picture,” *ARTnews* 50, no. 6 (October 1951), p. 29.

“struggle” was to find that quality’s appropriate expression so that it reflected back not only on the artist, but also communicated it to the viewer.

In these examples, the gravity of the decision that “confronts” the painter before a canvas is described in language that suggests an almost ethical value or aesthetico-moral principle governed the enterprise. This moral dimension is certainly present in Harold Rosenberg’s notion of action painting. As Fred Orton persuasively argues in his revisionist-minded essay, “Action, Revolution and Painting,” Rosenberg’s characterization of action painting had less to do with “existentialist-humanist” (melo-) drama of gestural-type abstract expressionist painting that it has come to mean, and more do with issues of political efficacy—that is, the revolutionary potential of an act.<sup>44</sup> Krauss makes the point that in fact, “Rosenberg was struck more by the bare canvas—an ‘arena for action’—than by the finished works, which he avoided describing.”<sup>45</sup> Rauschenberg found this sort of language for speaking about the relationship of a painter to his art—“tortured, struggle, pain”—at odds with how he viewed his own practice: “I never saw in the materials this conflict.”<sup>46</sup> In his mind, it was a question of the attitude of the painter and the interpreter. If one were to lose the idea that paintings had to be born of struggle and conflict, then one could have a completely different attitude about painting.

I suggested in the previous chapter that Rauschenberg’s attitude was of a distinctly Zen Buddhist persuasion. Yuriko Saito’s recently published study of Buddhist spirituality in Japanese design philosophy, with an emphasis on aesthetics as experienced

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<sup>44</sup> Fred Orton, “Action, Revolution and Painting,” *Oxford Art Journal* 14, no. 2 (1991), pp. 3–17. Kaprow would pick up on the melodramatic dimensions of the myth of the abstract expressionist artist. See “Happenings in the New York Scene” (1961); reprinted in Kelley, ed., *Essays on the blurring of art and life*, p. 23.

<sup>45</sup> Krauss in Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless: a user's guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997), p. 28.

<sup>46</sup> Seckler interview.

at the level of the everyday, is particularly germane to the present discussion, which I cite at length for the clarity of her insights:

Sensitivity and respect for the objects' essential characteristics underlie the attitude toward design and creation shared by traditional Japanese artists and crafts people, as well as contemporary artists committed to "truth to materials".... All of them, though from disparate backgrounds and each with distinct concerns and interests, are guided by the attitude of submitting to the objects' and materials' guide in their work. They willingly relinquish the power to impose their own ideas and wishes on the materials.<sup>47</sup>

Rauschenberg described his own practice in these very same terms. "I've always felt as though, whatever I've used and whatever I've done, the method was always closer to a *collaboration* with materials than any kind of conscious manipulation and control."<sup>48</sup> He explained further: "I don't like to take advantage of an object that can't defend itself. When an object you're using does not stand out but yields its presence to what you're doing, it collaborates, so to speak—it implies a kind of harmony."<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, Rauschenberg took as given the equivalence between paint marks and printed words—"even the first strokes in a painting has its [*sic*] unique position in a gray map of words." Paint is no more and no less than newspaper ink, marks made by his hand no different from text mass-printed onto broadsheets. Rauschenberg considered this leveling of difference across the various materials he employed in his paintings—"the fact that I chose to ennoble the ordinary"—"the strongest thing" about his work.<sup>50</sup>

Dore Ashton, who reviewed the Stable Gallery exhibition in which these paintings were shown, wrote upon seeing the black paintings, "Beauty is purity, he says, but decay

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<sup>47</sup> Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics*, p. 133.

<sup>48</sup> Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors*, p. 204.

<sup>49</sup> Swenson, "Rauschenberg paints a picture," p. 47.

<sup>50</sup> Rose interview, p. 59.

is implicit. Appliquéd newspaper is his disdain of perpetuity. Life is cheap.”<sup>51</sup>

Rauschenberg found “life” in New York to be, on the contrary, “rich in being able to pick up Con Edison lumber from the streets and whatever the day would lay out for me to use in my work. In fact, so much so, that sometimes it embarrasses me that I live in New York City as though I’m a guest here.”<sup>52</sup> In his hands, newspapers that he found discarded in bundles on the curb became a source of infinite “visual experiences.”

Rauschenberg’s statement regarding the “gray map of words” was printed earlier the same year as his “manifesto” for painting with anything and everything that appeared in the exhibition catalog for *Sixteen Americans*. His nonjudgmental attitude towards materials, Saito reveals, has much in common with how Japanese artists and designers conceive of their practice, and is deeply rooted in Buddhist spirituality:

Japanese art and design practitioners, for whom their vocation determines their way of life in general, are deeply affected by the worldview of Buddhism. One of the most important factors contributing to Japan’s spiritual, cultural, and social foundation, Buddhism emphasizes the importance of transcending one’s ego. It is no accident that most master artists and craftsmen, whose teachings have been handed down through generations, have historically been students or practitioners of Zen Buddhism.... This transcendence of ego is facilitated by our recognizing and overcoming all-too-human schemes of categorizing, classifying, and valuing. Once we succeed...Zen is optimistic about our ability to experience directly the thus-ness or being-such-ness (*immo*) of the other-than-me or -human. At this level of direct unmediated encounter with the Buddha nature of each object and phenomenon, our ordinary *valuation and hierarchy disappear*.... Thus guided by the Buddhistic transcendence of ego, the Japanese artists’ and designers’ practice of respectfully listening to the material’s voice and directing their creative activity accordingly manifests not simply an aesthetic wisdom but also a moral virtue....<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Ashton, “Bob Rauschenberg,” p. 21.

<sup>52</sup> Seckler interview.

<sup>53</sup> Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics*, pp. 133-34, emphasis mine.

Rauschenberg seems to have surmised the “idea” that needed to be lost in order to move away from the trope of art-as-struggle to a less agonistic attitude was the ego. “When I go to work I have to feel invisible to get away from the inferiority that is attached to ‘Bob.’ I want...to free my body, my head and my thoughts from my ego.”<sup>54</sup> As he explained to Calvin Tomkins, “I don’t want a painting to be just an expression of my personality. I feel it ought to be much better [and bigger] than that.”<sup>55</sup> He achieved this by “respectfully listening to the material’s voice,” as Eastern aesthetic philosophy instructed, and letting it guide his experiments, minus any overtly mystical overtones.

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### *Contemporary reactions to the black paintings*

As the black paintings series progressed, sections of newsprint became increasingly visible and were juxtaposed with painted-over pieces that evidence Rauschenberg’s continuing fascination with the myriad effects one could achieve with the ostensibly simple combination of old newspapers and black paint [fig. 1.13]. He explained the shift thus:

As the paintings changed the printed material became as much of a subject as the paint, causing changes of focus and providing multiplicity and duplication of images. A *third palette* with infinite possibilities of color, shape, content, and scale was then added to the palettes of objects (newspaper) and paint.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Rose interview, p. 85. Rose remarked, “Eastern philosophy turned egolessness into a religion,” a comment on the triteness of the notion as Zen became a pop cultural phenomenon in the late fifties and early sixties. The entry for the word in *Art 1963: A New Vocabulary* (see introduction) makes the point that it is “popular today among intellectuals and artists for its emphasis upon individual self-realization and spontaneity although its meditational disciplines are largely ignored.” In 1964, the *New York Herald Tribune* listed Zen as a “false sign and symbol.” See “Who’s Who & What to Make of Them: An Arbitrary Assessment (subject to fluctuations in the Dow Jones Industrial Average),” *New York Herald Tribune* (17 May 1964).

<sup>55</sup> Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors*, p. 204.

<sup>56</sup> Rauschenberg, “How Important is the Surface to Design?”, p. 31, emphasis mine.

His characterization of the printed text and objects as “palettes” is significant. For one, it is surely an appropriation of Albers’s way of thinking about the color paper that he had students use in his exercises on color study. Albers explains, “Why color paper—instead of pigment and paint” in *The Interaction of Color* (1963):

In our studies, color paper is preferred to paint for several practical reasons. Paper provides innumerable colors in a large range of shades and tints ready for immediate use. Though a large collection is needed, it is not expensive to assemble.  
[...]  
Sources easily accessible for many kinds of color paper are waste strips found at printers and bookbinders; collections of samples of packing papers, of wrapping and bag papers, of cover and decoration papers. Also, instead of full sheets of paper, just cutouts from magazines, from advertisements and illustrations, from posters, wallpapers, paint samples, and from catalogues with color reproductions of various materials will do. Often a collective search for papers and a subsequent exchange of them among class members will provide a rich but inexpensive color paper “palette.”  
[...]  
We can choose from a large collection of tones, displayed in front of us, and thus constantly compare neighboring and contrasting colors. This offers a training which no palette can provide.<sup>57</sup>

Albers used quotes when referring to the collected set of color paper as a palette, signaling to the reader he does not really mean that it is a palette, only like one, a distinction that is further underscored by the second use of the word, this time in reference to paint and thus without quotes. Rauschenberg chose to omit them in his statement, published in *Print* magazine several years earlier, in 1959. By this time, Rauschenberg was half a decade into combine-paintings, the series of paintings that took the ideas germinating in the black paintings to their logical conclusion: full color. The notion of objects forming a painter’s palette was a non-issue for Rauschenberg and, increasingly, for artists in the New York scene. The “third palette” he refers to is not the

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<sup>57</sup> Josef Albers, *The Interaction of Color* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1975), p. 7.



newspapers themselves, which he considers “objects,” but rather the printed text that was beginning to become more and more visible, and inevitably, more legible.

Across the limited set of criticism of Rauschenberg’s black paintings from the Stable Gallery show in 1953, reviewers express a similar sentiment that the black paint counterintuitively obscures the painting, rather than constitutes it, presumably because of the apparent ground layer made of newsprint that lies underneath. Carlyle Burrows, for example, wrote: “Rauschenberg’s rippled papier mache [*sic*] surfaces *concealing* in monochrome a faint incentive toward montage, afford a shimmering, thin ascetic expression not unpleasing to the eye, once the latter becomes accustomed to wide spaces of inert color.”<sup>58</sup> Dore Ashton used similar terms, describing the paintings as “*cloaked* mystery.”<sup>59</sup> Another reviewer, Lawrence Campbell, seemed mesmerized by the parts just discernable underneath paint, which again suggests he presumed the painting’s true content lay hidden by the paint: “One of the large paintings has a base of silver radiator paint which gives it a curious light, like those plants which turn silver under water.”<sup>60</sup> He, like Burrows, also remarked on the montage of images underneath the paint: “These ragged-edged shapes, sometimes vaguely geometric, adhering like collages to a canvas surface have the effect of several small pictures or photographs in a larger one.”<sup>61</sup>

A comparison of reviews of Twombly’s paintings, which were being shown simultaneously at the Stable Gallery, reveals that a painting on a bed of newsprint was

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<sup>58</sup> Carlyle Burrows, “Art Review: New Shows Strong in Experiment,” *New York Herald Tribune* (20 September 1953), p. 10, emphasis mine.

<sup>59</sup> Ashton, “Bob Rauschenberg,” p. 21.

<sup>60</sup> Lawrence Campbell, “Reviews and previews: Rauschenberg and Twombly,” *ARTnews* 52, no. 5 (September 1953), pp. 13-14.

<sup>61</sup> Campbell, “Reviews and previews,” pp. 13-14.

perceived differently from a painting directly on canvas.<sup>62</sup> The paint in Twombly's abstract canvases [fig. 2.21] was understood as marks on a surface—albeit one reviewer dismissed them as “nothing more than black scribbles on white surfaces” while another thought they resembled “fetish forms and black configurations.”<sup>63</sup> Burrows's use of the term “contours” suggests that he saw bounded forms in Twombly's loose, sketchy brush strokes and pencil lines.<sup>64</sup> The difference perhaps lay in the more conventional figure-ground relationship that characterized Twombly's paintings as compared to Rauschenberg's monochrome paintings, in which the relationship seemed to be reversed—text and images, in this case, on the newsprint that comprised the ground of the painting and thus painted over.

Rauschenberg claimed that this half-disclosure of the newspapers' contents was not meant to “tease” the viewer/ reader, but rather to get “complexity without their [the paintings'] revealing much—in the fact that there was much to see but not much showing.”<sup>65</sup> Indeed, in my own experiments using scrap magazine- and newspaper, one cannot pay attention to both manipulation of the material on the surface and what is written on each piece as one works with it. Nevertheless, as can be seen in a detail of a later black painting [fig. 1.39], Rauschenberg re-traced the words “Holiday means pleasure” in black to read more clearly; the painting was made after he had returned from

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<sup>62</sup> There is some disagreement on this fact. Campbell stated that each occupied a separate floor. Ashton wrote up each artist separately for *Art Digest*, which seems to confirm Campbell's report. However, an installation photograph taken by Rauschenberg shows his works set against a Twombly painting on the far wall. Rauschenberg himself recalled, “We mixed the work up. They looked very good together.” Rose interview, p. 47.

<sup>63</sup> Ashton, “Fifty-seventh Street: Cy Twombly,” *Art Digest* (September 1953), p. 20.

<sup>64</sup> Burrows, “Art Review: New Shows Strong in Experiment,” p. 10.

<sup>65</sup> Rauschenberg, “How Important is the Surface to Design?”, p. 31. Quoted by Andrew Forge, *Rauschenberg* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1969), p. 10.

an extended trip overseas between August 1952 and April of the following year that he famously made with Twombly.

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### ***Black as negation***

Back in New York, one of the first black paintings from this second phase [fig. 2.22] was made on top of a collage included in the Parsons show, *Should Love Come First?* (c 1951) [fig. 2.23].<sup>66</sup> The title came from the article Rauschenberg clipped out of a magazine and figured prominently in the upper left corner of the collage by tracing a rough circle around the words and painting over the rest of the page, essentially “whiting out” any other text that may have been legible: “[my problem...] should love come first?”<sup>67</sup> As Jonathan Katz notes, *Should Love Come First?* is

unique in the artist’s *oeuvre* because it is melodramatic, confessional and by and large legible according to a singular thematic—the thematic that gives it its title, ripped from the pages of a magazine: “my problem, should love come first?” Many works by Rauschenberg were broadly expressive, but none would ever again so blatantly, even aggressively trumpet an autobiographical theme.<sup>68</sup>

Katz goes on to list the rather sordid autobiographical details obliquely referenced by the titular question, namely the coincidence of Rauschenberg’s developing romance with Twombly and his separation from Weil in the same month that his son by Weil was born.

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<sup>66</sup> The black painting is in Basel’s Öffentliche Kunstsammlung.

<sup>67</sup> One of the first forms of correction fluid was invented in 1951 by the secretary Bette Nesmith Graham, founder of Liquid Paper. She may have been inspired by nail polish.  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Correction\\_fluid](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Correction_fluid).

<sup>68</sup> Jonathan Katz, “‘Committing the Perfect Crime’: Sexuality, Assemblage and the Postmodern Turn in American Art,” <http://www.queerculturalcenter.org/Pages/KatzPages/Katz%20Art%20Journal.pdf>. Katz’s reading is an important intervention in the contemporary critical literature on Rauschenberg, which he points out has lain stress on the “random” half of “random order,” finding in him “a proto-postmodernist cheerfully abandoning intentionality and openly embracing the free-play of signification. Katz is concerned with the “order” that emerges from the randomness, or those moments of authorial intent whose meanings, he suggests, “enabled different of lines of communication to be sent out to different audiences, including the self-conscious secreting of some highly privatized meanings directed to a very narrow audience, an audience sometimes no larger than one individual”—viz. Jasper Johns.

Though *Should Love Come First?* was not the only collage to meet this fate [fig. 2.24], one must admit that the undeniable emotional charge of the original collage does invite to a certain extent readings such as Katz's, which seek to decipher the causal relationship between the two works by looking to circumstances in Rauschenberg's personal life.<sup>69</sup> Katz argues that in covering over all traces of *Should Love Come First?* with black paint, and the more general shift away from such overtly self-referential expressions, Rauschenberg was in effect closeting himself, negating "I, Rauschenberg, the (gay) artist."

Thomas Crow similarly frames this act as "a willful suppression of a forbidden aspect of the self and its desires"—by which he surely means but never comes out and explicitly states Rauschenberg's homosexual relations with Twombly.<sup>70</sup> Some months earlier, Rauschenberg had committed a similar act of self-censorship, throwing most of the small assemblage works made during his Italian and North African sojourn into the Arno River, presumably on the suggestion of an unkind reviewer. And a few months after the black painting, he made his "erasure drawing." This pattern of effacements suggested to Crow that they were "a panicked response to some threat carried by whatever power had been externalized in his own creations."<sup>71</sup> It is a compelling proposition, especially given the emotional upsets that preceded Rauschenberg's departure for Europe.

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<sup>69</sup> Others of Rauschenberg's early Parsons paintings were made over into black paintings, most notably the small painting, *Number 1*, that the artist gave to Cage as a token of his admiration. Thus Katz's claim that this black painting is the "only one conserved, albeit through a paradoxical erasure" is not accurate, although it lends further credence to his argument. The existence of the *Number 1* black painting also complicates the arguments made for the singularity of the gesture encoded in painting over *Should Love Come First?*. Regarding Rauschenberg's practice of painting over old works see James Fenton, "Rauschenberg: the Voracious Ego," *Leonardo's Nephew: Essays on Art and Artists* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 221.

<sup>70</sup> Thomas Crow, "Rise and Fall: Theme and Idea in the Combines of Robert Rauschenberg," in *Robert Rauschenberg: combines* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art), p. 249.

<sup>71</sup> Crow, "Rise and Fall," p. 248.

Charles Olson, rector of Black Mountain College from 1950 until its closing in 1957, recounted to Robert Creeley by letter a bizarre episode where Rauschenberg nearly drowned, intimating that it may have been a suicide attempt:

it was Rauschenberg farther out [in the lake by Black Mountain College], out towards the middle, making these moans, & catchings of the voice—and obviously, at least mixed up, & probably stuck, in a trance, not the mud so much.... No one still knows how he came to be out in the lake waters, whether he just ran in (he is such a runner, like, a girl all upgenerated, those times when, the energy which keeps the life moving species-wise, is all over her, all in her and wanting out); whether he—conceivably—went for a swim...; or plain set out to go down (since I wrote you, Con[nie Olson, his wife] picked up that, he is in the black, just now, his marriage smashing, probably over the affair with Twombly, his contract with his gallery not being renewed, and—I'd also bet as an added hidden factor—the terrible pressure on him of the clear genius of this lad, Twombly, the success of his year and the total defeat of Bob's).<sup>72</sup>

The trip was not only a blessed escape from the messy circumstances of his personal life back home. In Rome, far away from the close knit artist circles of New York and under the cloak of anonymity, he and Twombly were free to express those “forbidden aspects of the self” that Crow would have the reader believe were being suppressed, and which had to be tamped down once again when back on American soil—hence the successive acts of erasure. Crow's dramatization is further corroborated by the fact that Rauschenberg “ended up...being furious and hating” Twombly only two weeks into their travels: the black painting was a bitter and unequivocal “No” to both Twombly and the question of whether love trumped all.<sup>73</sup>

Whereas Crow focuses on the particular renunciation represented by the black painting that “smothered” *Should Love Come First?*, Yve-Alain Bois sets his sights wider, arguing that the series of black paintings “blacked out” the *White Paintings*. They

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<sup>72</sup> Reprinted in Nicola Del Roscio, ed., *Writings on Cy Twombly* (Munich: Schirmer/ Mosel, 2002), pp. 19-23.

<sup>73</sup> Twombly allegedly spent Rauschenberg's share of money on antiques. See Rose interview, p. 38.

are run through the same monochrome-as-renunciatory-gesture machine as the all-white paintings, and like Crow, Bois has to wonder whether there wasn't a deeply personal motivation behind them. "Were these works conceived as an attack on Rauschenberg's revered professor at Black Mountain College, Josef Albers, and his passion for the 'interaction of colors'? Or were they rather an attack on the abstract-expressionist gesture?"<sup>74</sup> Bois supposes they were, but reasons that the more likely focus of the black paintings' "attack" were the *White Paintings*: "the black paintings *canceled* the fascination for the void and for 'dematerialization,' both of which had motivated the white monochromes that Rauschenberg himself had made several months earlier."<sup>75</sup>

Roni Feinstein, like Bois, believes that Rauschenberg conceived the black paintings as "polar opposites" to the *White Paintings*:

they were painted black not white, their surfaces were full not empty and were active rather than passive.... If Rauschenberg had originally conceived of the White Paintings as being about emptiness, stillness, and purity, he may have intended the Black Paintings to represent fullness, activity, and decay.<sup>76</sup>

However, as established in the first chapter, "None of those early things was about negativism or nihilism."<sup>77</sup> Rauschenberg, on the contrary, thought of the *White Paintings* and the black paintings as two sides of the same coin. When Rose suggested that the all-white and all-black paintings were about a single possibility—i.e., all-white or all-black—Rauschenberg exclaimed, "I did them at the same time!"<sup>78</sup> A portrait of Rauschenberg from 1953 shows him positioned in the corner made by the seven-panel *White Painting* (1951) and a large black painting that is no longer extant [fig. 2.25]. An

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<sup>74</sup> Bois, "Base Materialism," *Formless*, p. 59.

<sup>75</sup> Bois, "Base Materialism," *Formless*, p. 59.

<sup>76</sup> Feinstein, *Random Order*, pp. 102-04.

<sup>77</sup> de Antonio, *Painters painting*, p. 9.

<sup>78</sup> Rose in interview, p. 77.

artist's portrayal of himself is never a neutral document, so we can surmise from the decision to picture himself not with one or the other but both examples of his paintings that they were equally significant to his identity as an artist. Thus Bois's suggestion that the black paintings "canceled" or supplanted the *White Paintings* is not quite accurate.

Speaking in retrospect about the paintings, Rauschenberg realized that culturally specific associations of black presented a cognitive block to the plain fact that black is a color like any other, though he conceded that those associations must also surely have crossed his mind:

[T]here had been a lot of critics who shared the idea with a lot of the public that they couldn't see black as color or as pigment, but they immediately moved into associations and the associations were always of destroyed newspapers, of burned newspapers. And that began to bother me. Because I think that I'm never sure of what the impulse is psychologically. I don't mess around with my subconscious. I mean I try to keep wide awake. And if I see in the superficial subconscious relationships that I'm familiar with, clichés of association, I change the picture....

And when I did them, well, as I said, I wasn't sure that I really might have been using materials because they were old or liked black with newspaper because of the burned out look. But I certainly didn't like the idea of tortured, tarred, because I don't think that you torture newspaper.<sup>79</sup>

On the other hand, "White began to connote some form of purity, which it had never meant to me."<sup>80</sup> It was therefore inevitable that the two series would be thought of in opposition to one another. Crow especially seems to have let his ideas about the color black—as dark and brooding—get the better of his interpretation. If the black paintings did not "conceal," "cloak," "suppress," "renounce," "cancel out" or "destroy," then in what, more constructive capacity did they function for Rauschenberg? The answer, I

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<sup>79</sup> Seckler interview. See Stephanie Rosenthal, *Black Paintings* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2006), pp. 14-15 for a discussion of the different ways in which the color black has been theorized in both art and science since the Renaissance.

<sup>80</sup> Swenson, "Rauschenberg paints a picture," p. 44.

suspect, lies in the many photographs of the paintings that he took over the series' two-year span [fig. 2.26]. It was not necessarily as eternal, enduring objects that the black paintings held interest for Rauschenberg, but the opposite—the potentially absolute contingency that is a consequence of their integral relationship to light.<sup>81</sup>

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### *Photographing the black paintings*

My description of the black paintings already suggested the mercurial face they presented to the viewer due their interaction with light, which destabilized the physical “fact” (Rauschenberg’s way of describing what is actually there and present in a painting) of the newspapered and painted surface.<sup>82</sup> The effect is even more apparent when one tries to photograph a black painting, as I myself realized trying to photograph the four-panel black painting in the Whitney’s collection. The conditions have to be just right in order to get a decent shot of the painting, and no two pictures are the same because of the shimmering and winking surface. One has to rely on ambient light, for the flash floods the glossy black surface with an ugly white glare, as in the detail I took [fig. 2.27]. One does not get a single image from such an active and elusive painting—surely what all of the reviewers were picking up on when they described the black paintings with terms such as “mysterious” and “vague.” An endless array of views is possible, sustaining an infinite number of “picturings.” Judging by the number of photographs Rauschenberg took of the black paintings as he worked on the series, he was likewise fascinated by the fluctuations in the appearance of their inky surfaces.

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<sup>81</sup> The glossy black painting that remained in his collection until acquired by SFMOMA is a rare exception.

<sup>82</sup> See, for example, Rose interview, pp. 111-14. This idea of a “fact” becomes particularly provocative when what is actually there is a representation.



In 1981 Rauschenberg stated that he originally became interested in the camera “as a social shield,” the mediation of which gave him the pretext and courage to satisfy his curiosity to look when his self-confessed shyness would have otherwise dissuaded him. This “shyness” over his own work, particularly in the early period, may have played a role in his practice of photographing it. We will remember his hesitation over the first paintings, and the affirmation he sought from Parsons. And in spite of the conviction that impassioned Rauschenberg’s defense of the *White Paintings* in his letter to Parsons late in 1951, he was still vulnerable to uncertainty. We know that in Rauschenberg’s view, Cage’s greatest contribution to his thinking was the “permission to continue my own thoughts,” and “to trust yourself more than anybody else”—lessons he was evidently still learning with the black paintings.<sup>83</sup> Cage recalled,

Bob knocked on the door to my studio one day, and brought in a painting he had just finished. It was a new one in the black series. I think he felt my reaction to it was not sufficiently enthusiastic. I had been very enthusiastic about his work, and he may have felt I was disappointed. In any case, I suddenly realized that he was terribly upset, close to tears. He asked me if there were something wrong with the painting. Well, I gave him a good talking-to about that. I told him he simply could not be dependent on anyone’s opinion, that he could never, never look to another person for that sort of support.<sup>84</sup>

At the same time that the camera was a “shield,” it also “force[d] me to be in direct contact, intimately, unprotected, in an ambiguous outside world and therefore improve my sight.”<sup>85</sup> For Rauschenberg, improvement of sight corresponded to a heightened sensitivity to the flux of light. The camera’s ability to record that flux across a short period of time with many images is what “addicted” Rauschenberg to photographing: “The constant survey of changing light and shadows sharpens all of the

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<sup>83</sup> Rose interview, p. 34.

<sup>84</sup> Tomkins, *Off the Wall*, p. 72.

<sup>85</sup> Sayag interview.

awarenesses not only to make photographs but functions as fertilizer to promote growth and change in any artistic project.”<sup>86</sup> It should be clear now why so many photographs of the various black paintings in various states of completion are in existence. The very nature of the face they present to the camera is of changing light and shadow, whether glossy or matte, totally or only partially covered with black paint, “ragged” or smooth, geometric or torn, print visible, obscured, or “erased” by scumbling the newsprint ink with a brush dipped in soluble solution.<sup>87</sup> They are, according to what Rauschenberg needed and desired of photography, the perfect subject. Indeed, the black paintings register the contingencies of ambient lighting much more vividly than the *White Paintings*—the works usually singled out for their openness to the environment. Furthermore, the photographs functioned for him “as fertilizer to promote growth and change in any artistic project.” This statement is particularly significant when considering the number of photographs that exist of his own paintings, for it suggests that Rauschenberg’s keen pictorial sense—that is, his keen sense of what makes for a picture—was honed by looking at his work in and through photographs.

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### ***Installing paintings, combining paintings***

The resemblance of how the black paintings were staged in photographs taken at Black Mountain to the combine-paintings has been noted. Hopps refers to the “eccentric

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<sup>86</sup> Sayag interview.

<sup>87</sup> “Newspapers are generally printed with a mineral oil ink at a very fast rate—several thousand feet per minute. Because newsprint is not heated, that allows little time for the ink to air-dry. Instead, the ink is absorbed by the inner fibers of the sheet of paper and remains there a bit damp during most of the transient life of the paper—the vehicle doesn’t completely evaporate./ So when you handle the paper some of the ink can rub off onto your fingers. The amount depends on how fresh the newspaper is. Ink on the pages of books, magazines, newspaper inserts, and catalogs doesn’t smudge off, because they are usually completely dried during the print run and are printed on a different type of paper.” Steve Ritter, “What’s That Stuff? Ink,” *Chemical and Engineering News* 76, no. 46 (16 November 1998), <http://pubs.acs.org/cen/whatstuff/stuff/7646scit2.html> (accessed 1 June 2008).

composition” in what he identifies as “works in progress” photos, which corresponds to the internal “cabinet form” structure of the paintings themselves. The “architectural and furniture-like elements reminiscent of doors, windows, breakfronts, or beds” were used by Rauschenberg to “establish a human dimension.” They are also the very things that Rauschenberg would use to make his combine-paintings. In one photograph, Rauschenberg framed a black painting composed of two vertical panels such that one can see the door into the room at its left, and a ladder propped against the wall at its right [fig. 2.28]. The open door is one of the defining features of an early combine-painting, *Interview* (1955) [fig. 2.29]. Like the black painting in the photograph, *Interview* is composed of two “panels,” across which the ill-fitting cabinet door swings that, depending on its position, partially covers one’s view of the painting. A wooden ladder stands between two panels in *Winter Pool* (1959) [fig. 2.30], both propping up and bifurcating the painting. Another photograph shows an early version of the untitled vertical black painting in the close foreground, slightly out of focus, and a screen door in the far background [fig. 2.31]. The composition is nearly identical to the early combine-painting, *Pink Door* (1954) [fig. 2.32]. One panel has been stretched with screen so that one can see straight through to the wall on which it hangs.

The combine-paintings have been discussed as works that move painting off the wall and into the room for incorporating architectural elements, such as in the examples above. But Rauschenberg later felt that even these paintings were still limited: “I was frustrated because there was a restriction that something had to have an edge. I couldn’t deal with that. Architecture is just another edge. I couldn’t keep it going.”<sup>88</sup> In the series

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<sup>88</sup> Rose interview, pp. 45-46.

of installation views that Rauschenberg took of the 1953 Stable Gallery exhibition, one sees evidence of his earlier hyperawareness of the architecture of the space in how he arranged his pieces to relate to it, especially the *Elemental Sculpture*, whose tethered stones trace elegant lines from their posts [fig. 2.33].<sup>89</sup> One also becomes aware of the edges exerted by the architecture of the galleries. A wall crops the left edge of the four-panel glossy black painting in its early five-panel configuration. The placement of an *Elemental Sculpture* right at the edge of that wall, so that in the photograph it frames the bottom half of the cropped left edge of the black painting, seems to be an attempt on Rauschenberg's part to "work with" and reclaim some agency over the pre-given edge.

Another photograph shows an *Elemental Sculpture* of a low-lying wooden plank with six tethered stones set on top placed so that its right edge lines up with the bottom right corner of the seven-panel *White Painting* [fig. 2.34]. A wider shot of these two works includes a second *Elemental Sculpture*, this one made of a weather-beaten wood beam set across two shorter sections of the same type of wood, and with a large flat rock set right at the left edge of the beam [fig. 2.35]. Rauschenberg sits on top of this piece in this picture, as though it were a bench, his dark-haired head and black-suited shoulders in sharp contrast to the *White Painting* in the background. Andrew Forge has noted Rauschenberg's restrained, almost self-effacing comportment in photographs, "as though to present himself as a figure, no more—shoulders high, loosely at attention, his features

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<sup>89</sup> Rauschenberg made this series of assemblage-objects with basic, primitive-seeming material such as stones, wood and rope that he found in his Fulton Street neighborhood, which he arranged into simple yet evocative combinations. He explains to Rose that he started doing sculpture to "contradict" his working flat (i.e., paintings) for a while. See Rose interview, pp. 58-59.

expressionless but intent.”<sup>90</sup> Indeed, Rauschenberg has drawn himself into a compact ball, and stares blankly off to the right of the photographer, not meeting our gaze.

Rauschenberg is even less assuming and “figure”-like in another installation view, this one of an untitled black painting with grid forms, the two-panel *White Painting*, the same low-lying one in the other portrait and two other *Elemental Sculpture* [fig. 2.36].<sup>91</sup> He has positioned himself in the corner across which the black and white paintings face each other. His pose is of a wallflower, leaning away from the camera further into the corner, arms close to his sides, with an inert expression.<sup>92</sup> The *Elemental Sculpture* closest to him in the picture is made of repurposed wood similar to that used in bench-like one and set directly on the floor, which adds to the sense of its earthly and elemental nature.<sup>93</sup> A stone resting on the far left of the beam anchors a bicycle wheel whose spokes have been cut out, which seems to strain towards the third *Elemental Sculpture*. This third sculpture by contrast stands tall and upright at roughly human height (six feet), and is made up of pounded rusting metal that glints and goes flat in the light, like the surface of a black painting. As Rauschenberg is dressed in a dark suit and stands in a fairly rigid pose, his figure echoes that of this last sculpture.

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<sup>90</sup> Forge, *Rauschenberg*, p. 31.

<sup>91</sup> The whole sheet of newsprint that covers the entire upper left quadrant of the black painting, which was hung on a wood pillar rather than the wall, shows a few tears along the top, which exposes parts of the wood frame of the painting. Although the space directly behind the painting is in deep shadow, one can just make out the electrical wiring that runs down the wall from the ceiling. The rents in the paper reveal that it has been attached directly to the wood support. Ashton describes the black-painted paper as “fluttering on their battered surfaces.” It is possible that the fluttering was a result of the give of paper stretched in place of canvas across the frame, which would be far more responsive to any drafts. I imagine that one would also hear the crinkling of brittle, enameled paper.

<sup>92</sup> Feinstein notes the same sort of objectified treatment of the human figure in Rauschenberg’s non-portrait photographs. See *Random Order*, p. 194.

<sup>93</sup> In *Formless*, Krauss et al. assign the pure, disembodied visual field to the vertical axis, and everything to do with the body and (base) matter—carnal, animal, etc.—to the horizontal, which certainly seems to be operative in the case of Rauschenberg’s elemental sculptures. See especially pp. 90-98.

Rauschenberg seems to invite the viewer to consider him just another element in the room, in which case the photograph is no longer a portrait of the artist but rather a highly balanced formal composition animated by the “schizophrenic tension” that he spoke of—between black and white, quadrangle and circle, horizontal and vertical, square and on the bias.<sup>94</sup> The wood beams are, we realize, aligned perfectly parallel to one another. Their horizontality is counterbalanced by the verticality of the other pieces in the room: the black and white paintings, and the white post behind the black painting to the columnar sculpture that stands out in sharp relief against the white painting. The wheel forms a circular frame roughly at the center of the picture that focuses attention to what it encircles: the lower left corner of the white painting and the brick wall on which it hangs. One realizes just how accustomed the eye is to framing devices by the way it is invariably drawn to the area outlined by the wheel. Furthermore, that section of the brick wall seems to be sharper in focus than the rest of the photograph.

This passage is hardly the crux of the photographic picture, however, and the eye grows restless and pans out, returning to the focal point only to be turned away again—and this was precisely the point:

[T]here’s been a conscious attempt for me to treat any area whether I only have half an inch more before I hit the wall, or whether it’s dead center, to not treat any one area with a kind of dramatic preference. I dealt with that several ways. One is with a kind of simple minded formal idea about composition by just putting something of no consequence dead center so that when you look there, yes, there it is, but you see that certainly doesn’t matter any more than anything else; that’s not what the center is for. So that ideas of sort of relaxed symmetry have been something for years that I have been concerned with because I think that symmetry is a neutral shape as opposed to a form of design.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Rose interview, pp. 58-59.

<sup>95</sup> Seckler interview.

Rauschenberg's method was directed towards the end of making the most overdetermined and overattended areas of a picture, the edges and its center, equivalent to the rest of a picture's area or field. It seems self-evident that monochrome paintings would be a first step in this quest. These installation photographs are, I believe, the first instances where his de-privileging of the center and edges of a work take another, more complex form than a canvas of all one color, and move from one individual painting to a collection—or combination—of paintings.

## Chapter Three

### Black-and-white, or Rauschenberg's photography

We have thus far examined two principles central to Rauschenberg's developing aesthetic philosophy, which focused increasingly on neutralizing or defusing the hierarchies he understood to structure and restrict painting. In the Parsons paintings, he explored various compositional devices and techniques in laying down pigment to suspend what some would say was the inevitable opposition between figure and ground. The *White Paintings* were dramatic embodiments of flat, even surfaces wherein that opposition was precluded. Their stark simplicity, however, was met with contempt by critics, who dismissed them as no different than unpainted canvases. When thought of in such terms, one can also see how they demonstrate that a "canvas is never empty," being both the start of a painting (ie, the canvas), or the painting itself. In the *Night Blooming* series and the black paintings, Rauschenberg began incorporating what would otherwise be considered "base" material into paint: dirt and old newspapers. His aim at first was to achieve texture. As he pursued further the varied effects that could be achieved with the simple combination of black paint and newsprint, he increasingly allowed the bits of newspaper to assert their identity as such. The implication was that paint was no "better" than mass-printed text for making a painting, and that both could co-exist on the painter's palette. Furthermore, Rauschenberg kept newspaper "true to itself," working with the structure inherent to a broadsheet's layout, as well as the words and images already there



on the page, rather than taking it as just another type of paper as most other artists who were using the material did. The combine-paintings took these ideas to their logical conclusion, first moving from black-and-white newsprint to full-color reproductions—a shift that corresponded to advances in color printing technology, and then onto the use of actual objects.

As I argue in the previous chapter, the combine-paintings were not the first works in which Rauschenberg thought about the possibilities of painting coming off the wall and interacting with the room. One sees evidence that he was interested in how his paintings occupied space in the many photographs he took of the black paintings as he worked on them, as well as installation views of the 1953 Stable Gallery show in which they were first publicly exhibited. I believe Rauschenberg's paintings engaged with photography in a more dynamic, synergistic way than scholars have been able to articulate thus far. Indeed, given the extensive body of literature on Rauschenberg's work, discussions of his photography remain surprisingly scant. While Rauschenberg's engagement with photography in the early part of his career is acknowledged, it has otherwise been treated as an aside to his painting. Oblique references are made to the artist's "way of seeing" and the central role of photoreproductions in his work, or the photographs are used as documentation of works that are no longer extant, especially for the early paintings, many of which were made over into new paintings or lost. The few writers who have considered the role of photography in the development of his art in any depth, such as Hopps and Joseph, focus their analysis on formal similarities between his photographs and combine-paintings.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg: the early 1950s*, pp. 22-26 for a discussion of Rauschenberg's early involvement with photography at Black Mountain College. Joseph's recent article, "The Gap and the

The lacuna regarding Rauschenberg's photography is largely due to the fact that for many years, it remained a "hidden" practice. Even as Rauschenberg identified himself first and foremost as a painter, he continued to seriously pursue photography. When Barbara Rose asked him in 1987, "You were a photographer to begin with?" Rauschenberg corrected her by saying, "I am a photographer still." She insisted, "Weren't there a number of years where you didn't take your own photographs?"—i.e., when he exclusively used media photographs. Rauschenberg countered, "No. I only stopped taking photographs when my cameras were gone."<sup>2</sup> The exchange is telling. Rose seems unwilling to believe that Rauschenberg had remained a photographer throughout his public life as a painter. It is reasonable for her to be taken aback by this revelation since, after 1951, when a number of Rauschenberg's photographs were included in two group shows at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, there was no exhibition devoted solely to his photographic work until three decades later, in 1981.<sup>3</sup> The small number of photographs that did circulate were embedded into broader contexts, such as those included in "Random Order," a photo essay published in the first issue of the magazine *Location*, spring 1963 [figs. 3.1 and 3.2].<sup>4</sup>

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Frame," is the first systematic study of Rauschenberg's early photographs and their relationship to the combine-paintings. The exhibition catalog for *Robert Rauschenberg: photographs* includes a revealing interview with the artist conducted by Sayag. Feinstein devotes only a few paragraphs to her discussion of his early work; *Random Order*, pp. 53-55. Krauss opposes the pictorial logic of Rauschenberg's photography and "photographic" silkscreen paintings to the horizontal collage logic of the combine-paintings in "Perpetual Inventory," in Hopps and Davidson, eds., *Robert Rauschenberg, a retrospective*, pp. 206-23. I deal with this text in great detail in the following chapter. Vincent Katz includes Rauschenberg in a more general account of photography at Black Mountain College in Katz, ed., with essays by Martin Brody, Robert Creeley et al., *Black Mountain College: Experiment in Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003), pp. 168-81.

<sup>2</sup> Rose interview, p. 73.

<sup>3</sup> These early exhibitions will be discussed further in this chapter.

<sup>4</sup> Rauschenberg, "Random Order." The editors were Thomas B. Hess and Harold Rosenberg. The five-page article consists of a "cover page" (p. 27) with the title and a reproduction of a silkscreen painting, *Sundog* (1962). The next two sheets [figs. 3.1 and 3.2] are a montage of his photographs interspersed with prose.

I argue that Rauschenberg's work behind the camera enabled him to see past and through differences in medium, which is, after all, the inevitable consequence of being photographed—everything within the frame is transformed by the photographic medium into a picture. Thus Rauschenberg had a far looser, intermedial conception of “picture” that referred to anything from “original” paintings, photographs, and mass-printed imagery in an everyday context; to the view out a window, the Manhattan skyline, and “the intimidating clarity of plumbing”; and actual objects serving as images (of) themselves in the combine-paintings, as Rosalind Krauss points out in her important text, “Rauschenberg and the Materialized Image” (1974):

From the beginning Rauschenberg...treated *images* as a species of material.... In the works of the next few years [i.e., after 1954, the year he made his first combine-paintings], there is a consistent use of printed fabrics, paisleys, and embroideries, always enforcing the sense that the images of flowers, fruit, or whatever, are contained by, literally embedded in, a material substance. And consequently that images themselves, within the medium of Rauschenberg's art *are* material substances. Clearly, when the “images” are actual objects—socks, shirts, washcloths, umbrellas, street signs, and the like—the sense of identification between material objects and “images” is heightened in every way.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time that Rauschenberg's photographic practice shaped his pictorial awareness—what I term *pictoriality*, it in turn was inflected with a distinctly painterly sensibility because of his unique circumstances as the rare painter trained in and equally adept at photography.<sup>6</sup> In this chapter, the same critical period just prior to when the combine-painting as a form was crystallizing, which we examined from the point of view

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<sup>5</sup> Krauss, “Rauschenberg and the Materialized Image,” pp. 38-39.

<sup>6</sup> The reader will recall that Rauschenberg referred to this as the “internal dialectic of contradicting yourself.” As for photographers-*cum*-painters, only a few exceptions come to mind, including George Stillman, whose work I briefly touched on in the previous chapter, and, most relevant to the present study, Ben Shahn.

of the black paintings in the previous chapter, will be reconsidered from the perspective of his photographic work.

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***“Rauschenberg was a photographer before becoming a painter.”***<sup>7</sup>

Rauschenberg began studying photography his first year at Black Mountain College in 1948, and immediately took to the medium. His earliest photographs, dating to 1949 and 1950, which would have been a period of basic study, were likely taken with an eye to developing his skills in the technical aspects of photography.<sup>8</sup> They have in common a single, striking form at close range, and show Rauschenberg experimenting with different framing techniques (some more successful than others), and the articulation of forms under various lighting conditions and within a severely limited tonal range. He was particularly sensitive to the role of light in a picture, and often used it as a material, compositional element rather than as an aspect of the environment.

*Quiet House* (c 1949) [fig. 3.3] is a representative work from this period. As with many of his photographs, the image is framed tight and close up, heightening its flatness. The Quiet House at the College commemorated the death of Mark Dreier, son of one of the founding teachers, Theodore Dreier, and was a space of reflection. The spare, minimal composition echoes the withdrawn and perhaps slightly melancholic mood the House would inspire. Two chairs, which are the only objects in the photograph, allude to the activity of contemplation one may have sought in going there. It could be a

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<sup>7</sup> *Robert Rauschenberg: photographs*, unpaginated.

<sup>8</sup> Josef Albers directed the art program at the school from its inception in 1933 until 1950. He modeled the studio curriculum on the Bauhaus method of art instruction, which he had developed at the famed school of design and architecture during the 1920s. The photography studio at Black Mountain would truly blossom in the summer of 1951, when Hazel Larsen Archer was hired as the first full-time photography instructor at the college. I discuss this a little further on in the chapter.

depressing picture, were it not for the sunlight streaming in from a window high above the chairs. The shaft of light literally pierces the square composition (Rauschenberg always shot with a Rolleiflex twin-lens reflex [TLR] camera, which produces 6x6 cm square negatives) across its diagonal axis, and serves as a counterpoint to the quadrant formed by the chairs in the lower left quarter of the image.

Rauschenberg's precociousness with the camera is evident in the near-immediate recognition he received for his photographic work. The blueprint photograms have had the longest and most public life. In April 1951 *LIFE* magazine ran a two-page spread [fig. 1.24] on Rauschenberg and Weil's process of making them, which was documented in pictures. Weil had introduced him to the technique of exposing blueprint paper to create images that were light-imprinted directly onto photosensitive paper without the use of a camera in the summer after their first year at Black Mountain.<sup>9</sup> Various elements selected for their distinctive silhouette were artfully arranged on the large sheets [fig. 3.4]. A bright sun lamp was then passed over the composition. Those areas exposed to the strong light, when washed, turned blue, thus rendering the forms in reverse silhouette. The image was "built up" of successive layers or washes fused into a single, seamless image.<sup>10</sup>

The only indication of process *per se* (the "seams" that point to the coming together of a work) is the relative sharpness of certain silhouettes as compared to others, and the occasional "overlapping" or blurred edges of forms when they were shifted

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<sup>9</sup> Artists used the blueprint process because it was simple, cheap, and permanent, writes Richard Benson. He also describes the cyanotypes as showing "a straightforward, workaday approach to the medium that can be a great relief if we have spent too much time wandering the halls of proper, refined photographic art." In *The Printed Picture* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2008), p. 136. We can certainly describe Rauschenberg's approach to not only the blueprints but his entire practice as "straightforward," "workaday," and "a great relief" from "proper" art.

<sup>10</sup> Krauss identifies seamlessness as one of the key attributes of the photographic print in "Perpetual Inventory."

slightly between exposures, which indicate that the image was composed in stages.<sup>11</sup> For example, one monoprint bears three pairs of feet [fig. 3.5], all of which are identified as Rauschenberg's. He must have exposed each area of the paper separately before moving onto the next. Hopps's analogy of this technique to painting is apt, but a more accurate one enabled by current technologies is scanning. In both cases a light source advances slowly across the imaging surface. Thus the composition that lies "ahead" of the lamp can, at least in theory and not without some distortion, be re-arranged. However, because only faint images in reverse will appear in the light-exposing sequence, one has to imagine the composite result of the process. Any changes to the arrangement would therefore have been made to this imagined picture rather than in response to what was actually visible on the paper.<sup>12</sup>

Soon after the article in *LIFE*, a selection of Rauschenberg and Weil's photograms were included in the exhibition "Abstraction in Photography" at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (1 May- 4 July 1951), curated by Director of Photography Edward Steichen. Their blueprints were shown alongside photographs by some of the most prominent photographers of the day, including Ansel Adams, Harry Callahan, and Aaron Siskind, the fact of which says something about the significance and caliber of these works.<sup>13</sup> In 1952, Steichen purchased two of Rauschenberg's photographs for the museum's fledgling collection: *Interior of an Old Carriage* (1949) [fig. 3.6] and *Cy on*

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<sup>11</sup> The throw of light relative to its strength also played a factor in compositional effects. The sharpest contours and deepest blues were achieved by holding the lamp fairly close to the paper for an extended period.

<sup>12</sup> Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg: the early 1950s*, p. 25.

<sup>13</sup> Callahan and Siskind would spend the summer of 1951 at Black Mountain College as artist-instructors in residence.

*Bench* (1951) [fig. 3.7].<sup>14</sup> Steichen is reported to have declared Rauschenberg's photographs as having "the Black Mountain look," a look that was decidedly modernist.<sup>15</sup> Rauschenberg's early photographs do exhibit a modernist sense of balance in their formal relations. In these spare compositions, the subject serves primarily as a pretext for exploring pictorial space as bounded by the four edges of the square frame.

It is not surprising that Steichen chose *Interior of an Old Carriage* for the museum. Believed to have been taken in Lafayette, Louisiana, the photograph is elegant in its restraint. The dark interior of a canopied horse-drawn buggy that fills the entire frame makes for a very flat image. Rauschenberg angled the lens so that the vertical planes in the shot are perfectly flush and parallel to the surface of the picture, which emphasizes the quadrangular format. Although difficult to see in reproduction, the details of the quilted cushion are crisp and clear. One can almost feel the velvety or perhaps dusty texture of the fabric. Through the circular peephole on the back wall one can make out branches in the distant landscape silhouetted against the intense white of light that pierces both the buggy and the composition. The white circle keeps drawing one's focus away from the center of the photograph, which is literally a pitch-black emptiness. I do not think it is a coincidence that this effect corresponds to Rauschenberg's formal device for de-privileging the center by putting something of no consequence there. Furthermore, the subject of the picture is not incidental to the formal exercises—Rauschenberg could

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<sup>14</sup> Steichen was part of the group of artists associated with Alfred Stieglitz's Gallery 291 in New York, out of which came the seminal journal of photography *Camera Work* (published 1903 to 1917). They were foundational to the establishment of photography as a viable art medium in America.

<sup>15</sup> Rauschenberg in an interview with Roni Feinstein, 6 June 1983. In Feinstein, *Random Order*, p. 55. See also Katz, *Black Mountain College*, p. 169.

have taken a closer shot that cropped out the spoke wheels and passenger seat, but left these key contextual elements in the picture.<sup>16</sup>

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***The summer of photography: Black Mountain, 1951***

The sophistication of *Interior of an Old Carriage*, which was one of Rauschenberg's first photographs, suggests he had what one might say was a natural inclination for the photographic medium. We know that the summer of 1951, when he began the *White Paintings*, the *Night Blooming* paintings, and the black paintings, was a pivotal moment in Rauschenberg's development as a painter. Nineteen fifty-one was also a signal year for the college's photography program. Photography had always played a key role in art pedagogy at Black Mountain, Vincent Katz, chronicler of the institution's history, tells us. Hazel-Frieda Larsen's appointment that year as the first full-time photography instructor at the college resulted in what Katz describes as "the most significant summer for photography in the college's history."<sup>17</sup> Following the precedent at Black Mountain of inviting prominent artists to teach, Larsen lined up an impressive faculty of photographers for her department: Harry Callahan, Alfred Siegel, and Aaron Siskind; and the modernism ascribed to Black Mountain photography is largely informed by Larsen's and Siskind's work. The significance of securing their commitment to come to the college is reflected in the bulletin sent out to prospective students that year, which underscored the role of photography in the school's curriculum. So in the summer of

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<sup>16</sup> This is, we shall see, a key point of distinction between his and Siskind's photographs, to which Rauschenberg's photographic work is most often compared.

<sup>17</sup> See Katz, *Black Mountain College*, for representative works by artists-in-residence and visiting faculty. See also Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg: the early 1950s*, pp. 22-26.



1951, among this milieu, Rauschenberg not only made great strides in painting but in photography as well.

Art historians have noted the obvious formal affinities between the work of Rauschenberg and Siskind, and their mutual admiration of one another's work.<sup>18</sup>

Siskind's photographs, like Rauschenberg's, are minimalist compositions arranged in a shallow plane that emphasize the two-dimensionality of the photographic image. The two artists also shared the signature motif of close-ups of walls with tattered posters and fragments of language, which later would appear in their actual form in Rauschenberg's combine-paintings. A comparison of their pictures, however, reveals stylistic differences. Siskind was far more interested in formal relationships, striking designs in black and white, and texture as pattern, such as *New York 3* (1951) [fig. 3.8]. The image is tightly cropped, altering perception of scale and abstracting form. According to his "credo," Siskind wanted the photograph "to be an altogether new object, complete and self-contained," which was accomplished by making the depicted form unrecognizable in being removed from its usual context, "dissociated from its customary neighbors and forced into new relationships."<sup>19</sup> Siskind incorporated everyday objects only to strip them of their social meaning, a seeming reversal of his documentary practice for the New York Photo League in the thirties, which aimed to "concentrate" and empathize social meaning through an intensely engaged collaboration with his subjects.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Siskind was enthusiastic enough about both Rauschenberg's and Twombly's paintings to try and help them secure exhibitions in Chicago at a friend's gallery, driving the works there himself. See Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg: the early 1950s*, pp. 62-64 and Joseph, "The Gap and the Frame," pp. 60-70 for discussions of Siskind's influence on Rauschenberg's photographic aesthetic.

<sup>19</sup> Aaron Siskind, *Credo* (1950); reprinted in *Aaron Siskind 100* (New York: PowerHouse Books, 2003).

<sup>20</sup> See chapter one of Blair, *Harlem Document*, especially pp. 24-33. I will say more about this period of Siskind's career a little further on in the chapter.

Rauschenberg, on the contrary, rarely cropped out key contextual clues to his subject's identity from his pictures, as established in my discussion of *Interior of an Old Carriage* above. "I don't want a picture to look like something it isn't," he explained. "I want it to look like something it is."<sup>21</sup> In an untitled photograph taken in Rome [fig. 3.9], posters of the *Theatro Circo Alegria* are pictured as one would likely encounter them on the street: numerous copies of the same bill are plastered on the face of a building; one can just make out the sill of a window in the upper right corner. The printed text, though faded, remains legible, and one gets a sense of what is being advertised—precisely the sort of descriptive context that Siskind cropped out of his photos. When asked why he printed full frame, Rauschenberg replied: "I don't crop. Photography is like diamond cutting. If you miss you miss."<sup>22</sup>

Joseph has recently argued that Rauschenberg's photographic aesthetic was rather more indebted to Larsen's work. He observes throughout Rauschenberg's early negatives the compositional device of bringing a vertical element into the center of the picture, which created what Joseph describes as "a type of internal framing 'edge' visually more powerful than the actual framing edges on either side" [fig. 3.10].<sup>23</sup> This formal strategy of placing an internal framing edge at the center of a composition that detracts from the actual edges of the picture—and also de-centers the center—is significant, for we see Rauschenberg again experimenting with ways to de-privilege the edges and center of a picture. Joseph also observes that the internal framing edge has "the effect of opening up

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<sup>21</sup> Rauschenberg cited in a Whitney Museum press release, 21 December 1965. He continues to say the oft-quoted line about making pictures out of the real world: "And I think a picture is more like the real world when it's made out of the real world."

<sup>22</sup> Sayag interview.

<sup>23</sup> Joseph, "The Gap and the Frame," p. 63.

the sides of the image to an implied continuity,” which makes sense if one’s perception of, or attention to, the actual framing edges is displaced.<sup>24</sup>

Larsen, like Siskind, also severely cropped her photographs. Whereas Siskind used an enlarger to select tight views from a negative, she composed directly through the lens of the camera. She would write “Do not crop” on the back of her photographs, maintaining the integrity of the image as found, a rule that Rauschenberg also followed. Those photographs that capture motion (Joseph speculates that Larsen was particularly interested in action shots since polio had confined her to a wheelchair), because she shot them at such close range, imply continuity of space and contiguity of action. For example, Larsen just managed to capture Merce Cunningham’s body [fig. 3.11] as he leapt across her camera’s field of vision. The “before” and “after” of the shot—our awareness that the photograph is an embalmed moment along a continuum of events—are indicated by Cunningham’s head and arms, which have already left the frame, and his right foot that is about to come into view. At the same time, one feels that these parts of Cunningham’s body have been cropped out from a wider shot, and one imagines the rest of the picture, which, as we know, did not in fact exist since Larsen’s images were printed as shot.

Joseph’s research uncovered an unpublished photograph of Cunningham by Rauschenberg very similar to Larsen’s, where the dancer’s head has been severed by the edge of the picture.<sup>25</sup> It is likely that the impressionable young photographer was experimenting with his teacher’s methods, as Joseph suggests, but technical factors associated with Rauschenberg’s camera of choice may have also played a role. Although

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<sup>24</sup> Joseph, “The Gap and the Frame,” p. 63.

<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately Joseph’s article does not include a reproduction of Rauschenberg’s photograph of Cunningham.

the feature of a pop-up magnifying glass in higher-end models like Rauschenberg's beloved Rolleiflex allowed the user to track moving subjects,

It is nearly impossible to judge composition with such an arrangement, however.... Because the photographer views through one lens but takes the photograph through another, parallax error makes the photograph different from the view on the screen. This difference is negligible when the subject is far away, but is critical for nearby subjects.<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, at the heart of the discourse on the twin-lens reflex camera in the fifties was how the square format in and of itself “de-centered” the image (which Joseph attributes wholly to a formal decision on Rauschenberg's part) and made moot the issue of horizontal *versus* vertical.<sup>27</sup> Photographers with a “true” appreciation of and respect for their medium are said to have preferred the TLR for the particular challenges it posed. The compositional difficulties in negotiating a square frame are considerable, and ask of the photographer an extraordinary level of “collaboration” with the instrument to get the shot.<sup>28</sup> Rauschenberg's own fidelity to the Rollei makes perfect sense, then, given his attitude towards art as collaboration—and his cameras were arguably his closest “friends,” as he called the materials of his art: “My favorite camera was a Rollei... I had such a close relationship with my camera that I only had to look and see if the image was there.... [I]t was like an extension of my hands.”<sup>29</sup>

I draw the reader's attention to these more technical issues not to argue against Joseph (Rauschenberg's relationship with Larsen was quite clearly vital and nurturing) but to raise two points. First, “action” shots are not typical of Rauschenberg's photographs. They are more often characterized by an almost monumental stillness;

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<sup>26</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twin-lens\\_reflex\\_camera](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twin-lens_reflex_camera) (accessed 18 September 2009).

<sup>27</sup> The latter fact, we shall see in the following chapter, is even more significant in the context of the discourse that developed around Rauschenberg, which hinge on that very distinction.

<sup>28</sup> Sara Blair made this point in my defense, and I thank her for drawing my attention to the literature.

<sup>29</sup> Rose interview, p. 73.

Rauschenberg himself described the quality of his images as “a photographic still-life before the picture has been taken.”<sup>30</sup> Second, the wide availability of point-and-shoot cameras and drugstores where film could be processed, combined with the complete naturalization of the photographic idiom in our everyday environment, have led to a sense of expertise and facility with the medium. Kozloff observes, “The spectator has long been inured [since 1900] to the conventions of photography in tabloids, films and television and has come to accept them as adequate substitutes for reality.”<sup>31</sup> Albers, who had also been a photographer of great importance when at the Bauhaus, cautioned against making too much of our so-called expertise: “I suppose some of you have seen the advertisement of commercial photo dealers saying ‘You push the button and we do the rest’ .... Such a way of looking at photography, I believe, is of the lowest level possible.”<sup>32</sup> Although the assessment seems rather harsh and ungenerous, especially since it implicates the vast majority of us, Albers does have a point: ours is usually only the most rudimentary knowledge of photography.

Roland Barthes, from the outset of *Camera Lucida*, his candid and poetic excursus on the photograph, discloses the fact that he is not himself a photographer, “not even an amateur photographer: too impatient for that: I must see right away what I have produced.”<sup>33</sup> His thoughts on photography are therefore thoughts on photography as viewer and subject, and his knowledge of photography secondhand. He engages the

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<sup>30</sup> Rauschenberg, statement for the exhibition, “*Scatole e Feticci Personali*,” Galleria dell’Obelisco, Rome, 3-10 March 1953. See Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg: the early 1950s*, p. 232 for a facsimile of the galley proof.

<sup>31</sup> Kozloff, “Robert Rauschenberg,” *The Nation* (7 December 1963); reprinted in *Renderings: critical essays on a century of modern art* (London: Studio Vista, c 1968), pp. 214.

<sup>32</sup> Albers, “Photos as Photography and Photos as Art” (1943); reprinted in Achim Borchardt-Hume, ed., *Albers and Moholy-Nagy: from the Bauhaus to the new world* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 157.

<sup>33</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera lucida: reflections on photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), p. 9.

photograph intellectually rather than practically, semiotically rather than formally. In short, he is concerned with the content of experience recorded in the image—what the picture is *of*, not the picture itself, which for him is a “weightless, transparent envelope” that holds the referent (what it represents), details, or a trigger for an effect. “Whatever it grants to vision and whatever its manner, a photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see.”<sup>34</sup> It is most telling that for Barthes, deep engagement with a photograph happens only when he shuts his eyes—“to make the image speak in silence,” “to allow the detail to rise of its own accord into affective consciousness.”<sup>35</sup>

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### ***The photographer-cum-painter***

It goes without saying that the photograph is a different object for the trained photographer, and likewise a different sort of visual experience. Knowing firsthand the “inner workings” of photography would temper the romanticism and mysticism that tinge Barthes’s description. The photograph’s objectness or materiality would be more apparent, and a host of further considerations opened up. For example, the photographic process not only involves a number of subsidiary steps, across which an infinite number of various outcomes are possible, but the medium itself is comprised of many types of processes. Robert Demachy, a late nineteenth-/ early twentieth-century French photographer known for the painterly quality of his highly worked-over prints, wondered, “Which is the photographic aspect? A print on albumen is quite different from a daguerreotype and has nothing in common with a platinum print; carbon does not look

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<sup>34</sup> Barthes, *Camera lucida*, p. 6.

<sup>35</sup> Barthes, *Camera lucida*, p. 55.

like gelatin-bromide and chloride paper has a different aspect from tin-types.”<sup>36</sup> In addition to the various processes that comprise the photographic medium, there are several other variables that factor in: exposure time, focal length, pigments, papers, developing time, and the human hand.<sup>37</sup>

Rauschenberg’s interest in photography did not take a “high art” or technical bent, but he was nevertheless serious about the practice. In fact, he claimed that at this moment in 1951-52, he could have gone in either direction—painting or photography.<sup>38</sup> He ultimately went with painting because he could not conceive of the photographic project in practical terms: “My project for continuing, if I was going to be a photographer, at that time was to photograph the entire U.S.A., inch by inch,” described again to Barbara Rose as “to walk across the United States and photograph it foot by foot in actual size.”<sup>39</sup> Both the wry, deadpan humor and banality that would surely mark the resulting images of the American landscape seem to anticipate the literalism that characterized the photographic projects of a decade later, such as Edward Ruscha’s. Rauschenberg’s conception also owes, I believe, something to the social documentary background of the photographers in residence at the college while he was there—namely Siskind and Callahan.

Ben Shahn should be added to this list. Shahn was also at Black Mountain in the summer of 1951. Better known as a painter, muralist and graphic artist, he and Robert Motherwell are named as the established *painters* who joined the faculty at the college that summer. Shahn’s social realist paintings [fig. 3.12] were of an entirely different tendency than Rauschenberg’s monochromatic paintings, which is ostensibly the reason

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<sup>36</sup> Paul Hayes Tucker, “Picasso, Photography, and Cubism,” *Art Bulletin* 64, no. 2 (June 1982), p. 289.

<sup>37</sup> Tucker, “Picasso, Photography, and Cubism,” p. 289.

<sup>38</sup> Rauschenberg, quoted in Feinstein, *Random Order*, pp. 53-54.

<sup>39</sup> Feinstein, *Random Order*, pp. 53-54. Rose interview, p. 75.

why his name never comes up in the literature. Indeed, placed side by side, Rauschenberg's early paintings share more with the elemental shapes and minimal palette of black and white that distinguish Motherwell's abstract expressionist paintings, than with Shahn's representational figurative canvases. The vertical line and circle motif of *Trinity* [fig. 1.30], for example, bears a strong resemblance to what would become Motherwell's signature series, *Elegy to the Spanish Republic* [fig. 3.13].<sup>40</sup> The *Elegies* share the basic compositional structure of a white canvas divided by two or three vertical black bars and punctuated at various intervals by blots of black; in *Trinity*, the figure-ground colors are reversed.

Rauschenberg's and Shahn's photographs, on the other hand, reveal unexpected contiguities. Laura Katzman's landmark study of the relationship between Shahn's photography and painting makes the point that in the forties, a painter's use of photographs would have been perceived as "cheating," which may have factored into Shahn's decision to downplay his prolific work as a photographer.<sup>41</sup> This negative perception may have influenced Rauschenberg's own decision to do the same. There are, to be sure, major discrepancies in how they conceived of the medium of photography and how it was linked to their painting, but the affinities are just as many, and merit consideration.

No account of the term when the two artists were at Black Mountain brings them in any sort of relation. Shahn's omission is, I suspect, symptomatic of the narrow view of

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<sup>40</sup> The series was sparked by a small drawing made in 1948 to accompany a poem by Harold Rosenberg.

<sup>41</sup> Laura Katzman, "The Politics of Media," in Deborah Martin Kao, Jenna Webster et al., *Ben Shahn's New York: The Photography of Modern Times* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 98. Her contextualization of Shahn's photographic practice within his broader practice as well as the culture at large is especially helpful, pp. 97-102. She makes the point that Shahn's photographs were censored from his 1947 retrospective at MoMA—a telling indicator of the still limited audience for photography, especially in association with painting. Shahn's photographs were not exhibited until 1969, and an in-depth study of them not completed until the 1990s.



photography taken by writers when considering the place of the medium in Rauschenberg's broader practice, although more nuanced takes on the relationship have been attempted. Hopps, for example, qualifies the assumption that Rauschenberg's photographs of his own work are simply a matter of straightforward documentation. They "not only provide an important record of certain paintings in various states or of lost works, but also permit a revealing glimpse into Rauschenberg's visual universe" and are "informed by Rauschenberg's sensibility."<sup>42</sup> If we were to go solely on discussions of Rauschenberg's training in photography, especially in the pivotal summer of '51, that sensibility would come across as decidedly modernist. However, during this time, Rauschenberg's photography moved away from strictly formal concerns and began to incorporate a documentary focus, which is plain in his conceptualization of the photographic project cited above. And later he would say that he liked to take photographs of "anything uninteresting. Maybe just two doors on a wall" [fig 3.14].<sup>43</sup>

This documentary aspect of Rauschenberg's photographs has not been given any notice, presumably because they retain a modernist "look" in their balanced proportions and minimalism. I argue in the following section that the documentary slant to his photography was a result of the social documentary work through which Shahn and Siskind arrived at the mature aesthetic in evidence during their time at Black Mountain. Rauschenberg's photographs do not fit the narrow rubric of social documentary photography as defined by New Deal photographic ideology, exemplified in the iconic images of Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans, but neither did Shahn's and Siskind's photographs. To revisit the social documentary background of these photographers'

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<sup>42</sup> Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg: the early 1950s*, p. 62.

<sup>43</sup> Rauschenberg, cited in Deborah Solomon, "Questions for Robert Rauschenberg: Growing Old, Artfully," *New York Times Magazine* (15 February 2004).

practices not only serves to situate Rauschenberg within the history of American photography, but also sheds light on the roots of his own practice. It is furthermore a crucial aspect of his painterly practice: “I had everything to learn in either [photography or painting] or both, but now I find they are the same thing. My work has always been journalistic, even the most abstract paintings.”<sup>44</sup>

While Rauschenberg’s photography owes far more of its aesthetic to Siskind, especially since Shahn was at Black Mountain as a painter rather than photographer, Siskind was not a painter. Shahn, on the other hand, like Rauschenberg effectively started his artistic career as a photographer. His photographs for the Farm Security Administration (FSA) are housed in public collections, some of which have been reproduced and celebrated; photographs were the first of Rauschenberg’s work to be acquired by a major museum, and his photograms found their way into the pages of *LIFE*. Further, both downplayed their photography in favor of painting. Shahn’s and Rauschenberg’s respective practices diverge significantly, but the parallels offer a fruitful point of departure for my own consideration of the place of photography in Rauschenberg’s combine-paintings.

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### ***From documentary to post-documentary***

As a young, struggling artist, Shahn worked for the Historical Section of the Resettlement Administration/ Farm Security Administration (RA/ FSA) from 1935 to 1938 photographing the plight of the rural poor in the southern and midwestern United States [fig. 3.15]. Shahn recalled, “We tried to present the ordinary in an extraordinary

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<sup>44</sup> Sayag interview.

manner. But that's a paradox, because the only thing extraordinary about it was that it was so ordinary. Nobody had ever done it before, deliberately. Now it's called documentary."<sup>45</sup> Unlike his fellow artist-photographers of the FSA, however, he cultivated an amateur style that was in part a function of the "tiny German cameras" he favored. Their small size enabled "candid camera" work, catching his subjects unaware. Indeed, a 1936 article in Hearst's *Fortune* described them as what you used for "photograph[ing]...people when they don't know they are being photographed."<sup>46</sup> Shahn's photographs, which Katzman describes as "warm, spontaneous" and "characterized by asymmetry, compressed space, and dramatic cropping," thus offered a different view of Depression-era America from Evans's and Lange's "elegantly compassionate images."<sup>47</sup> The implication is that there was a certain edginess to Shahn's approach to the medium, which more convincingly captured the mode of viewer-subject than the aloof photographs taken by Evans and Lange.

This guerilla point-and-shoot mode of production that eventually came to define FSA images was precisely what Siskind's own insistence on documentary practice as a form of encounter resisted.<sup>48</sup> He distanced himself from the "essentially illustrative nature" and photographic politics of photojournalism, which turned life into a clichéd

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<sup>45</sup> Shahn cited by Davis Pratt, ed., *The Photographic Eye of Ben Shahn* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. x. The notion that the camera "reveals" details and forms is central to the (early) modernist understanding of photography. The New Vision Photography movement of the 1920s and 1930s promoted by Russian Constructivist and German Bauhaus artists expressly conceived of the practice in such terms, mining the depths of what Benjamin, writing contemporaneously, referred to as the optical unconscious. Benjamin deliberately borrowed the Freudian notion of the human unconscious in order to suggest that these visual phenomena were not new experiences, but rather ones that existed "beneath" and parallel to surface reality.

<sup>46</sup> Aaron Siskind, "The Drama of Objects" (1945); reprinted in Nathan Lyons, ed., *Photographers on Photography* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966), p. 96.  
in Blair, *Harlem Document*, p. 38.

<sup>47</sup> Katzman, "The Politics of Media," p. 103.

<sup>48</sup> See chapter one of Blair, *Harlem Document*, especially pp. 24-33.

spectacle; and instead focused on everyday social exchanges in which the extremes in lived circumstance were actively experienced. Siskind directed his team to go for “a growing concentration of feeling” rather than “the literal representation of a fact.” His project was grounded in a socio-anthropological approach that depended on research and direct engagement with subjects on-site—“talking, and listening, and looking, looking”—and explored the tension between mediation and documentation.<sup>49</sup> When it came down to the moment of truth, however, when one was at last ready to photograph, Siskind advised co-workers on his team “to become as passive as possible when they faced the subject, to de-energize for the moment their knowledge of the ideas about the subject, to let the facts fall away and at that crucial moment to permit the subject to speak for itself.”<sup>50</sup>

It is significant that this explanation of Siskind’s documentary practice appears in a statement not about his documentary projects but new work in 1945, which were classic examples of the sort of imagery and formalism for which Siskind became known as a modernist [fig. 3.16]. This series of what he termed “photographic still-lives” of found commonplace objects was “curiously enough,” Siskind observed, “an outgrowth of my documentary practice.”<sup>51</sup> Rauschenberg, we know, would use the same term to describe his *scatole e feticci personali*, suggesting the apparent exchangeability of photographs of objects and assemblages of objects, at least as far as he was concerned. The implications of this will be considered further in the following chapter. For the moment, it is enough to take note of how Siskind’s documentary practice is factoring into his new work. The procedures of producing the photographic document—first, the examination of the idea of the project, then visits to the scene, the casual conversations, and more formal

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<sup>49</sup> Siskind cited in Blair, *Harlem Document*, p. 24.

<sup>50</sup> Siskind, “The Drama of Objects,” p. 96.

<sup>51</sup> Siskind, “The Drama of Objects,” p. 96.

interviews, and finally arriving at a point of view for the story—was for the purpose of “clear[ing] my way for complete absorption in the problem.”<sup>52</sup> In the case of documentary photography, the “problem” was of human interest, or in Lange’s words, “man in his relation to mankind.”<sup>53</sup> With Siskind’s post-documentary work, the problem became of formal interest—in the relationships of objects.

The way Siskind parlayed his background in documentary photography into subsequent work is fairly straightforward since the project (and medium) remained photographic. It is less so with Shahn, because of the added factor of his painting. He recalled in an interview with Richard Doud that he first became interested in photography in the early thirties because he was “very interested in details.” Like Rauschenberg, Shahn felt that photography could be his career: “I was terribly excited about it and did no painting at all during that time [when he was on a three-month Resettlement Administration project to document the progress of the program].”<sup>54</sup> His sharp and witty eye for camera work earned the admiration of such figures as Evans, who described Shahn’s photographs as “pioneering”, and Clement Greenberg. Colin L. Westerbeck, Jr., has argued that the “originality” of Shahn’s photographs can be attributed to the fact that photography was secondary to his painting: “his uninvolved ego—his willingness to try anything and to fail—contributed to his great output and facility in photography.”<sup>55</sup> (Rauschenberg would concur with Westerbeck that such a “nothing to lose” attitude was incredibly productive, the opposite of crippling self-doubt.) Katzman argues after

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<sup>52</sup> Siskind, “The Drama of Objects,” p. 96.

<sup>53</sup> Dorothea Lange, “Documentary Photography” (1940), reprinted in Lyons, ed., *Photographers on Photography*, pp. 67-68.

<sup>54</sup> Ben Shahn, “Richard Doud: Interview with Ben Shahn” (1964), reprinted in Kao et al., eds., *Ben Shahn's New York: The Photography of Modern Times*, pp. 296-97.

<sup>55</sup> Katzman, “The Politics of Media,” pp. 104-05.

Westerbeck that Shahn's self-professed amateurism was a reflection of his profound ambivalence towards photography, at the same time that it lowered the stakes of his engagement with the medium, thereby giving him license to experiment: "if they turned out well, he could attribute their success to his natural talent (steady hand) or luck rather than to technical know-how or sophisticated equipment."<sup>56</sup>

Shahn remained deeply involved in photography only insofar as he was employed with the FSA; after 1938 he eventually lost interest in the medium, although he continued to use his and others' photographs in conjunction with his paintings. He evidently returned to painting because of the level of creative, authorial autonomy that he had over the results as compared to photography. "I feel that the status of painting as an art is a higher one than that of photography...because painting is able to call much more out of the artist himself, and is able to contain a fuller expression of the artist's own capacities than is photography."<sup>57</sup> It seems that the contingencies involved in getting a good photograph frustrated Shahn, and were what limited his capacity to full artistic expression: "I felt that I had more control over my painting than I did over photography. Extraneous material entered that I couldn't control in photography."<sup>58</sup>

Rauschenberg had a rather different view to Shahn's on the element of chance in getting a good shot:

You are always dealing in collaboration with the amount of light you have, the scale of objects, your own physicality—like your size and the distance between you and the ideal photo—and everything is moving. So I

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<sup>56</sup> Katzman, "The Politics of Media," pp. 104-05.

<sup>57</sup> Shahn, "In the Mail: Art vs. Camera" (1955), reprinted in Kao et al., eds., *Ben Shahn's New York: The Photography of Modern Times*, p. 315.

<sup>58</sup> Shahn, "Richard Doud: Interview with Ben Shahn," p. 305.

am more or less choked [up] when I get something that appears to be technically a good photo because it is not necessarily my intention.<sup>59</sup>

As with his paintings, Rauschenberg understood the variables determining how a picture turns out not as circumstances to master, but rather as the collaborative aspect of photography, especially since he was using a Rollei; Shahn, a self-described “lone wolf,” was not inclined to cooperation and collaboration. Rauschenberg’s notion of collaborating with photography goes against the grain of how the medium’s relation to the traditional arts is usually understood. As Benjamin observed, “If one thing typifies present-day relations between art and photography, it is the unresolved tension between the two introduced by the photography of works of art.”<sup>60</sup> That is, reproductions of works of art compromised their uniqueness and sense of origin (what he termed “aura”), which for centuries had been foundational to our conception of artistic value.

Given the fact of this longstanding antagonism, to treat painting in conjunction with photography invariably leads down the path of judging one over and against the other, which is indeed a common tendency when one is dealing with only two terms: comparison is a logical recourse. Rauschenberg, because of the unique circumstances of his artistic training, embodies a more synergistic dynamic between painting and photography. His painter’s eye was not distinct from his photographer’s eye; for Rauschenberg, they were the same manner of seeing. Shahn also confessed that it was difficult for him to distinguish between photography and painting: “Both are pictures.”<sup>61</sup> In other words, differences in medium notwithstanding, photographs and paintings both served the same pictorial function. Furthermore, his eye was so attuned to looking for

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<sup>59</sup> Sayag interview.

<sup>60</sup> Benjamin, “Little History of Photography,” p. 290.

<sup>61</sup> Pratt, ed., *The Photographic Eye of Ben Shahn*, p. vii-viii.

photographs that the pictorial sense he brought to painting was framed in the camera viewfinder: “When you spend all day walking around, looking, looking, looking through a camera viewfinder, you get an idea of what makes a good picture.”<sup>62</sup>

Neither Shahn’s nor Rauschenberg’s photographic vision translated into “merely photographic” paintings, however, a tendency that other painters making use of photographs did not always overcome. Max Kozloff, an art historian and critic whose affinity for photography led him to become a successful art photographer himself, is particularly dismissive of “photographic effects” in Andrew Wyeth’s paintings [fig. 3.17]: “those overhead views and turned backs, coquettish, accidental shadows, ‘clever’ cropping, the magnified pores of skin, the crumpled weeds, frayed curtains intimately seen and preciously empty house corners.”<sup>63</sup> Kozloff is critical of how Wyeth’s engagement with photography seemed to be limited to gimmicky appropriation of imagery.

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### ***The photograph-as-sketchpad***

Shahn claimed to have been interested in photography only as “a means of documentation” and for “mak[ing] notes for my future paintings.”<sup>64</sup> It was ultimately subordinate to painting, his primary art.<sup>65</sup> Katzman pushes the analogy of note-taking a little further to suggest that “Shahn used photography as a sketchpad for future paintings,

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<sup>62</sup> Pratt, ed., *The Photographic Eye of Ben Shahn*, p. vii-viii.

<sup>63</sup> Kozloff, “Some Contemporary American Photography,” (1967); reprinted in *Renderings*, pp. 296-97.

<sup>64</sup> Shahn, cited in Pratt, ed., *The Photographic Eye of Ben Shahn*, p. vii.

<sup>65</sup> Clement Greenberg would declare that Shahn was “more naturally a photographer than a painter, feels only black and white... It was the monocular photograph, with its sudden telescoping of planes, its abrupt leaps from solid foreground to flat distance, that in the early 1930s gave him the formula which remains responsible for most of the successful pictures he has painted since then.” In “Art,” *The Nation* (1 November 1947). Shahn considered himself a “social painter,” and Greenberg may also be suggesting that the idiom of social documentary Shahn evident in his paintings was better suited to the medium of photography. Shahn cited in Pratt, ed., *The Photographic Eye of Ben Shahn*, p. viii.



seeing the camera as an *aide-mémoire*, more efficient than the pencil for capturing movement, gestures, and details. Photographs were raw materials to him, what he called ‘documents for myself.’”<sup>66</sup> Note-taking is a very preliminary stage of any project. We can therefore presume that these observations of note that Shahn recorded by taking pictures were not motivated by a specific painting, but rather closer to “brainstorming.” From these Shahn would select (or appropriate) elements and compositional arrangements for his paintings and drawings.

The depictive nature of Shahn’s paintings determined to a large extent how photographic imagery from his “sketchbook” figured into them. Michael Podro writes, “At the core of depiction is the recognition of its subject.”<sup>67</sup> The conditions under which recognition is possible and on which it depends are: 1) our capacity to recognize the subject of the depiction even though it is not itself the subject, but a depiction of it; and 2) the intention to use the depiction (e.g., a painting, drawn sketch, or sculpture) to imagine what we recognize within it; i.e., to make a good-faith effort to imagine what is actually depicted, to let the depiction suggest its meaning.

Rauschenberg’s combine-paintings are also full of recognizable imagery that, as Andy Warhol put it, “anybody walking down Broadway could recognize in a split second—comics, picnic tables, men’s trousers, celebrities, shower curtains, refrigerators, Coke bottles—all the great modern things that the Abstract Expressionists tried so hard not to notice at all.”<sup>68</sup> Their recognizability is not a matter of depiction, however. In a combine-painting, the objects and photographic images were not translated into another medium but rather stood (in) for themselves, thus foreclosing the core condition of

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<sup>66</sup> Katzman, “The Politics of Media,” p. 103.

<sup>67</sup> Michael Podro, *Depiction* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 5.

<sup>68</sup> Warhol, *POPism*, p. 3.

difference between subject and depiction, as well as the difference between abstract and representational. *Paint Cans* (1954) [fig. 3.18], a painting made of actual cans of paint bearing signs of heavy usage set into a makeshift wood frame, is an early demonstration of this fact. Paint that dripped down the sides of the can when a brush was wiped across the rim obscures the labels entirely, though one can see that one of the “paint cans” is in fact an empty Blue Ribbon beer can (a beverage of choice in his and Johns’s studio) peeled flat and nailed to the surface. Most of the paint on the paint cans was likely “found”—i.e., there to begin with, but it is also clear that Rauschenberg liberally applied more paint after affixing them to the wooden support.

Although Rauschenberg’s photographic “notes” differed significantly from Shahn’s, Katzman’s analogy of photography-as-sketchpad is pertinent and useful nevertheless. “The photo,” Rauschenberg explained,

can insist on reviewing moments that were unseen, or not known they were seen but passed in viewing.... It’s the experience of taking the photo that keeps my mind open to unprogrammed images, uncontrolled, and then permits me to handle them rawly or allow them to be digested in a cacophony of other specifics [fig. 3.19].<sup>69</sup>

Unexpected juxtapositions surrendered themselves in the darkroom, the fleeting relationship serendipitously caught within the frame of the camera’s viewfinder and preserved in a photo. This understanding of the photograph as a collage of elements that happened to be in the frame when it was taken is, I argue, central to the combine-paintings’ pictorial logic.

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<sup>69</sup> Sayag interview.

### *The collage condition of photography*

Gertrude Stein suggests in her memoir of Picasso that he, not unlike Rauschenberg, understood photography as a kind of collage:

I was very much struck at this period when cubism was a little more developed [1911-13] with the way Picasso could put objects together and make a photograph of them. I have kept one of them and by the force of his vision, it was not necessary that he paint the picture. To have brought the objects together already changed them into other things, not to another picture, but to something else, to things as Picasso saw them.<sup>70</sup>

Indeed, it is significant that photography was instrumental to the “invention” of cubist language, as Paul Tucker argues, and by extension modernist collage. The landscape paintings that Picasso executed in the summer of 1909 at Horta de San Juan are widely credited as the beginnings of cubism because they are distinct from what Picasso had been doing before, and because a nascent cubist pictorial language is evident [fig. 3.20]. Tucker argues that the spatial relationships inconsistent with one-point perspective and the arbitrary distribution of light and shadow in the Horta de San Juan paintings were accomplished with the aid of photographs. Picasso was at this time, Tucker writes,

concerned with what might be termed a graphic mode of expression, since it was through graphic means—pen and ink drawings, prints, and perhaps photography—that he worked out these relationships and achieved this reconciliation [of the solidity of the cubic, block-like buildings with the picture plane].<sup>71</sup>

By “graphic means” Tucker refers to the intermediality that characterized cubist work between 1909 and 1914, especially the period of “synthetic cubism” in 1912-14, so-called because manufactured (“synthetic”) materials replaced the more traditional oil paint of “analytic cubism” (1909-12).

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<sup>70</sup> Gertrude Stein, *Picasso*, p. 18; cited in Tucker, “Picasso, Photography, and Cubism,” p. 297.

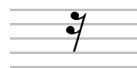
<sup>71</sup> Tucker, “Picasso, Photography, and Cubism,” p. 289.

Collage deliberately confuses the boundary between what is depicted, and what simply is. Returning to Podro, he maintains a distinction between the way we look at a picture from how we look at other things, although he suggests that the most successful picture exploits that very tension between the subject/ image and the (material) surface that conveys it. A collage pushes this tension even further by conflating image and material, bits of things standing in for themselves next to drawings (usually very schematic) of things and depictions made of material such as newspapers whose previous identity gets in the way of easy and total recognition of the subject. Picasso's and Braque's *papiers-collés* [paper collages] of 1912 and 1913 are classic examples of this type of play between real and represented.

Picasso's collage *Bottle, Glass and Violin* of December 1912 [fig. 3.21] brings together a minimum number of material elements—four pieces cut out from newspaper, two of which bear charcoal drawings, a section of faux-wood wallpaper, and a rectangle cut from what may be plain brown paper wrapping; all of these laid on a sheet of white sketch paper and connected by penciled lines in a way that nevertheless manages to convey the general subject of a bottle, glass and violin, although not without some ambiguity. On the far left, a bottle shape has been cut out from a sheet of newsprint that has been rotated counterclockwise ninety degrees so that the text reads from bottom to top, rather than left to right. It is topped by a drawn inverted isosceles trapezoid, which, in this context, must surely be a cork. A black-bordered advertisement for “offers of interest” hits where the label of a wine bottle might be; the right/ bottom line has been cut off so that the effect is of the label curving around the bottle and out of sight. “Roundness” is further suggested by the hook-shaped incision that begins where the neck

meets the body of the bottle, the white paper visible through that cutout corresponding to light glinting off glass, and also accounting for the asymmetry of the bottle.

The rectangular bit that juts out from the neck, also articulated by the top edge of that same hook-shaped cut, gives the appearance of a siphon. To its right lies a newspaper, which is here represented by the French word for newspaper [*journal*] cut from the banner and pasted across the long side of a rectangle. Next to the paper rests a glass, drawn in an almost contrived abstract manner onto a roughly cut piece of newspaper. The top of the glass, represented with just a circle, intersects with a cartoon of a boat at sea, a play on the liquid contents that usually fill a glass; the caption reads: *Comment on pose une ligne d' [???] [???] de fond.* Finally, furthest to the right, lies a violin drawn in the same abstract, linear style as the glass. The shapely curve of the instrument is barely hinted at by the faux-wood wallpaper cut into the shape of the letter “B” on the right, a semicircle on the left. The sound holes take the shape of an “f” on the left, which is also the notation for *forte*, and an “f” turned around on the right, which could be a loose interpretation of a treble clef or a sixteenth rest.



Similarly, the five lines that could be both the bridge for the four strings or the strings themselves also read as the five bars of a musical composition.

The literal and drawn elements work in tandem to represent a recognizable form, and, further, Picasso selected material that shared assonances with the object it was used to depict; eg, faux-wood for a wooden instrument. However, because the material is pictorial in nature—text, sketch, pattern, one could argue after Podro that the type of looking invited by the collage is the same, regardless of whether the image is hand-drawn

or readymade. This sort of indiscriminate use and clever intermixing of materials is perhaps Picasso's and Braque's most enduring contribution to the direction of modern art and painting. Tucker claims their apparent disregard for any sense of propriety governing a work of art's "medium" during this later phase of cubism had its genesis in Picasso's early engagement with the photographic medium at Horta de San Juan. As is evident from the letters that Tucker brings to light and serve as the crux of his argument, Picasso was photographing the countryside as he painted it. Accordingly, Tucker suggests that the pictures may have functioned, in his own words, as "intermediaries" to Picasso's experiments that summer with new formal relationships in pictorial space. That is to say, Picasso used the camera's eye and the peculiar spatial and tonal anomalies rendered visible by it to countervail his "painter's vision," conditioned as it was by his formal training as a painter.

Rauschenberg alludes to a similar de-conditioning of familiar ways of looking when he claims that "taking the photo...keeps my mind open to unprogrammed images, uncontrolled, and then permits me to handle them rawly or allow them to be digested in a cacophony of other specifics" [fig. 3.22]. That is not to say he snapped pictures without composing them. On the contrary, in seeming contradistinction to his messy and ostensibly disordered paintings, it is evident that Rauschenberg's photographs were meticulously composed and framed. He is referring, rather, to the semi-blindness built into photography in spite of all of the claims made for the objectivity of the camera's gaze. Until the widespread commercial availability of instant film with the Polaroid camera, one could not know the precise design seen by the lens until the negative was printed. Granted, having taken the picture, one would have a pretty good idea what it

looked like from memory. However, the photograph condenses information from the flux of real time—details fixed, movement stilled, sounds silenced—and makes it available to one’s awareness in a way that is impossible “in the moment.” Rauschenberg delighted in the odd way that a photo could “remind” him of a scene that he didn’t know he had seen or intended.

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### ***Vernacular traditions***

Shahn took a similar pleasure in “discovering” the shot he had managed to capture on film:

Sometimes I got things that I never dreamed I’d get. There was one photograph that I’m very proud of [fig. 3.15: *Untitled (Child of Fortuna Family, Hammond, Louisiana)* (October 1935)]. It’s been reproduced a lot. There is a little girl, sort of very meager looking tragic eyes, and she was walking through the hallway of her home and there was a huge reproduction of Raphael’s Holy Mother [fig. 3.23]. I held the camera in hand for about ten seconds, and I got it.<sup>72</sup>

The photographs of the Fortuna family are significant not only as examples of the originality of Shahn’s camera work. They also give us a glimpse into the vernacular traditions that may have informed Rauschenberg’s collage aesthetic. Hammond, Louisiana lies at the edge of the gulf and, like nearby Port Arthur, where Rauschenberg grew up, can fairly be called a backwater town. Judging by pictures from his childhood, Rauschenberg’s family wasn’t as abjectly poor as those photographed for the FSA. It is plausible, however, that Rauschenberg first encountered art through reproductions, in a situation like the Raphael Madonna hung on the outside wall of the Fortunas’ home:

The only painting I knew (and I didn’t know it was “a painting” until much later) was [George Frederick Watts’s] *Hope* [1886]—the woman

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<sup>72</sup> Richard Doud, “Interview with Shahn” (1964), reprinted in Kao et al., eds., *Ben Shahn's New York*, p. 299.

sitting on a globe with her head in one of those bandage-nooses and I think a lyre? and the water lapping around her? that green you only get in reproductions! [fig. 3.24]

I think that negates the idea of a painter's relation to official—old master—art.... *Hope* was just sort of a thing there, not art.<sup>73</sup>

In other words, *Hope* was a picture like any other, undistinguished as art. Shahn also photographed Mrs. Trische of Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana [fig. 3.25] in front of a devotional shrine prominently displaying two framed likenesses of the Virgin set on delicate lace squares on her mantel. Hanging reproductions of art and objects on the wall, both for devotion and decoration, is shown to be a common practice, not only in Shahn's photographs, but in others taken by FSA documentarians.

Rauschenberg carried on the tradition in his studio, assembling a “museum-type thing” of art and objects [fig. 3.26], including

Etruscan votives; a saint's decayed tooth in a frame that looks as though it was hammered out of a license-plate; I used to have two ostrich eggs but I gave one away; an Egyptian Osiris; a faïence sheep: bright blue. I have a prehistoric pot—just a container—it looks like it was made out of chewing gum.<sup>74</sup>

Scholars have pointed to the parallel between the random grouping of objects and casual manner of display, and the “cabinet” form of the combine-paintings. Framed “pictures,” whether found drawings or bits of things that become a picture by virtue of being placed in a frame, are another stock element in Rauschenberg's early combine-paintings [fig. 3.27]. As Hopps discovered in conversation with Rauschenberg, the artist showed an early predilection for making such “collection walls”:

As a crucial part of his early childhood, Rauschenberg built a small sanctuary within a shared room by using crates and planks to create a

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<sup>73</sup> Thomas B. Hess et al., “Is today's artist with or against the past?”, *ARTnews* (summer 1958), pp. 26-29, 42-46, 54-58. Watts painted two versions of *Hope*. The original is in a private collection; another version was painted as a replica and presented to the Tate Collection of British Art in 1897.

<sup>74</sup> J[ames]. S[chuyler]., “Is today's artist with or against the past?”, p. 46.



dividing wall for privacy. In the resulting compartments, he collected and arranged a great miscellany of things that were meaningful to him, obsessively adding jars and boxes and all sorts of found specimens such as rocks, plants, insects and small animals. Using magazines or any printed matter, he drew, traced, copied, cut out, pinned up, and glued together images. In so doing, he in effect utilized most of the basic techniques found in his art to come.<sup>75</sup>

Shahn's photographs suggest that Rauschenberg may have resourcefully and imaginatively expanded on a practice already familiar from his home environment, which was internalized and re-emerged as the physical and aesthetic form and complex juxtapositions characteristic of his art.

The co-mingling of representations with the real in the lived environment evidently fascinated Shahn. A number of his photographs picture signs that exist in an uncanny and ambiguous relationship, not only with the landscape in which it is set, but the photograph itself. The photographic idiom often employed by sign painters as well as distortions to scale heighten the sense that a sign has been collaged onto the surface of the photograph, such as a picture Shahn took of a painted advert for Oertels '92 lager beer on Route 40 in central Ohio [fig. 3.28]. The sign, in the shape of a bottle and the height of a man, was affixed to a telephone pole. The style in which the depiction was rendered flirts between the mimetic and the commercial-graphic, and because the sign was painted to the very edge of its (likely wood) support and photographed head-on, the bottle's flatness seems at odds with the rest of the landscape, which converges on a point to the left.

While the photograph unifies three-dimensional objects at various points in space and depth of field onto a single, seamless plane, the already-flat sign doesn't assimilate with its surroundings, paradoxically seeming to "stick out" from the photograph.

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<sup>75</sup> Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg: the early 1950s*, p. 14. Andrea Dewees in my writing group also made the point that the inclination exhibited by Rauschenberg for compartmentalizing objects and organizing space is a developmental stage in childhood.

A novel publicity display for the day's headlines employed by an area newspaper on Main Street in Lancaster, Ohio [fig. 3.29] also caught Shahn's eye. Rather than a typical notice board, the one in Shahn's photograph is cut in the shape and size of a young boy. The amalgamation of three different medial registers grabs one's attention: photography, hand-painted graphic illustration and the real. A photograph of a boy's smiling face with newsboy cap askew has been pasted onto his body, which is done in the style of commercial illustration. He holds in his left hand a newspaper drawn in the same stylized idiom as his body. With his right he "holds up" the real *Columbus Citizen* by way of a thin metal rod that has been rigged to the stand into which a paper can be slotted. A speech bubble comes from the boy's mouth, reminding passersby: "Don't forget your CITIZEN!" Shahn was no doubt struck by the clever way that the newspaper had been staged. More to the point, the idea of mixing media—of putting real objects with photos of objects and depictions—was already out there in the (commercial) world as an effective eye-catching strategy.

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We will recall that Hopps describes photography as "a device for Rauschenberg's melding of imagery,... a vital means for Rauschenberg's aesthetic investigation of how humans perceive, select, and combine visual information."<sup>76</sup> In the following chapter, I will elaborate on the combinative function of photography that Hopps alludes to in his discussion, which I reframe as the collage condition of photography. The analogy of photography to collage is not in itself new. As we saw above, Stein believed Picasso was already thinking along these lines when he photographed objects that he had brought

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<sup>76</sup> Hopps, "Introduction: Rauschenberg's Art of Fusion," in *Robert Rauschenberg, a retrospective*, p. 26.

together, not as the basis for a painted composition but as the composition itself. However, the connection between the collage condition of photography and the collage condition of Rauschenberg's combine-paintings has not been made because each medium—photography, (combine-) painting, and collage—has been discussed as a distinct field of activity. Any overlap is figured as an encroachment on painting, which is by far the privileged and normative term: collage “challenges” painting, a photograph is a more faithful representation of (material) reality than painting, etc.

The situation is further complicated in the particular context of Rauschenberg's oeuvre because the collage condition (or horizontal orientation) of his combine-paintings is set in opposition to the photographic (vertical) condition of his silkscreen paintings, as we shall see. In other words, when it comes to Rauschenberg's paintings, collage and photography are antithetical and mutually exclusive. Thus it is crucial to recover the broader connotation of collage represented in Rauschenberg's choice of the generic verb “combine” to describe his method of painting. As Martin Duberman notes, the notion of combination was central to Albers's teaching, and thus central to art instruction at Black Mountain during the years of Rauschenberg's residency:

Albers didn't merely emphasize how one surface differed from another...but how surfaces correspond and can be combined. 'Combination' became one of the key words in the art lexicon at Black Mountain, and Albers felt that this Dadaist playing with surfaces was for some of his students—and especially for Robert Rauschenberg—the most exciting and durable feature of their Black Mountain experience.<sup>77</sup>

Evidence of this fact would not appear in Rauschenberg's work until after that crucial summer of 1951, when he left Black Mountain and started on a journey that would take him back to Europe for a second time, and further afield to North Africa. Though the

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<sup>77</sup> Duberman, *Black Mountain*, p. 68.

college was a place of incredible creative and personal growth, Rauschenberg has also alluded to feeling limited by its culture and aesthetic politics. It is not surprising, then, that Rauschenberg's art assumed a bolder, more idiosyncratic look once he left the avant-garde enclave. A reconsideration of the work Rauschenberg made during the nine months he was away in Europe and North Africa provides the final piece to the complex interplay of photography and painting that this chapter has been developing.

## Chapter Four

### “Everything gets into the picture”

As we saw in the second chapter, Rauschenberg often photographed his own paintings in the early period of his career. He spoke of taking photographs “as fertilizer to promote growth and change in any artistic project,” and so we can reasonably assume he derived great benefit from seeing his own works through the camera’s eye. The practice is especially notable with regards to the black paintings, which I argued was a response to the uniquely variable surface they presented to the camera because of their integral relation to light. He continued to consistently photograph his paintings through the brief transitional period of the predominantly red paintings from November 1953 to September of the following year, in particular *Yoicks* (1954) [fig. 4.1], which some consider to be proto-combine-paintings. Late in 1954, Rauschenberg made the first “true” combine-paintings, which to this day remain canonical works from the series: the untitled piece familiarly known as *Man with White Shoes* (1954), *Charlene* (1955), *Interview* (1955), *Odalisk* (1955/ 58) and *Monogram* (1955-59). The importance of this group of combine-paintings to Rauschenberg is further supported by the fact that he kept them with him in the studio and posed with them for press photos [fig. 1.16].

In this chapter I argue that the convergence of the collage method and the disposable nature of the materials used made the combine-paintings a highly flexible and provisional type of painting, one that could easily accommodate changes after having

existed for a period of time as a “finished” work. Rauschenberg took full advantage of this provisionality in different ways, sometimes treating the component panels of a combine-painting like modular pieces that he would rearrange and recombine, and at others recycling a panel altogether for a new painting [figs. 1.37, 1.38, 4.2-4.4].<sup>1</sup> A combine-painting’s very form therefore embodied the always-possible potential to be altered, changing the very terms by which painting was understood. A combine-painting was “finished” only insofar as it remained in that particular configuration, which could easily thereafter be changed, so long as it remained at hand in the studio. The impermanence of such a painting represented a marked departure from the conventional understanding of the medium, whose value had heretofore depended on the artist’s assurance that the work was finished, the vision realized, and the painting preserved in that state.

As such, photographs of the early combine-paintings did not simply document the process, which implies that the works pictured are shown moving from start to finish, an idea that Rauschenberg dismissed as a romantic notion of the artist:

[The Action] Painters showed that making a painting wasn’t a logical process of will gradually moving toward an ideal conclusion. An artist throws his arms around and is many times fairly uncomfortable; and he is forced to admit that he tries many things which he isn’t sure he can do....

It is physical, the whole activity; you don’t begin with some divine image—to say you do is part of the popular illusion built around art. When you finish a picture and people like it they say, “It’s just perfect,” or, “It couldn’t be any different,” or, “That’s the way a real artist sees it.” I think

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to the panels from the original *White Paintings* that became combine-paintings discussed in chapter one (*Trophy II (for Teeny and Marcel Duchamp)* [fig. 1.38] and the second state of *Monogram* [fig. 1.37], see p. 72) and the two early Parsons paintings made over into black paintings discussed in chapter two (see “Black as Negation,” pp. 99-104), other known cases include: *K24976S* (1956), made from the original four-panel *White Painting* [fig. 4.2]; *Rhyme* (1956), which formerly existed as the back panel for the first state of *Monogram* (c 1955) [fig. 4.3]; and several small combine-paintings such as *Opportunity #7* (1956) and the untitled painting with shirt cuff (1957) that Rauschenberg made by cutting out sections from a larger “unsuccessful” work [fig. 4.4]. Regarding the last set, see Joseph, “The Gap and the Frame,” pp. 66-70.

that's a lot of bull because it could, it obviously could, be some other way. By the time it starts drying, it doesn't look the same as when it's still wet.<sup>2</sup>

Rather, Rauschenberg photographed his paintings, I argue, for the same reasons that one prints a hard copy of a text when it is nearly complete: to assess and gauge the work; to serve as a snapshot of the work at a particular moment; and to have a more concrete, tangible form in hand to edit. Of the same token, these five combine-paintings were ongoing “thought-pieces.” The larger body of combine-paintings was constituted by more sustained studies of specific issues identified in these five prototypes, such as the question of how to incorporate a taxidermied animal or a working light fixture into a painting. Thus the combination of these five combine-paintings and photographs of them constitute Rauschenberg's “sketchbook” for thinking about the series. I term this consciousness of being-a-picture, or, the visual dimension of an artwork, whether freestanding or against a wall, in the flesh or in a photograph, as *pictoriality*.

I base my term on Barthes's discussion in *Camera Lucida* of knowing—sensing—when he was being photographed: “Now, once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of ‘posing,’ I instantaneously make another body for myself, *I transform myself in advance into an image*.”<sup>3</sup> What Barthes is speaking of is the moment when he realizes that his picture is going to be taken and becomes self-conscious of how that picture of him might look. Barthes describes this self-consciousness aptly (and viscerally) as somehow wanting to “work upon my skin from within,” to touch himself up in advance of the picture, to airbrush his imagined image before the resounding click commits it to paper. (He would likely have appreciated the digital age, when one can take any number of shots and preview them all before

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<sup>2</sup> Rauschenberg, cited in Swenson, “Rauschenberg Paints a Picture,” p. 66.

<sup>3</sup> Barthes, *Camera lucida*, p. 10, emphasis mine.

saving the best one.)

Krauss, in “Perpetual Inventory,” works towards a definition of pictoriality in considering the shift from Rauschenberg’s combine-paintings to printmaking in 1962. She frames the transition, which “replac[ed] the collage condition of the Combines with the seamlessness of the photographic print,” as nothing less than a revolution.<sup>4</sup> The implication is that the definitively flat silkscreen paintings are a totally new species of painting, not only in material terms, but conceptually as well. Krauss labels this new conception of painting “photographic.” She explains further: “This was a shift to photography not only as the image bank on which his pictorial practice would then rely...but as a new conception of the pictorial itself.”<sup>5</sup> That is, Krauss argues that the silkscreen paintings, in their use of the photographic image, are fundamentally pictorial in logic, which is to say that, “whether stored within the imaginary spaces of our dreams or observed in the external world, images are vertically oriented, with heads at the top, feet at the bottom.”<sup>6</sup> For Krauss, vertical orientation is the defining feature of pictorial logic, and, by extension, silkscreen-painting. Since this image logic of photographic painting supersedes the combine-paintings’ collage condition, it follows that “collage logic” is precluded from the vertical axis, and can only be horizontally oriented [fig. 4.5]. To insist on the combine-paintings’ horizontality goes against what Rauschenberg himself has always claimed for them—that they were paintings, and their place, on the wall.<sup>7</sup> In order

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<sup>4</sup> Krauss, “Perpetual Inventory,” p. 211.

<sup>5</sup> Krauss, “Perpetual Inventory,” p. 211.

<sup>6</sup> Krauss, “Perpetual Inventory,” p. 216.

<sup>7</sup> I will distinguish between combine-paintings and combines, although there has been considerable slippage between the two from the outset. Alloway emphasizes the second half of “combine-painting” in his text for Rauschenberg’s retrospective at the Smithsonian: “Rauschenberg coined the term *combine-painting* (my italics) for his work.... There are pieces, like *Summer Rental* (1960), say, that are absolutely paintings as everybody uses the term, but what about those with the attachments and appendages? Bulky as these objects may get, they do not as a rule disrupt the continuity of a prevailing flat plane somewhere in



to understand the stakes of Krauss's claim—why she would pursue the strict opposition between vertical and horizontal, photography and combine-painting—we must revisit Steinberg's seminal essay "Other Criteria" (1972), to which Krauss's own construction of the silkscreen-paintings' vertical orientation responds.

"Other Criteria" remains one of the most insightful considerations of this phase of the artist's work, and is authoritative as a result: one cannot talk about Rauschenberg's contributions to the history of art without making reference to the ideas set forth in this article. In the course of being referenced over and over again, and often through secondary citations rather than from the original text, Steinberg's wide-ranging discussion has been reduced to two buzzwords: 1) the *flatbed* or work-surface *picture plane*, which he uses to describe the characteristic painting of the sixties, and 2) the flatbed picture's *post-Modernity*.<sup>8</sup>

Steinberg's alternative conception of (postmodern) painting as the flatbed picture has established the critical commonplace that the combine-paintings are horizontal in orientation, which is a gross oversimplification of what he meant by the term. While his discussion does acknowledge the fact that the combine-paintings were ultimately exhibited on a wall, he maintains that their "logic" is nevertheless horizontal. What was

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the work. They are usually defined with reference to a volatile but persistent surface." He goes on to discuss combine-paintings as objects that are also paintings; ie, the objectness of painting. I will reserve the term "combine" for free-standing works such as *Odalisk* (1955/ 58), although I will argue that they nevertheless orient themselves to the wall, rather than space. As Alloway put it, Rauschenberg was "perpetually resourceful [in] gaging [*sic*]...the ways in which the combine-paintings join wall and floor." See "Rauschenberg's Development," *Robert Rauschenberg*, exh. cat. (Washington, D.C.: National Collection of Fine Arts, Smithsonian Institution, 1976), pp. 3-23. While Rauschenberg does engage the space of the room to a certain degree, it is not in the sculptural or architectural sense. He was concerned with the more circumscribed space of painting, not only the wall on which it hung and the actual physical space it occupied, but the area around a painting where the viewer stands to look at the work. Rauschenberg has remarked, "By the time you stretch the canvas you are out in the room." His was a multifaceted understanding of how one made and looked at a painting, at once very direct, physical and embodied; and mediated by technologies of reproduction.

<sup>8</sup> See chapter one, "From neo-dada to the neo-avant-garde," where I discuss the conflation of Steinberg's use of the term and postmodernism.

at stake in reorienting painting from the vertical to the horizontal axis had everything to do with the particular preoccupations of Steinberg's (art) historical moment. In the discussion that follows, I show how Rauschenberg's combine-paintings were made to do heavy lifting for counter-modernist and, more to the point, counter-Greenbergian discourse. This single-minded polemic has detracted from consideration of other aspects of the combine-paintings, which I will elaborate in the second part of the chapter. I argue that to foreclose verticality robs the combine-paintings of a vital dimension: how they function as pictures.

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### *The flat picture plane*

At the heart of the debate lies the *picture plane*. The notion of the picture plane was a hot button issue in the New York art world during the sixties, one that even the self-professed poorly-read Rauschenberg would have known. The general notion of the picture plane as the flat surface of painting “behind” or “under” which the picture was contained had been bandied about in art theory and criticism for some time, arising out of Alberti's famous metaphor for painting as a transparent window [fig. 4.6].<sup>9</sup> According to Greenberg's theory of painting, most clearly and explicitly defined in “Modernist Painting” (1961), all pictorial art (read: painting) shares the flat picture plane, which no other art can claim. Thus flatness is the constitutive condition of painting, and to which

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<sup>9</sup> Leon Battista Alberti wrote *On Painting [De Pictura]* (1435), the first textbook for painters to address the construction of pictorial space using geometrical perspective, the principal means for generating a convincing appearance of three-dimensional reality on the two-dimensional picture surface that was the cornerstone of the Renaissance tradition. For a fascinating account of the intellectual climate that gave rise to the treatise, and its circulation and reception (not always favorable) among artists, see Michael Baxandall, *Giotto and the orators: humanist observers of painting in Italy and the discovery of pictorial composition, 1350-1450* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971) and Frances Ames-Lewis, *The Intellectual Life of the Early Renaissance Artist* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000).

painting must orient itself in order to be defined as such.<sup>10</sup> The flat picture plane is in turn oriented to the vertical, in correspondence with the upright human posture, or a window—hence the metaphor.

In Greenberg's view, the difference between Old Master painting and Modernist painting is a matter of how the picture plane operates in relation to the image or illusion. "The Old Masters," writes Greenberg, "had sensed that it was necessary to preserve what is called the integrity of the picture plane."<sup>11</sup> Perhaps counterintuitively, to preserve the picture plane's integrity was to give the impression that it wasn't there, to suppress the fact that the painting was composed on a flat surface, and rather play up the vivid illusion of looking through a window frame onto a three-dimensional worldspace that lies on the other side of the wall. The Modernists, on the other hand, reverse the terms: "One is made aware of the flatness of their pictures before, instead of after, being made aware of what the flatness contains."<sup>12</sup>

Édouard Manet's *Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (1883) [fig. 4.7] is a witty (and highly art historically literate) demonstration of this reversal. The vast majority of the image is a reflection in a gilt framed mirror whose reflective surface of glass is signified by resolutely opaque smudges of blue. A pretty bar maid who, judging by her blank expression, has already worked a long day even as the crowd at the *Folies-Bergère* is at its peak, faces the viewer head-on from the shallow space between the bar counter and the mirrored wall behind her. Over her left shoulder we see that she is in fact engaged in

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<sup>10</sup> The article appeared first in 1960 as a pamphlet in a series published by the Voice of America. It had been broadcast over that agency's radio in the spring of the same year. The following year it was printed unrevised in *Arts Yearbook* 4. The influence of "Modernist Painting" cannot be overstated, defining what it means to be a canonical text in the history of modern art. The page numbers of subsequent citations, unless otherwise noted, correspond to the essay as reprinted in O'Brian, ed., vol. 4, pp. 85-93; editor's note continues onto p. 94.

<sup>11</sup> Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in O'Brian, ed., vol. 4, p. 87.

<sup>12</sup> Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in O'Brian, ed., vol. 4, p. 87.

conversation with a top-hatted gentleman on the other side of the bar, whose position is also the viewer's. Manet's painting is a window that, rather than opening onto the cavernous space of the dance hall, thrusts the viewer back out into real space by virtue of the flat reflected image that blocks such an imagined foray into the world pictured, forcing her to occupy the role Manet effectively painted her into. Greenberg understands this (Modernist) manner of foregrounding the flat surface of painting as the self-preserving project of demonstrating the area of competence exclusive to painting, which could only be achieved by doing away with the illusionism inherent to a background.

John O'Brian, editor of Greenberg's collected essays and criticism, makes the important point that the much-maligned critic's account of how modernism works struck a chord with the contemporary public, as evidenced by the breadth of interest in the essay.<sup>13</sup> Greenberg's explanation of modern art's development was so compelling for the elegance of the teleology proposed—the first time, really, that contemporary developments in American art were placed in a larger historical context. Modernism also gave a clear meaning to abstract painting for a lay audience that was as yet unconvinced that abstract art wasn't a hoax: to rid itself of what was inessential to the medium.<sup>14</sup>

The cornerstone of "Modernist Painting"—the ineluctable flatness of the picture plane—became the contested term in discussions of contemporary painting, and the target

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<sup>13</sup> When "Modernist Painting" was broadcast, Voice of America was reaching between thirty and fifty million listeners each day in Europe, the Soviet Union, the Middle East, Africa, South Asia, the Far East and Latin America. A few years later, John Ashbery, a renowned New York School poet whose influence extended into the visual arts through his art criticism, wrote to Greenberg requesting to publish the article in *Art and Literature*, an esoteric specialist journal with a few hundred readers. It cannot have been commonplace, notes O'Brian, for the same piece of critical writing to be solicited by both the Voice of America and a poet with Ashbery's aesthetic politics. O'Brian, ed., introduction to vol. 3, pp. xv-xvi.

<sup>14</sup> Greenberg admits that he "had to simplify and exaggerate," focusing on "abstract" and "near-abstract" painting in order to corroborate this account of modernist painting. That is, for the purposes of making his theory of modernist painting work, modernist painting and abstract painting are one and the same. See "Sculpture in Our Time," in O'Brian, ed., vol. 4, p. 59.

of critical backlash. The faddishness of the term is evident in Gene Swenson's confession in 1966, "It is hard for me to muster more than boredom in greeting that humorously ubiquitous subject the picture plane."<sup>15</sup> The title of Swenson's show at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia (27 January-7 March 1966), "The *Other* Tradition," quite clearly takes on Greenberg's modernist tradition. "Other Criteria" plays the same game, and Steinberg's text and the concept of the flatbed picture plane that it advances must be understood in this context, where flatness is the operative (or inoperative, depending on where your sympathies lay) word.

Steinberg's line of attack is to reveal the cracks in the foundation of Greenberg's Modernism, which is defined in opposition to the Old Masters. "If that opposition becomes unstable, Modernism may have to be redefined—by other criteria."<sup>16</sup> The instability Steinberg points to is the arbitrariness of Greenberg's conceptualization of the picture plane that presumes a fixed order in which illusion and flatness are perceived: illusion first in an Old Master, flatness first in a Modern. "But what if he [the viewer] doesn't?... Does an Old Master painting forego its Old Master status if it is seen in primary flatness and only secondly as a vivid illusion?"<sup>17</sup> The very tension between actual flat surface and perceived pictorial space, the picture as a flat object and the depicted subject, paint as a material and the image it conjures—is precisely the delight of painters and viewers alike, the irresolvability of which has sustained the whole enterprise.<sup>18</sup> For what is "pictorial flatness" anyway, Steinberg asks rhetorically.

Obviously it does not refer to the zero curvature of the physical plane—a cat walking over a picture by Tiepolo [fig. 4.8] and Barnett Newman [fig.

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<sup>15</sup> G[ene]. R. Swenson, *The Other Tradition* (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1968), p. 14.

<sup>16</sup> Steinberg, "Other Criteria," p. 68.

<sup>17</sup> Steinberg, "Other Criteria," p. 69.

<sup>18</sup> Podro writes a particularly insightful account of this back-and-forth in *Depiction*.

4.9] gets the same support from each one. What is meant of course is an ideated flatness, the sensation of flatness experienced in the imagination. But if that's what is meant, is there anything flatter than the *Olympia* (1950) of Dubuffet [fig. 4.10]? If flatness in painting indicates an imaginative experience, then...Dubuffet's image dramatizes the sensations of flatness far beyond any capacity, or the intention, of most color field painting. But in fact, these different "flatnesses" are not even comparable. And the word "flat" is too stale and remote for the respective sensations touched off by the visionary color *Veils* of Morris Louis [fig. 4.11] and the bedrock pictographs of Dubuffet.<sup>19</sup>

What matters, then, is not flatness *per se* but the tilt of the pictorial surface in the mind of the viewer—upright or *flat*, the latter being characteristic of the *flatbed* picture plane.

This seeming instance of double-talk gives one pause. It is hard to ignore the fact that "flat" comprises half of the term "flatbed," which contradicts Steinberg's rebuff that "the word 'flat' is too stale and remote for the sensations touched off" by a painting. And there must surely be further motivation for his having chosen this particular allusion than the justification he proffers by way of Webster's definition: "a horizontal bed on which a horizontal printing surface rests." "Flatbed picture plane" is, after all, only one syllable removed from the flat picture plane he spent fifteen pages deconstructing and disproving. This nearly identical correspondence between Greenberg's term and Steinberg's is indeed precisely the point. His aim is to divorce the flat surface of painting from the flat picture plane and its vertical orientation, and to convey the literal flat-surface-ness, horizontal in orientation, as the new conception and experience of painting inaugurated by Rauschenberg.

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<sup>19</sup> Steinberg, "Other Criteria," p. 82.

### *The flatbed picture plane*

The Renaissance picture plane affirms verticality as its essential condition—“the picture plane as an upright surface.” Flatbed pictures, on the hand,

no longer simulate vertical fields, but opaque flatbed horizontals.... The flatbed picture plane makes its symbolic allusion to hard surfaces such as tabletops, studio floors, charts, bulletin boards—any receptor surface on which objects are scattered.... The pictures of the last fifteen to twenty years insist on a radically new orientation, in which the painted surface is no longer the analogue of a visual experience of “nature” [i.e., looking through a window onto the (natural) world contained within the picture frame] but of operational processes [whose domain is contemporary culture.]

The crucial point: “I tend to regard the tilt of the picture plane from vertical to horizontal as expressive of the most radical shift in the subject matter of art, the shift from nature to culture.”<sup>20</sup> What Steinberg suggests is that modern society’s point of reference had ceased to be nature, with culture being the far more ready and familiar analogy. A particularly telling illustration of this fact is the notion of camping as a temporary return to nature, into which we drag along the baggage of our civilized existences: plumbing, canned goods, filtered water, the proper gear, etc.

The operative term for this new conception of the picture plane is no longer *flat*, as in the Greenbergian notion of painting, but *bed*, also the name of the prize-winner at the 1964 Venice Biennale, Rauschenberg’s combine-painting *Bed* (1955) [fig. 4.12], which Steinberg suspects is his “profoundest symbolic gesture.” The paint-smearing pillow and quilt coverlet uprighted against the wall in the vertical posture of “art,” “continues to work in the imagination as the eternal companion of our other resource, our horizontality, the flat bedding in which we do our begetting, conceiving, and dreaming.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> All citations in this paragraph are from Steinberg, “Other Criteria,” p. 84.

<sup>21</sup> Steinberg, “Other Criteria,” p. 90.

It is possible that Steinberg, when he wrote that line, was thinking of John Cage's characterization of a painting that was not composed as rather, "a place where things are, as on a table or a town seen from the air: any one of them could be removed and another come into its place through circumstances analogous to birth and death, travel, housecleaning, or cluttering."<sup>22</sup> Steinberg continues, "The horizontality of the bed relates to 'making' as the vertical of the Renaissance picture plane related to seeing."<sup>23</sup> This insistence on the specific orientation of making and seeing, horizontal and vertical, is where Steinberg's argument for the flatbed picture plane starts to unravel. Are making and seeing mutually exclusive endeavors? Certainly not, at least for the artist; the viewer may be less conscious of this fact as she did not have a direct hand in the making of the work. Further, reading more carefully, one finds that Steinberg mixes his analogies. We will recall, "The flatbed picture plane makes its symbolic allusion to hard surfaces such as tabletops, studio floors, charts, bulletin boards—any receptor surface on which objects are scattered." When considering the different functions assigned to tabletops and bulletin boards, as I have of my own, one comes to realize that these are not so similar as Steinberg makes them out to be.

The surface of a desk [fig. 4.13] is often littered with stacks of papers and piles of books whose arrangement corresponds to a rough hierarchy of "in constant use" (and thus nearest at hand), "in regular use" and "hardly used." At the same time, their location is provisional. This is possible insofar as the objects are not affixed to the desk's surface. There is no easy or straightforward way to translate this ordered disorder (a characterization Rauschenberg would use himself) of one's desk to a wall, because its

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<sup>22</sup> Cage, "On Robert Rauschenberg," p. 99.

<sup>23</sup> Steinberg, "Other Criteria," pp. 89-90.



very condition presumes a flat and horizontal surface. The bulletin board [fig. 4.14] is an entirely different affair. Once a sheet of paper goes up on a wall, it usually stays where it has been pinned, either slowly getting buried as its relevance decreases, or getting pulled down altogether. At any rate, the placement depends on the sheet's visibility more so than use.<sup>24</sup>

Twombly's photograph of materials strewn about the floor of Rauschenberg's Fulton Street studio [fig. 4.15] makes clear that much of the making of a combine-painting was negotiated on the floor, horizontally. However, Rauschenberg's photograph of two early combine-paintings, *Yoicks* and the untitled combine-painting with shelf and colored glass, propped up against a wall with paint cans in the foreground [fig. 4.1], confirm that much of their making—painting, to be exact—was also done upright, “the vertical related to seeing” that Steinberg assigns to the Renaissance picture plane, which the combine-paintings ostensibly overturn. Hopps remarks that “the importance of this image for Rauschenberg is underscored by the fact that he made several exposures of the view, which was unusual for him.”<sup>25</sup> Another photograph of a multi-panel combine-painting, this one with the floor cleared of any signs that it was still being worked on, suggests that Rauschenberg put primary importance to how it looked hanging on a wall [fig. 4.16]. Since the work pictured is no longer extant, it is possible he may have decided upon looking at the photograph that it wasn't working, in which case he likely dismantled the painting and used the panels for new paintings. Thus the bulletin board is an equally

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<sup>24</sup> It is also worth mentioning that Rauschenberg treated the floor space of his studio in much the same way as I describe of the desk. Swenson observed the artist at work in the studio, and noted that as objects that had been in the corner of his studio “began to occupy more and more of his interest,... over a period of time they were moved to his central working area.” See Swenson, “Rauschenberg Paints a Picture,” p. 47.

<sup>25</sup> Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg: the early 1950s*, pp. 166-67.

apt analogy for Rauschenberg's combine-paintings, because the images and objects are pinned to the wall as one would look at it.<sup>26</sup>

So why Steinberg's insistence on horizontality at the expense of the vertical and what I refer to as the pictorial dimension? It is clear he means to stress that the objects are arranged on top of a flat surface that doesn't "recede" back into the wall like an image "under" the flat surface of painting would. He therefore turns to examples of flat objects that are literal surfaces to counter the figurative flat surface of the picture plane.

However, a flat surface meant to hang on a wall and function as a picture is different from a hanging picture that maintains the flat surface's original horizontal orientation. Steinberg refers to a painting's "psychic address of the image, its special mode of imaginative confrontation." If this were to tilt to the horizontal, the world—viewer included—would pivot ninety-degrees on the axis formed by the intersection of the wall on which the picture hangs and the floor on which one stands. Only in this way, with the wall becoming floor and floor taking the place of the wall, is the painting's horizontal psychic address preserved.

The sensation of confronting a flatbed picture, then, is not of standing on the floor and looking at the wall but of standing "at" the picture which lies perpendicular to the viewer as would a table. *Monogram* [fig. 4.5] is the only other combine-painting in the series besides *Bed* that one can reasonably claim is horizontal in orientation. It is perhaps more appropriate to think of this singular work as a combine-combine-painting, since a

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<sup>26</sup> The letter board and hanging objects displayed on a wall are indeed art historical tropes in the tradition of *trompe-l'oeil* painting. Seventeenth-century Dutch artists took the art of "tricking the eye" to new heights [fig. 4.17]. *Trompe-l'oeil* painting also has a significant place in the history of the American painting tradition [fig. 4.18]. Tabletops were also a common theme, but they were rendered with extreme foreshortening in perspectival space to "trick the eye" into seeing the edge closest to the viewer break through the surface of painting into real space. The National Gallery in Washington, D.C. mounted an exhibition on the subject in 2002 with accompanying catalog. See Sybille Ebert-Schiffere, ed., *Deceptions and illusions: five centuries of trompe-l'oeil painting* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2002).

combine-painting is itself a component of the combine-painting. (We will see how for Rauschenberg, a “painting” was not a single type of object with a single function, but rather a synecdochical or meta-conception, referring to both stand-alone paintings and paintings as components of a larger one.) An Angora goat has been “set to pasture” on a combine-painting that was likely made specifically to be a flat surface for the animal to stand on since it is relatively free of drips running off of painted elements, which typically indicate the orientation of a combine-painting.

The improbability of the configuration compels one to look at it from all angles. A taxidermied animal is an uncanny and intriguing object in and of itself. The paint in bright primary colors daubed onto his face and the rubber tire that encircles his waist makes the goat even more bizarre. To find him standing—and quite boldly at that—on a painting, looking remarkably at home there (the painted face and painted tire serve to tie the goat and the combine-painting together, although Rauschenberg has also said that he had received the goat with the face somewhat disfigured, which necessitated “make-up”) is a sight one has to see to believe. Because the goat is undeniably a presence in the room, one approaches the combine as one would a sculpture, walking *around* the perimeter of the combine-painting base in order to gauge its reality. Curiosity and disbelief are rewarded with the rear view: a filthy tennis ball placed just behind the creature’s hind legs doubles as a “dropping,” next to which a plaque identifies the work [fig. 4.19].

A sketch from 1959 [fig. 4.20] indicates that the final version of *Monogram* was not conceptualized pictorially, but rather as an object in space, or sculpturally. The work is shown in bird’s-eye view, and the base is rendered perspectively in the front elevation. A roughly rendered view of the side clearly indicates plans for the base to be set on

casters. The arabesque lines directly below the wheels could almost read as cartoon-style marks that denote spinning and whirling; the lines are in actuality a quick schematic sketch of the goat seen from above. By comparison, an earlier sketch that shows *Monogram* in its first state [fig. 4.21] imagines the composition as what is quite clearly a painting that hangs on a wall. Indeed, that these two studies for *Monogram* exist in the first place is out of the ordinary, as Rauschenberg rarely did any preliminary work for a painting.<sup>27</sup> Even though each combine-painting was carefully composed, his was an intuitive approach, which he framed in terms of collaboration with the materials:

I'm opposed to the whole idea of conception-execution—of getting an idea for a picture and then carrying it out. I've always felt as though, whatever I've used and whatever I've done, the method was always closer to a collaboration with materials than to any kind of conscious manipulation and control.<sup>28</sup>

The “composing” happened directly on the canvas as he worked, which he felt kept his personality at bay.

*Monogram* is also distinctive for having undergone three very different arrangements over the course of several years. Begun in 1955, it ranks among the earliest combine-paintings, but was not “officially” finished until 1959. It is clear that this combine-painting held particular significance for Rauschenberg, as he returned to it several times. We know from studio shots taken during this period that *Monogram* was one of five combine-paintings that remained with him during most of the life of the series, along with *Charlene*, *Interview*, *Odalisk* and *Man with White Shoes* [fig. 4.23].

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<sup>27</sup> Rauschenberg discusses why he didn't like working from sketches in Rose interview, p. 72. I suspect that Johns had a hand in the execution of the 1959 sketch. For one, it is far more articulated than Rauschenberg's other drawings, which tend to be more diagrammatic than descriptive. Watercolor and inkwash were not mediums that Rauschenberg turned to often, and the brushstrokes bear a striking resemblance to the hash marks that distinguish Johns's draughtsmanship and painterly style. In 1959 Rauschenberg also made a study for *Pail for Ganymede* that is rendered in a more characteristic way [fig. 4.22], offering little beyond construction and measurements.

<sup>28</sup> Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors*, p. 204.

*Monogram* was one of his “thought pieces,” which Rauschenberg used to work through specific problems; he put it in these general terms: “I had to figure out how they [the materials used] could be physically supported on a wall when they obviously had no business being anywhere near a wall.”<sup>29</sup> The Angora goat was especially resistant to the wall [fig. 1.37], which Rauschenberg had to concede in the end, but that he tried for four years to get that goat onto a vertical surface speaks volumes about the orientation of his paintings.

There are, to be sure, paintings that give one the sensation of standing on the wrong side of the six-sided cube, though Rauschenberg’s do not. Swiss artist Daniel Spoerri made a career of this surreal effect with his snare pictures [fig. 4.24], so-called because they literally ensnared the view of objects arranged on a table top and flipped it upright on the wall, giving one the same uncanny sense of the world’s being flipped on its side that Steinberg describes of the flatbed pictures, the bird’s eye view *cum* painting on the wall: “Though they hung on a wall, the pictures kept referring back to the horizontals on which we walk and sit, work and sleep.”<sup>30</sup> Spoerri even transformed the “imaginative confrontation” into a real one by installing the pictures on the floor, the illusion heightened by furniture that was nailed to the walls, and actors posing as viewers leaning against the wall (they really had their backs to the floor). A photo [fig. 4.25] captures the viewers’ disorientation in the hesitant way they traverse the gallery floor/display wall, arms slightly raised for balance even though they’re standing on solid ground.

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<sup>29</sup> Rose interview, p. 58.

<sup>30</sup> Steinberg, “Other Criteria,” p. 87.

Steinberg further claims an any-which-way-up for Rauschenberg's combine-paintings.<sup>31</sup> In Old Master painting, the top of the picture corresponds to where we hold our heads aloft, and the bottom to where we place our feet. Flatbed pictures, however, "no more depend on a head-to-toe correspondence with human posture than a newspaper does," which simply does not hold for Rauschenberg's combine-paintings.<sup>32</sup> Cage was second only to Rauschenberg in his understanding of the artist's work, and his 1961 essay "On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and his Work" ranks with Steinberg's in importance with respect to the literature. If Cage states something about Rauschenberg's paintings in unequivocal terms, we would do well to listen. Of the combine-painting's orientation he writes: "There is no doubt about which way is up. In any case our feet are on the ground. Painting's place is on the wall, painting's place, that is, in process."<sup>33</sup> Paint drips also serve to reassert the vertical orientation of a combine-painting. And seeing as how paint is consistently one of the final additions to the surface, evident in how it dribbles over collaged parts, it is apparent that the final stages of the combine-painting were carried out with the works standing upright, which the photographs support.

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<sup>31</sup> It is quite possible that Steinberg was brought around to the issue of orientation by Max Kozloff's discussion of Rauschenberg's combine-paintings: "In Rauschenberg's works of any vintage from the last five years [the article was published in *Artforum*, March 1966], the orientation of images is such that one no longer knows what is 'up' or 'down' or, more, what are the rates of speed by which one assimilates the composite, montaged elements." Max Kozloff, "The Inert and the Frenetic" (1966), reprinted *Renderings* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1969), p. 253. Rauschenberg's shift from combine-painting to silkscreen painting met with significant press in the mid-sixties, as his reputation grew (Kozloff writes that Rauschenberg's is the most significant art being produced in the U.S. by anyone of the younger generation), and the public began to follow his work more closely. In the same review, Kozloff considers the combine-paintings and silkscreen paintings of the same field of inquiry." The main difference he cites is not of orientation, as Steinberg and Krauss suggest, but depth: the imagery "now recedes into the fibers of the canvas, from which it once had protruded." Kozloff also lays emphasis on the relative "weights" (or physical heft and immediacy) of the imagery in the combine-paintings versus the silkscreens.

<sup>32</sup> Steinberg, "Other Criteria," p. 84.

<sup>33</sup> Cage, "On Robert Rauschenberg," p. 43. There are certain of Rauschenberg's works in which the orientation seems less regulated. Cage, in the same text (p. 46), says of the later series of combine-drawings, "I imagine being upside down." He supposes the effect is due to the drawings' origins as illustrations for a book, which can be set with the text going in any direction, although at the expense of legibility.

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Krauss's conception of image logic works very closely off of Steinberg's flatbed pictorial logic, which is evident in the close correspondence between her wording and his:

Krauss: "**Whether stored within the imaginary spaces of our dreams, fantasies, or memories, or observed in the external world, images are vertically oriented.**"

Steinberg: "**Though they *hung on the wall*, the pictures kept referring back to the horizontals on which we walk and sit, work and sleep."**<sup>34</sup>

The photographic is expressly vertical in orientation, in her view. She is forced to concede, however, to the inconsistencies generated when trying to commit Rauschenberg's paintings to a strict binary of orientation according to medium and developmental logic, as she tries to do in "Perpetual Inventory," though she does so in a footnote rather than in the body of her text:

Setting aside the fact that Rauschenberg had begun a serious practice of photography itself in the late 1940s and would continue to make photographs throughout his career, a reconsideration of the medium of painting as "photographic" involves a particular leap, which this essay is involved in exploring. Rauschenberg's few blueprint photographic works of 1950-51 might seem to have performed this leap, and, indeed, the great interest in them might elicit the response that he was not starting out in a new direction at the outset of the 1960s but rather returning to one he had initiated early in his career. I should say here that the status of these works in Rauschenberg's oeuvre is not clear to me. They do signal the kind of reorientation of the work to the horizontality that Steinberg named "the flatbed picture plane" ...[and] Rauschenberg's pursuit of the index as a way of marking. But Rauschenberg did not return to the photogram technique as a strategy for fusing the photographic index with painting's scale and pictorial logic...<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Krauss, "Perpetual Inventory," p. 216. She takes Steinberg's word for the horizontal orientation of the blueprint pictures. See Steinberg, "Other Criteria," p. 85.

<sup>35</sup> Krauss, "Perpetual Inventory," p. 221, n18.

Significantly, Rauschenberg's photographic practice must be "set aside" because it twice contradicts her argument for photographic painting.

The first contradiction is within the body of his photography itself. Krauss claims, remember, that the silkscreen paintings mark a (successive) shift from "the collage condition of the Combines," to the "seamlessness of the photographic print" and a "systematic turn to photography as the basis for his paintings."<sup>36</sup> She is unclear what to make of the fact that Rauschenberg's blueprint works, which in being photographic prints should be vertical, instead signal the horizontal orientation of his flatbed combine-paintings, presumably because it is obvious that they were made on a flat (horizontal) surface; i.e., the floor. Elsewhere in the article, Krauss suggests that the difference between collage-conditioned painting and photographic painting has to do with whether it "reads" as an assortment of material objects assembled on a flat surface or as a unified image within a frame—in her words, "a two-dimensional element whose substance is now truly at one with its planar support."<sup>37</sup> A blueprint photogram is by nature a seamless indexical print of an assortment of material objects, which again confounds her attempt to dissociate materiality (and horizontality) from the photographic in Rauschenberg's paintings.<sup>38</sup>

The second contradiction obliges Krauss to suppress the "painting" half of combine-painting, instead focusing on the "opaque presences" of objects "dumped" onto the surface of a combine-painting, which allows her to speak exclusively to their collage

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<sup>36</sup> Krauss, "Perpetual Inventory," p. 218.

<sup>37</sup> Krauss, "Perpetual Inventory," p. 217.

<sup>38</sup> *Formless* is a greatly expanded discussion of this opposition between the vertical and horizontal fields, which are variously assigned to painting and drawing, the pictorial and the graphic, image and text, "addressed to the subject as an erect being" and the "axis that governs the life of animals." See pp. 93-94 for Krauss's reading of Steinberg's text.



condition—and their horizontality. Paint *has* to be there in order for those objects to be “no less suitable to make a painting with,” for they’re not on just any flat surface, but the flat surface *of painting*. Our centuries-long conditioning with paintings that address the subject as an erect being guarantees that the primary orientation experienced will be of the vertical axis over and above any allusion to the horizontality of a reader’s orientation to the (flatbed press-) printed page. Indeed, as Krauss herself notes in *Formless*: “[A]ll images—*whether seen on a horizontal plane or not*—will enter the space of his or her imagination as upright: aligned with the verticality of that viewer’s own body.”<sup>39</sup>

And what of Rauschenberg’s photography? Krauss “sets it aside” in a quite literal sense, bracketing it out of his larger artistic practice by characterizing his photography as the material or “basis” of his art—“a photographic corpus through which reality is somehow ingested, organized, catalogued, and *retrieved*.”<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, whereas Krauss is arguing that the photographic logic of the silkscreen paintings supplanted the collage logic of the combine-paintings, Rauschenberg rather saw the silkscreens as a happy medium between the two: “The photographic process was unsuccessful because I could only take away images—I couldn’t add images after the process. Getting into silkscreen was somehow a compromise.”<sup>41</sup> That is to say, the silkscreen paintings were a compromise between the limited capacity to alter the image on a negative, and what I will argue in the next section of this chapter was the radical provisionality of the combine-paintings.

In the end, what ultimately does Krauss’s argument in is the strict, categorical delineation she is at pains to make between vertical and horizontal, photographic and

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<sup>39</sup> Krauss, *Formless*, p. 90, emphasis mine.

<sup>40</sup> Krauss, “Perpetual Inventory,” p. 218, emphasis mine.

<sup>41</sup> Rose interview, p. 77.

collage; which is precisely the sort of constancy that Rauschenberg's work resists, as Rose noted: "You have a certain contrariness. Just when the public seems to begin to understand and appreciate your work, you delight in changing your direction."

Rauschenberg concurred: "It's almost reactionary.... I always do that to myself when I feel that I'm getting too successfully stylistic."<sup>42</sup>

The nine months that Rauschenberg spent in Europe and North Africa acted as something of a "stylistic break" with the influences and experiences connected to Black Mountain College, which he suggested had begun to feel more limiting than stimulating: "I had had enough of living around a lake in isolation and I wanted to see what was happening [elsewhere]."<sup>43</sup> This break was followed by another extremely prolific period in the arc of the artist's career: the roughly two years (April 1953 to August 1954) he was at 61 Fulton Street.

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### **Scatole e feticci personali [Personal Boxes and Fetishes] and shirt board collages**

Thanks to the scholarship of Hopps, Feinstein and most recently Nicholas Cullinan we have a far better picture of the significance of Rauschenberg's interlude overseas to his artistic development. From September 1952 to February 1953, Rauschenberg amassed four discrete bodies of work, the bulk of which originated from Morocco: a series of approximately thirty-three collages of ephemera and old engravings salvaged from second-hand bookstalls and flea markets, all mounted on shirt boards from laundries [fig. 4.26]; *feticci personali*, free-hanging assemblages of found materials [fig. 4.27], and *scatoli personali* ["personal boxes"], assemblages ensconced in boxes [figs.

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<sup>42</sup> Rose interview, p. 122.

<sup>43</sup> Rose interview, p. 35.

4.28 and 4.29]; and photographs [figs. 4.30 and 4.31]. He claims to have started making the *scatole* and *feticci* to keep “from going crazy while living in Rome and working at the Atlas Construction Company in Casablanca,” using material that he found or bought at native bazaars.<sup>44</sup> The reason he gave for working with the blueprints is applicable to here: “It was something that we could do anywhere. It was like photography.”<sup>45</sup> In other words, there is a certain advantage to photography and collage when one is looking to travel light.

Rauschenberg’s peripatetic existence is legible not only in the objects themselves, which were collected in the various places he visited and bear signs that give clues to their origin, but also in the disposable nature of the materials. The latter was most dramatically demonstrated when he disposed of the *scatole e feticci personali* by throwing them into the Arno River upon the unkind suggestion of a reviewer of his solo show at Florence’s Galleria d’Arte Contemporanea. As discussed in chapter two, the act was read as a gesture of self-censorship and renunciation. Rauschenberg, on the other hand, claimed lightly, “It solved the packing problem.”<sup>46</sup> Such as it were, few of the *scatole* and *feticci* are thought to survive.<sup>47</sup> Rauschenberg did, however, photograph several of them fancifully installed among the classical busts and trees of Giardini del

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<sup>44</sup> Roberta Bernstein, *Rauschenberg, the white and black paintings 1949-1952*, exh. cat. (New York: Larry Gagosian Gallery, 1986). Full quote: “The series of small collages on brown cardboard were done after the white and black paintings, while Rauschenberg was traveling in Italy and North Africa from fall 1952 to spring 1953. Rauschenberg says he made them to keep himself ‘from going crazy while living in Rome and working at the Atlas Construction Company in Casablanca.’ They have an elegance and a delicacy, conveyed through their intimate scale and fragile, poetic materials, that distinguish them from the purposely assertive style of the rest of his work of the 1950s and 1960s.” Rauschenberg also suggests that Twombly was driving him crazy. It is a commonplace to say that travelling with someone can make or break a relationship; the nascent romance between Cy and Bob was most definitely broken by their shared (at times, unwillingly) experience.

<sup>45</sup> Rose interview, p. 25.

<sup>46</sup> *Robert Rauschenberg*, Smithsonian exh. cat., p. 33.

<sup>47</sup> Two *feticci* were later photographed hanging in Rauschenberg’s Fulton Street studio in New York in 1954. See *Robert Rauschenberg*, Smithsonian exh. cat., p. 33, and Crow, “Rise and Fall,” pp. 249-50 for accounts of the throwing of works into the Arno River.

Pincio [fig. 4.32] and arranged on the floor of the *pensione* he shared with Twombly in Rome [fig. 4.33].

Although the photographs of the hanging and boxed assemblages are staged with evident care and intention, and display a serious engagement with photography as an art form, far more attention has been given to their subject. The collage method of the *scatole* and *feticci*, along with the related shirt board collages, are positioned as the works that effectively bridge the gap between the black paintings and the combine-paintings, and wherein the nature of the shift is thought to reside. They do seem to prefigure the combine-paintings in their cabinet- and “symmetrically relaxed” form, apparently random juxtapositions of found objects, and incorporation of extra-painterly elements such as sound and sensory events.

Germano Celant characterizes the group as an “objective break” with the reductive monochromatic *White Paintings* and black paintings that Rauschenberg left behind in New York. Of the black paintings that predate 1953, Celant argues for their “painterly” interest and two-dimensionality.<sup>48</sup> As we saw in chapter two, sheets of newsprint in a majority of the 1952 black paintings were used to create a substructure for the painting that provided a fresh sort of surface for paint, an alternative to the traditional smooth and flat one. At the same time, Rauschenberg’s photographs of the paintings show them in states similar to the later paintings, wherein the bits of torn newspaper were used *as* pieces of newsprint. Thus newsprint shifted from *papier-mâché* material to the

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<sup>48</sup> Celant, *Roma-New York*, pp. 20-21. Cullinan, on the other hand, argues that all the works that Rauschenberg produced immediately upon his return to America referred back to this Moroccan moment “through a reinvigorated painterly style.” See Nicholas Cullinan, “Double exposure: Robert Rauschenberg’s and Cy Twombly’s Roman holiday,” *The Burlington Magazine* CL (July 2008), p. 464. Cullinan makes the point that, rather predictably, Rauschenberg’s encounter with Burri is peripheral in American accounts, while central in Italian ones. See “Double exposure,” pp. 466-67.

equivalent of paint marks in their function. Celant further describes the Fulton Street black paintings (those done upon his return to New York) as having “exploded surfaces”—their interior (violently) rendered visible, conferring an “inside” to these paintings. The implication is that the boxes helped Rauschenberg to imagine a painting as having an inner cavity.

Celant and others attribute this shift to Rauschenberg’s exposure to the work of the Italian avant-garde, specifically Antonio Burri, whose studio he and Twombly visited in February 1953. Charles Stuckey, for one, credits the older Italian artist with giving Rauschenberg the license to “salvage and redeem all sorts of objects, transforming them into art.”<sup>49</sup> Encouraged by the example of Burri’s use of burlap sacks as the pictorial element in his paintings (the same sacks in which the food and material distributed under the Marshall Plan arrived in Italy) [fig. 4.34], Rauschenberg’s own paintings were thereafter made up of a more heterogeneous mix of materials, quotidian objects and ephemera. It is rather more accurate to say that Burri confirmed the validity of the younger artist’s use of salvaged material as a viable artistic strategy rather than gave him permission to do so, since the use of extra-artistic material had always been central to Rauschenberg’s paintings. Nearly all of the early Parsons works are characterized by the inclusion of things like bits of hair, fragments of glass, and pieces of text—the same stuff used for his *scatole e feticci personali* and shirt-board collages.

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<sup>49</sup> Charles Stuckey, “Rauschenberg’s Everything, Everywhere Era,” in Hopps, ed., *Robert Rauschenberg, a retrospective*, p. 37. Stuckey does, however, recount a peculiar anecdote about how Rauschenberg sent Burri one of the personal fetishes as a ‘healing work’ when he heard that the older artist was seriously ill. According to Rauschenberg, Burri reciprocated three days later, with a gift to Rauschenberg of one of his works. See Stuckey, “Rauschenberg’s Everything, Everywhere Era,” p. 41, n23.

## ***Scatole* into combine-paintings**

Rauschenberg, who did not make a habit of explaining his works, came out with a rare statement about the *scatole* and *feticci* in conjunction with their exhibition in Rome and Florence:

The Material used for these Constructions were chosen for either of two reasons: the richness of their past: like bone, hair, faded cloth and photos, broken fixtures, feathers, sticks, rocks, string, and rope; or for their vivid abstract reality: like mirrors, bells, watchparts, bugs, fringe, pearls, glass, and shells. Some of the boxes have sound, smell, and movement; others act to isolate a single natural object. The departmental contents are selected and constructed for each box according to its power of containment. The actual boxes range in contrast from a Victorian change-purse to Baroque crystal cases to the discard pile of any street. The full inside view of a box may look like a photographic still-life before the picture has been taken. In one case the skull of a bird has been decorated in a rich false history and tassels with a bell on a string attached to her in reminiscence of her song. A bone on the stage of a box no bigger than a tube of lipstick becomes a miniature monument. In others one or several compartments are left empty for you to add bits of your own choice, to rearrange the contents, or to leave them in their emptiness which signifies unknown possibilities. Many of the boxes are a third dimensional poem of not more than one word: White. A hanging construction of mirrors to mirrors is visual infinity. Other stringlike totems hang pretentiously boasting of their fictitious past. A contemplative instrument is made with a bead on a coil of wire. You may develop your own ritual about the objects. The order and logic of the arrangements are the direct creation of the viewer assisted by the costumed provocativeness and literal sensuality of the objects.

He gives his reasons for the material used, which he found at various flea markets and in “the discard pile of any street,” much like the material he would use for his combine-paintings a year later. The (false) sense of having a rich past or a “vivid” and “abstract” presence were what attracted Rauschenberg to the objects. He invites the viewer to likewise be compelled into the sort of romantic reverie that is conveyed by both the words’ meanings as well as the poetry of their arrangement, which could also describe the *scatole* and *feticci*. He does, however, allude to the falseness of this rich past,

suggesting that his is an affected, ironic sentimentality, a “costumed nostalgia,” one could say.

Many art historians ascribe surrealist affinities to the *scatole* and *feticci*. The name of the series—“personal fetishes”—seems to confirm the designation. One reviewer had a more negative characterization of their surrealist slant, calling them “psychological messes.” The *feticci* were made of the archetypal fetish: hair. Downy snow-white tresses secured to hanging wooden supports cascade to the ground. Rauschenberg’s photograph of the *feticci* hanging from the gnarled branches of trees in the Giardini del Pincio [fig. 4.32], now described in terms such as “bygone grandeur,” heightens the qualities Rauschenberg describes in his statement. The garden was a short and picturesque climb from the Pensione Allegi where he and Twombly lodged during their stay in Rome, on the Piazza di Spagna.<sup>50</sup>

The trinkets ensconced into *scatole* are likewise uncanny: fragments of bone, tufts of fur, butterfly wings and the like [fig. 4.35]. Feinstein finds a direct and obvious source in Joseph Cornell’s boxes, which share with Rauschenberg’s constructions the same sort of evocative imagery and found material, as well as their arrangement in boxes.<sup>51</sup> Hopps takes care to point out the differences between the two artists, however. The class of materials used betrays their respective aesthetic sensibilities. While Cornell’s boxes are “urbane and raise sophisticated ‘art-about-art’ issues,” Rauschenberg’s “earthy, naturalistic materials...point towards an underlying atavistic pantheism.” More

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<sup>50</sup> The *pensione* was a block from the via Margutta where, as Twombly wrote to a friend, “most of the important contemporary Italian painters and sculptures have studios.” Cullinan, “Double exposure,” p. 462.

<sup>51</sup> Rauschenberg and Twombly were familiar with his work through exhibitions at the Egan Gallery, New York, and having visited Cornell’s house on Utopia Parkway, Queens, New York, to transport works to the gallery. See Cullinan, “Double exposure,” p. 468. Cornell’s boxes were also shown alongside works by Twombly in an exhibition at the Stable Gallery in 1954, which Rauschenberg photographed.

significantly, Hopps asserts that the artists' works are fundamentally different in how they orient the viewer in relation to them: "in a Cornell box, one looks at vertical planes evoking the realm of painting or proscenium, but with Rauschenberg's works, one looks down into the small boxes with their one-to-one human scale."<sup>52</sup>

"Human scale" is implicitly opposed to the grander scale we expect of art. Many of the *scatole* are the size of jewelry boxes, designed to be cupped in the hand and brought close to one's face. Thus the viewer is already primed for an intimate experience, which the preciousness of the objects reinforces. In one of the few extant examples, a veneered wood box about the size of a business card (4 3/8 x 3 1/2 inches) opens to reveal a pink-satin-lined interior [fig. 4.28]. The bottom half has been papered over with two engravings, one of which is a diagram of how the eye processes the visual field using the example of a beetle; an actual beetle has been placed on a twig as one might find it in nature, which is laid diagonally across the images. In another, a pearl dangles inside a tiny metal box with a circular clear window that measures a scant 1 x 1 x 2 inches [fig. 4.29]. As Hopps says, the viewer's engagement with a *scatola* is not of looking (up) at a painting but rather reading a book, which also captures the sense of closing off to the world in which one's body stands and drawing into the private interior of a reverie.

It is only natural to think of the small, boxed assemblages as objects to be set on a table. They are made of things that in their normal everyday existence typically live on a table or some other flat surface. There is a solidity and, for lack of a better word, *thingness* to them because they are made with actual objects. Some even contain dirt, connecting them to solid ground, the earth. Joseph senses in Rauschenberg's choice of

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<sup>52</sup> Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg: the early 1950s*, p. 115. See pp. 112-15 for a discussion of the *feticci* and *scatole*.



objects and the way he presents them a desire to retain an auratic quality ritual function for art, and nostalgia for the past that he argues is abandoned by 1958.<sup>53</sup> The passages from the exhibition statement that Joseph cites corroborate his reading, but the ellipses are quite telling, which are italicized:

Some of the boxes have sound, smell, and movement; others act to isolate a single natural object. The departmental contents are selected and constructed for each box according to its power of containment. The actual boxes range in contrast from a Victorian change-purse to Baroque crystal cases to the discard pile of any street. *The full inside view of a box may look like a photographic still-life before the picture has been taken....*

*In others one or several compartments are left empty for you to add bits of your own choice, to rearrange the contents, or to leave them in their emptiness which signifies unknown possibilities.* Many of the boxes are a third dimensional poem of not more than one word: White. A hanging construction of mirrors to mirrors is visual infinity.

The call for viewers to handle the objects has been excised. Such “friendliness,” to borrow Rauschenberg’s characterization, contradicts the auratic work of art’s dignified aloofness from a public audience. Furthermore, the sense of authenticity, authority and permanence that such a work would project is violated by the provisions Rauschenberg makes for the viewer to reconfigure the work: “one or several compartments are left empty for you to add bits of your own choice, to rearrange the contents, or to leave them in their emptiness which signifies unknown possibilities.” This openness to change is analogous to Benjaminian aura, or the “life” and “spirit” of Rauschenberg’s art: “Once you can remember a piece, if you can visualize it accurately, then that piece is dead. They [the abstract expressionists] were after the elusive presence of the piece without the

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<sup>53</sup> Joseph argues that the poeticism evident in Rauschenberg’s statement is replaced by an increasing commitment to “literalness”: “I [Rauschenberg] have an Etruscan hand that’s just that. It’s just so literal. It’s a fact. A hand.” *Random Order*, p. 135. One presumes that the Etruscan hand’s literalness is a product of its disembodiment, which Rauschenberg seems to confirm when in the same article that Joseph cites, he refers to fragments as parts of an indefinite (“a”) whole, rather than a definite (“the”) whole. That is to say, the hand’s isolation from the larger whole translates to an impersonality. As such, the hand can conceivably go to any body. I will revisit this notion of the interchangeability of parts when I discuss the combine-paintings in further detail in the following section.

physicality. I want the physicality also.”<sup>54</sup> That physicality resided not only in the abstract thingness of actual objects. The viewer also had the opportunity to make that thingness a real, physical sensation if she heeded Rauschenberg’s call to rearrange the bits and pieces in their compartments.

Joseph also omits the line where Rauschenberg refers to the view inside of a box as “a photographic still-life before the picture has been taken.” Rauschenberg’s characterization is significant for, even with all of these signs that point to their categorical horizontality, he evidently also conceived of them as pictures, or pictorially. Indeed, the photograph taken by Rauschenberg of the *scatole personali* in his and Twombly’s room at the Allegi is a striking literalization of their pictorial dimension [fig. 4.33]. The various-sized *scatole* have been carefully placed onto a square sheet of white paper so as to lay neatly in a grid pattern within the square frame formed by both the paper “canvas” and the Rollei’s viewfinder. Interspersed among them are a few objects not in boxes, such as the baby doll at the center of the picture, and the curious fetish-like assemblage made from what looks to be a rattlesnake’s rattle. It is possible that they were removed from their housing for the photograph. The box with the sliding lid left open at the top of the image looks to be empty, and is about the right size for the baby doll. Rauschenberg also used the lids of boxes as compositional elements. The left edge of the paper abuts the left edge of a rug with a paisley pattern, and the shot has been framed so that a section of the tiled floor is visible. A wood beam has been placed just below the bottom edge of the sheet, and also lines up vertically with the left edge of the rug, only a small section of which has made it into the picture. These small compositional details

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<sup>54</sup> Rose interview, p. 109.

suggest that this was more than a documentary photo, which is how it has served in the absence of most of this important body of work.

One has to wonder what role the photograph of the thirty *scatole* played in suggesting to art historians the correspondence between the bits of forgotten mementos tucked into boxes and the earliest combine-paintings. Looking at the same *scatole* without the aid of the photograph [figs. 4.28, 4.29 and 4.35], the ostensive latent combine-painting form is not nearly as apparent. The individual *scatola* look somewhat anemic by comparison. They are far more compelling and successful as works in critical mass. If the *scatole* do indeed prefigure the combine-paintings, as I believe they do, then Rauschenberg's acknowledgment of their pictoriality is critical, for it problematizes the critical commonplace that the combine-paintings are expressly horizontal in orientation. While making them, he viewed them through the lens of the camera, and this exchange was pivotal to his conception and rethinking of painting as an assemblage of objects within a frame and on a flat surface.

Cage relays a curious anecdote in the oft-cited article "On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and his Work":

There is no doubt about which way is up. In any case our feet are on the ground. Painting's place is on the wall, painting's place, that is, in process. When I showed him [Rauschenberg] a photograph of one of Rauschenberg's paintings, he [Rauschenberg] said, « If I had a painting, I'd want to be sure it would stay the way it is; this one is a collage and would change ». But Rauschenberg is practical. He goes along with things just as they are. Just as he knows it goes on a wall and not any which way, but right side up, so he knows, as he is, it is changing (which one more quickly? and the pyramids change). When possible, and by various means, he gives it a push: holes through which one sees behind the canvas the wall to which it is committed; the reflective surfaces changing what is seen by means of what is happening; lights going on and off and the radios.... Now in a metal box attached by a rope, the history kept by means

of drawings of what was taken away and put in its place, of a painting constantly changing.<sup>55</sup>

The exchange is rife with ambiguities that bear consideration. We can be fairly confident that the pronoun “him” refers to Rauschenberg, and that the photograph is of one of Rauschenberg’s combine-paintings, which by the mid-fifties was his signature work. Taking these as givens, Rauschenberg’s reply suggests several possible meanings: the combine-painting pictured is more accurately a collage because it can change, a photograph is a collage, and a photograph of a painting is distinct from the very same painting pictured in the photograph—the picture is distinct from what is pictured. Knowing Rauschenberg, all three are the case. If so, what are the implications?

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### *Modular painting*

A collaged image can more easily be altered than a painted one because all of its parts are composite. A painted image, on the other hand, is literally bound to the surface of the canvas, the individual strokes of paint drying together to form one piece. Thomas B. Hess vividly conveys how arduous it would be to change the position of a painted element within a composition in his discussion of de Kooning’s working method.

Elaine de Kooning remembers that after stopping work on one magnificent painting, the artist reluctantly admitted that it was “pretty good” but decided that it had to be moved “two inches to the left.” Instead of cutting down the right side and piecing out some space to the left, he proceeded to paint over the whole image, meticulously shifting each element—and in the process lost the whole image.<sup>56</sup>

Rauschenberg’s combine-paintings are embodiments of the other route suggested by Hess. The modular construction of the larger works, comprised of individual panels

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<sup>55</sup> Cage, “On Robert Rauschenberg,” p. 43.

<sup>56</sup> Thomas B. Hess, *Willem de Kooning* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1968), p. 22.

brought together, made it possible for a section to easily be shuffled around and a new, blank piece appended. We have already seen how Rauschenberg capitalized on this flexibility by using the original panels of the *White Paintings* for new paintings, such as the seven-panel *White Painting* that is now *Trophy II (for Teeny and Marcel Duchamp)* [fig. 1.38]. In fact, the combine-paintings' modularity is rarely mentioned. We are most familiar with modular units in the context of pre-fab furniture and building construction, where all of the modules are identical so that they can be put together a number of different ways and at the same time produced at minimal cost. OED gives the general definition, "involving or consisting of modules or discrete units as the basis of design, construction, or operation."<sup>57</sup> Nowhere is it stated that each module must be exactly the same; this is simply what our rationalized economy has conditioned us to expect.

To be fair, the randomness that characterizes each individual panel in a combine-painting does not make the connection to modularity very obvious, which the photograph of the thirty *scatole* captures. "Random order" is the term Rauschenberg used to describe the unstoppable connectivity of images and objects in relation to one another. It first appears in the 1963 photo essay of the same name published in *Location* (spring 1963): "With sound scale and insistency trucks mobilize words, and broadside our culture by a combination of law and local motivation which produces an extremely complex *random order* that cannot be described as accidents" [fig. 3.1].<sup>58</sup> The combine-paintings' random order likewise cannot be described as accidents; rather, they were composed in a way that did not look obviously composed. As he told Rose, "I prefer not to brag about its

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<sup>57</sup> <http://dictionary.oed.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/> (accessed 29 October 2009).

<sup>58</sup> Reprinted in Joseph, *Random Order*, pp. 28-31, emphasis mine.

sophisticated anatomy.”<sup>59</sup> The oblique references to aggression (“with insistency,” “trucks,” “broadside”) are appropriate, for the effect that legible fragments of text and recognizable objects have is to splinter our attention, making it very difficult to grasp the whole of the painting.

Multi-panel construction solved the very practical problem of getting a combine-painting out of the studio. Cage evidently speaks from experience when he advises: “More important is to know exactly the size of the door and techniques for getting a canvas out of the studio. (*Combines* don’t roll up). Anything beyond that size must be suitably segmented.”<sup>60</sup> This became an issue only when Rauschenberg had a studio large enough to accommodate mural size stretched canvases; his Fulton Street loft was the first such space. He obviously relished the luxury of working on expansive paintings, as evidenced by the photographs discussed in detail in chapter two of the large black painting [fig. 2.26].<sup>61</sup> One of the last in the series, Rauschenberg often exaggerated the ample horizontal format of the painting by framing the shot to crop out its edges. The same painting was given to Cage in early 1954, and its removal from the studio may have been what prompted the realization that a painting beyond a certain size had to be segmented. At about six feet tall and eight and a half feet wide, it would no doubt have been an awkward bulk to carry the ten or so blocks from Rauschenberg’s studio at 61 Fulton Street to Cage’s Monroe Street flat, even with its open-frame construction. (The sheets of painted-over newsprint, which on their own would have been fairly lightweight,

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<sup>59</sup> Rose interview, p. 90.

<sup>60</sup> Cage, “On Robert Rauschenberg,” p. 44.

<sup>61</sup> Hopps labels this painting “the summa work of the final phase of [Rauschenberg’s] black paintings.” He further notes, “The fact that Rauschenberg was compelled to photograph it so often (more than any other work of the time) underscores his obsessive engagement with this painting.” See *Robert Rauschenberg: the early 1950s*, p. 154.

were stapled directly to the front surface of the wood supports.)<sup>62</sup> Another large painting made of layer after layer of white lead paint was too heavy to lift and so had to be abandoned at the Fulton Street studio when Rauschenberg moved to the Pearl Street space [fig. 4.36].<sup>63</sup>

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### *A painting on multiple levels*

Ease of getting a work in and out of the studio was not the only advantage to modular construction. It also suited Rauschenberg's unconditional attitude towards art. A painting was variously the start of a painting, in process, or the completed work; sectioned panels not only made alteration easier, but more likely as well. We have already touched on several examples of paintings being recycled as canvases for new works, such as *K24976S* (1956), made from the original four-panel *White Painting* [fig. 4.2]. A painting could be recycled in a different sense, becoming an element, unchanged, in another work. While a painting used in this way ceased to be a freestanding work of art, neither was its identity as a painting absorbed into the larger work: Rauschenberg never masked or transformed the identity of a borrowed object, which is a cornerstone of his particular approach to collage.

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<sup>62</sup> Hopps describes the painting as "beloved" by Cage and so was given to him sometime around early 1954. It was soon thereafter damaged beyond repair by a flood in Cage's loft. See Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg: the early 1950s*, p. 154.

<sup>63</sup> Incidentally, a monochromatic black painting whose existence is documented only in a photograph by the artist taken in the Fulton Street studio may very well be the same (white lead) painting. The surface is similarly grainy. The brick wall on which the black painting hangs has a little niche just left of the painting. Although the photograph of the white lead painting is not as sharp, one discerns a similar shadow-darkened space. Hopps, on the other hand, believes this to be a repainting of the one-panel *White Painting*. Both of these can co-exist as possibilities, since it was quite customary for a single canvas to have several lives as a work. I am inclined to think that the single-panel *White Painting* looks smaller than the black monochrome that presumably obscures it. See Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg: the early 1950s*, pp. 163-64 for discussion of the performative aspect of this painting.

Louis Aragon, one of the first to consider the larger implications of collage for art, finds that the autonomy of each component in a collage lends itself quite naturally to analogy with stage production.<sup>64</sup> “It is probably not by chance that brings me here to the language of the theater: the actors play a role on a stage where props for several possibilities are planted. I have often thought that a huge and wonderful drama would result from the arbitrary succession of those tableaux.”<sup>65</sup> A collage in such a configuration is a field on which several actors or agents (the collage material) interact in various ways according to the context and situation. The metaphor makes vividly clear the openness of such a pictorial arrangement: the materials have legs and can move from one position on the stage to another, which changes the “scene” or picture. Furthermore, the various elements always carry with them the potentiality to play different roles in alternate *collections* because they are discrete.<sup>66</sup>

Aragon became aware of the “tableaux drama” effect in considering Max Ernst’s surrealist collages. In keeping with the theory of the surrealist object, Ernst “liberated” elements from their conditioned identities and played with new iterations: “an embroidery pattern here advantageously represents the turf of a race course, and elsewhere, hats constitute a caravan.”<sup>67</sup> This is in marked contrast to how Rauschenberg employed his material. “I don’t want a picture to look like something it isn’t. I want it to

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<sup>64</sup> Aragon’s treatise *La Peinture au défi* (1930), written for a Paris exhibition of collage, offers many compelling insights on its early history and reception. That Benjamin cites this text in “Letter from Paris (2),” which considers the long suffering relationship between photography and painting, says something of the importance of the ideas therein. In Jennings et al., eds., *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*, pp. 299-311. Benjamin’s “letter” will be discussed in further detail later in the chapter.

<sup>65</sup> Aragon, “The Challenge to Painting,” pp. 65-66. I prefer Lucy Lippard’s translation of the first sentence in her anthology, *Surrealists on Art* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970), pp. 45-46, which I’ve used here. In the Hultén edition the line reads: “the actors play a role on a stage where flats containing several possibilities have been placed.”

<sup>66</sup> I emphasize the word “collection” because it is also the name of another important early combine-painting, *Collection* (1954).

<sup>67</sup> Aragon, “The Challenge to Painting,” p. 47.



look like something it is.”<sup>68</sup> Gene Swenson came to realize Rauschenberg’s fidelity to the object over the course of several studio visits made in preparation of an exposé in *ARTnews* of the artist’s process. As he observed Rauschenberg working with a car door that was a piece for one of the several ongoing projects:

The stages of response which changes in and around the door gradually evoked led to a better understanding of one aspect of Rauschenberg’s work—the way he “transforms” objects. He does not use them as pure form and color, destroying our sense of their origin—which is what is usually meant by “transformation.” Rather he seeks to retain or reinstate some quality the object possessed in its original environment. The door of a car is not noticeably distinguished from the frame of the car; it is seldom noticed, even when we use it. If we were to encounter such an object in an artist’s studio, we see a mere form with overtones of an automobile. Such a transformation had already taken place when I first saw the car door. What surprised me most was the way it gradually lost its quality of being a ‘transformed’ object. It was re-integrated into a situation—given an environment in which it was both in place, as originally, and yet not smothered as pure form. Between the first time I saw it and the last, it had acquired literacy and an ability to communicate.... [H]is objects often assert themselves so strongly that only time can integrate them for me.<sup>69</sup>

Rauschenberg repurposed the paintings of fellow artists with the same care to preserving their original qualities. A number of drawings by Twombly figure in several early combine-paintings. He also secretly “snuck” works by friends into a group show that had not been accepted by incorporating them into his own entry, *Short Circuit* (1955) [fig. 4.37].<sup>70</sup> *Rhyme* (1956) and *Summerstorm* (1959) are prime examples of this way of re-using paintings as it applied to his own. *Rhyme* formerly existed as the back panel for the first state of *Monogram* (c 1955) [fig. 4.3]. The ledge with three electric lights that had supported the goat in profile was removed. The original design was kept largely

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<sup>68</sup> Rauschenberg cited in Whitney Museum press release, 21 December 1965, which is also the source of the famous, oft-quoted line about making pictures out of the real world: “And I think a picture is more like the real world when it’s made out of the real world.”

<sup>69</sup> Swenson, “Rauschenberg paints a picture,” p. 47.

<sup>70</sup> Paintings by Jasper Johns and Weil and a collage by Ray Johnson are revealed through two “doors” that the painting points to with an arrow and instructs the viewer to “OPEN.”

intact, and it is significant that he did not paint over signs that a shelf had once been attached to the panel—the outline in bare canvas revealed once it was removed, and the holes for the screws that had secured it. The middle panel of *Summerstorm* [fig. 1.37] was taken from the second state of *Monogram* (c 1956). Again, only minor changes were made, suggesting that the “borrowed” panel was the fixed term, to which the other two panels were calibrated.

Reproductions of old master paintings and amateur examples found on the street were also fair game. A particularly brilliant instance of the latter occurs in the combine-painting *Interview* (1955) [fig. 4.38]. A painting by one S. Dysko of a tropical island scene, charming in its naïveté, figures prominently in the combine-painting, and is juxtaposed to a reproduction of an Old Master-style painting that also features a marine backdrop. Dysko’s painting is placed at eye-level, and a brick suspended from twine hangs squarely in the middle of the scene. The unexpected presence of the brick is, paradoxically, very effective in drawing one’s attention to the painting it obscures.

Rauschenberg may have been inspired by a performance of the Martha Graham company:

It was a fantastic tragedy. She [Graham] always hires the most beautiful dancers and then she crawls around them. The set was a huge rock. Martha came dramatically out—and sat behind the rock! She stayed there for forty-five minutes! I couldn’t take my eyes off the rock. It didn’t matter how gorgeous the bodies were or how gymnastically they performed, the focus was on the rock. The rest of the activity was simply static.<sup>71</sup>

A publicity photo taken in 1958 of Rauschenberg in the studio with his combine-paintings reveals that the brick was, in fact, a late addition.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Rose interview, p. 97.

<sup>72</sup> The date does not reflect the change like *Monogram* (1955-59) and *Odalisk* (1955/ 58), which were modified over the course of a few years. Another work that bears a striking resemblance to the brick in *Interview* is Philippe Soupault’s *Cité du Retiro* (1921), which features a piece of asphalt strung to a gilt frame. Of how the work came about, Soupault, who was among the group of artists who exhibited in the

The heft and bulk already associated with brick is amplified because of the way it dangles weightily on a string. Dense mass is but one among “the whole world of associations” attached to bricks; romantic ideas about brick cottages and chimneys, and factual information were brought to mind for Rauschenberg.<sup>73</sup> And an island is, after all, in the crudest of terms, a lump of dirt in the middle of the ocean.<sup>74</sup> The associative chain could go on indefinitely, the gaze transfixed to this small area of the painting. One can easily lose sight of the forest for the trees, and if consumed by a particularly evocative passage, the thought of the rest of a large combine-painting’s surface could be overwhelming.

The chains of association in *Interview* are sparked off not only by the brick itself, but because it hangs amidst a bevy of cultural material that suggests further meaning, which Rauschenberg nudged along with random ordering. His sensitivity to the interrelation of elements and their context echoes Albers’s way of thinking about color,

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Salon Dada at the Galerie Montaigne in Paris, explained: “It was agreed that each of us should bring two or three paintings to the Salon.... I, not being a painter, had thought that I should show an abstract work of art. For this purpose, I had picked up a piece of asphalt in a small street near the rue Royale, called *Cité du Retiro*. I had suspended it in a frame with the title underneath. Placed between two other of my ‘works,’ *Portrait d’un inconnu* (*Portrait of an Unknown*)—an empty frame—and *Portrait d’un imbecile* (*Portrait of an Idiot*), which was a mirror, this intrigued people a lot.” In Hultén, ed., *The Surrealists look at art*, pp. 84-85. I have not been able to research the exhibition history of Soupault’s work to determine whether Rauschenberg had ever seen it, but I can confirm that there were several dada and surrealism exhibitions in New York at the time. I am surprised to find that *Interview* has received nowhere near the attention as other combine-paintings of the same vintage, and I too must give it short shrift here.

<sup>73</sup> “We have ideas about bricks. A brick just isn’t a physical mass of a certain dimension that one builds houses, or chimneys with. The whole world of associations, all the information that we have—the fact that it’s made of dirt, that it’s been through a kiln, romantic ideas about little brick cottages, or the chimney which is so romantic, or labor—you have to deal with as many of the things as you know about.” Rauschenberg in an interview with David Sylvester, *BBC*, June 1964. Iconographical readings of Rauschenberg’s work aim to find possible meaning in these chains of associations; see, for example, Roger Cranshaw and Adrian Lewis, “Re-Reading Rauschenberg,” *Artscribe* 29 (June 1981): 44-51; Michael Newman, “Rauschenberg Re-Evaluated,” *Art Monthly* 47 (June 1981): 7-10; Judith Bernstock, “A New Interpretation of Rauschenberg’s Imagery,” *Pantheon* 46 (1988): 149-64; Susan Wainwright, *Reading Junk: Thematic Imagery in the Art of Robert Rauschenberg from 1952 to 1964* (PhD thesis, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1993); and the exhibition catalog *Rauschenberg: combines*.

<sup>74</sup> We are brought around to Rauschenberg’s work again when looking closely at the brick, which has been painted over in black, the uneven texture mimicking the surface of the rougher black paintings. The chalky face of the brick bears scratches not unlike the marks in Twombly’s paintings.

which was founded upon the principle that a color's value changes with its chromatic context. The difference between teacher and student lay in their understanding of the nature of the relationship, the degree to which it was manipulated and to what end. Rauschenberg said of what Rose describes as the "monochromatic impulse" of his early paintings, "It was related to Albers's censorship. I had been totally intimidated because Albers taught that one color was supposed to make the next color look better, but *my* feeling was that each color was *itself*. You can't reduce the importance of red by subjecting it to green."<sup>75</sup> And elsewhere: "I didn't want painting to be simply an act of employing one color to do something to another color, like using red to intensify green, because that would imply some subordination of red."<sup>76</sup> Rauschenberg resisted the subjection of one element to another, whereby a hierarchy of the painting's surface was established. In such an arrangement, "chosen" or favored elements would be privileged over others, the "lesser" components made to work for them. He would likely characterize the dominant parts as bullies, a quality that he was trying to avoid himself when working with an object, and the idea behind his characterization of the relationship with his materials as collaborative. Collaboration, as he understood it, "is a prescription or device that keeps one from getting hung up on a strong single intention that blinds."<sup>77</sup> If something wasn't working, he did not ignore this reality. Rather than exerting his will

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<sup>75</sup> Rose interview, pp. 37-38. Here, we have a second valence to the Rauschenbergian notion of random order. Random order not only referred to the random connections we make between things that cannot be planned for, but also a painting's construction. Rauschenberg said that he wanted the arrangement to look inevitable, as though everything in the painting had to be placed in that way and that all of it had been laid down at the same time, rather than in sequence. "I never like that 'struggled' look./ BR: *You don't want the creative effort to show?*/ RR: That's right." Rose interview, p. 94. That is to say, there was no "first" or "next," which would again imply some sort of hierarchical ordering.

<sup>76</sup> Cited in Forge, *Rauschenberg*, p. 12.

<sup>77</sup> Rose interview, p. 85.

to force his original idea to work, he accepted that it had to change and tried something else.

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### ***The need for light***

As we have seen, Rauschenberg was thinking of light in plastic terms from the outset although he may not have been entirely conscious of the fact or consequences. While some accounts claim that the *White Paintings* were used as projection screens in Cage's "happening" at Black Mountain, Rauschenberg has denied this was ever the case.<sup>78</sup> Looked at from the perspective of de-hierarchizing painting that I've alluded to throughout the dissertation, it is clear why he would resist such a notion. As screens, the *White Paintings* are completely subordinate to the projection, no more than a blank receptor "ground" for the projected "figure." In the black paintings, on the other hand, surface and light are interdependent, which is brought into sharp relief through the lens of a camera.

"Ad Reinhardt once said that sculpture was what you tripped over when you stepped back to look at a painting," recalls Minimalist sculptor Carl Andre. "I replied that when you shut off the lights the painting disappeared—but you still tripped over the sculpture."<sup>79</sup> The need for light to see—and photograph—a painting takes the very literal form of light bulbs in Rauschenberg's combine-paintings. There are lights in several of the earliest combine-paintings, most of which date to 1954 (except where indicated): an untitled red painting with a novelty light bulb affixed to the top edge [fig. 4.39], the

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<sup>78</sup> Dorothea Rockburne, a fellow student in the summer of 1951, "thought they [the all-white paintings] were so beautiful and *full of light*"; emphasis mine. See Katz, *Black Mountain College*, p. 162.

<sup>79</sup> Carl Andre, "Questions for Carl Andre" (1982); reprinted in James Meyer, ed., *Cuts: texts 1959-2004* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005), p. 242.

untitled combine-painting with shelf and colored glass [fig. 4.40], *Charlene* [fig. 4.41] and *Odalisk* (1955/58) [fig. 4.42]. If a light fixture of some sort wasn't attached to the painting, then it often included reflective surfaces or areas covered with gauzy material that allowed light to filter through. The latter ranged from entire panels stretched with scrim rather than canvas as in *Pink Door* (1954) [fig. 2.32], to collage elements overlaid with sheer fabric. *Man with White Shoes* (1954) [fig. 4.43], *Red Interior* (1954) [fig. 4.44] and *Odalisk* feature a distinctive variant of this structural device: "shadow boxes" that cast silhouettes of their contents when backlit. It is not by coincidence that *Minutiae* [fig. 4.45], the free-standing combine created as the stage set for Merce Cunningham's 1954 dance piece of the same name, is pierced by several cut-outs that allow light to shine through.<sup>80</sup> And like any other surface in a combine-painting, whether the canvas or a collaged scrap of paper or the sweet face of an Angora goat, these diaphanous passages were fair game for a slap of paint by Rauschenberg's brush.

Many of these are also the same combine-paintings that Rauschenberg kept with him in the studio well into the life of the series, and photographed regularly and often. I suggest that the inclusion of working lights in these paintings evolved in response to this practice of photographing his work and the attendant need for illumination. He was quite clearly fascinated by the contradiction of photography: light is necessary in order to capture an image on film, and yet the picture must be developed in darkness.<sup>81</sup>

I consider the time in the darkroom a very special kind of time that can't be clocked. When I am in the darkroom I don't know whether I have been

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<sup>80</sup> *Minutiae* was first performed at the Brooklyn Academy of Arts in 1954. John Cage composed the score.

<sup>81</sup> The idea of a painting lurking in darkness is not one that often crosses the average museum-goer's mind. After all, lighting is a key aspect of any installation. Indeed, I wonder whether artists even consider this flipside to the need for light to continue working. I imagine that "living" among art works (ie, in when the artist's living and work space are one and the same) would make the thought more likely to cross one's mind. It is at any rate a curious thing to think about.

there for ten minutes or six hours. It's one of the only places where time only exists from accomplishment to accomplishment, because there is no other form of reference in the darkroom. You can't bring the television and the door should be locked, so it's a kind of cloister where you are performing an operation that takes time. The most important part of the medium is time, but you actually have to sacrifice the outside world time in order to measure the darkroom time.<sup>82</sup>

Many of his works reference the notion of an image coalescing in darkness, such as the *Night Blooming* (1951) series discussed in the second chapter, as well as the blueprint photogram entitled *Light Borne in Darkness* (1951).<sup>83</sup> Light is in fact the medium of photograms (Hopps characterizes the process as painting or drawing with light), and the realization of light's plasticity may very well have started with the blueprints.

At the same time, Rauschenberg's use of electric lights signaled a turning point in how he conceived of found objects as collage material, and indeed of painting itself. Rauschenberg observed: "Alight [*sic*] bulb in the dark can not show its self without showing you something else too."<sup>84</sup> That is to say, a lit bulb cannot be isolated from its environment. Neither can its function be repressed, quarantined or denied. The incandescence by which an electric light bulb works applied whether it was screwed into a fixture in "life" or screwed into a fixture in a painting. And anyway, both needed to be plugged into a socket in order to work. This realization gave Rauschenberg permission to use objects as they were without "art-ifying" them. The goal wasn't to make the objects "blend in" with the painting so that they looked at home there, but rather for them to retain something of their identity and "stand out." Giving a painting its own light source gave rise to the further realization of its relationship to the environment. "Trying to make

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<sup>82</sup> Sayag interview.

<sup>83</sup> Incidentally, "light borne," when said of horses, means easily guided, not hard-mouthed; OED (accessed 17 November 2009).

<sup>84</sup> Rauschenberg, "Random Order."

the light come from the painting. Adding the luminosity from the painting to match the environment. That was the first evidence I had of wanting the work to *be* the room itself. Instead of the work depending on input from the outside, it was self-sufficient.”<sup>85</sup> It makes sense then, why he considered screwing light bulbs into a painting the most inventive thing he’d done.

Rauschenberg was not only concerned with an individual combine-painting’s self-sufficiency from its environment, but the autonomy of the individual elements *within* a painting as well. A painting, being itself a possible arrangement or *combination* of composite parts, was subject to being dismantled and reworked. The parts were then once again free to play roles in alternate *collections*, which were necessarily different because of the changed context. A painting (panel) was furthermore variously the start of a painting, in process, or the completed work. Finally, paintings were not only those objects made by painters—painting “in the flesh,” so to speak—but also paintings in various forms of reproduction: photo-printed onto silk scarves, postcards, pages from art books and magazines, “exquisite full color,” “ready-to-frame” prints for the art reproduction collector.<sup>86</sup> So “painting” refers to a range of scales, with the smallest being the painting-as-collage-material, to the multi-panel combine-painting.

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<sup>85</sup> Rose interview, p. 56.

<sup>86</sup> One could subscribe to receive “portfolio” collections of high-quality, matted color reproductions of famous paintings that one was to use to follow the free “art appreciation course.” Advertisements for such programs can be found in art journals from the fifties. *ARTnews* (February 1954), p. 3. In 1950, Greenberg speaks appreciatively of advances in mass color-printing in a review of four art books on canonical figures in the history of painting (Picasso, Renoir, van Gogh and El Greco). The color in the books is described as “miraculous” and “superlative by comparison with what we have been accustomed to.” The volumes, Greenberg writes, deliver on the promises made in advertisements about the quality and number of color reproductions, and at a reasonable price. See Greenberg, “Realism and Beyond: Review of *The History of Modern Painting from Picasso to Surrealism* by Maurice Raynal et al, *Pierre-Auguste Renoir* by Walter Pach, *Vincent van Gogh* by Meyer Schapiro, and *El Greco* by Leo Bronstein” (1950); reprinted in O’Brian, ed., pp. 63-65.



The ambiguity of painting thus conceived resides in the radical impermanence of its situation. A combine-painting was not simply a matter of making a collage and calling it painting. Rauschenberg was able to work an unprecedented level of provisionality into the medium by running painting through the channel of collage (as Krauss puts it), not only in the conventional sense but as a condition of photography as well, thus making for a truly versatile and forgiving medium. I purposefully use “provisional” in place of “ephemeral,” which is the more common term used to describe collage. The latter places emphasis on the compromised lifespan of a collage because of the already-degraded materials used. “Provisional” better conveys the quality of a work being in flux, its current state a temporary one that can and will change.

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### ***Against the permanence of painting***

Collage has been understood as a provisional medium since its (modernist) inception with the *papiers-collés* exchanged between Braque and Picasso beginning in 1912. Aragon notes that *papiers-collés* were (mis-) taken as maquettes for paintings; Picasso himself called them “the anatomy plates for painting.” Aragon protests: “Nothing is more false. The *papier collé* is an end in itself.”<sup>87</sup> As a self-standing work of art, Aragon suggests that collage delivered yet another blow to the old myth of the genius artist, whose hand in making the physical materials used in a work was increasingly absent: “One can imagine a time when painters who no longer mix their own colors will find it infantile and unworthy to apply the paint themselves and will no longer consider the personal touch, which today still constitutes the value of their canvases, to possess

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<sup>87</sup> Aragon, “The Challenge to Painting.” See the footnote on pp. 53-54.

anything more than the documentary interest of...an autograph.<sup>88</sup> The signature, in such a state of affairs, is a superficial though necessary surrogate for what had been a palpable communion between artist and material, which no amount of training (technique) could compensate for if not inherent: “the painter, if we can still call him that, is no longer bound to his canvas by a mysterious physical relationship analogous to procreation.”<sup>89</sup>

The materials used to compose a collage, by comparison, are commonplace and touched by the hands of many. But this “homelessness” did not mean that a new relationship couldn’t be forged. Rauschenberg referred to the objects he used as “friends”:

I recognize the individuality of all objects, which is what I think that my art is about. It becomes a friend.... I don’t mean that it takes on human qualities, but if you can recognize something, then it has distinction. It has uniqueness. Anything that has uniqueness deserves respect....

Even though it’s just an old piece of can, that doesn’t stop me from falling in love with it.<sup>90</sup>

The communion between artist and material is reimagined in the age of mass production from creation to composition or arrangement. Gillo Dorfles: “Of late we have been witnessing (unfortunately) an increase in neo-dada experiments due to whimsy alone, and meant to astonish, shock, and therefore to publicize the author. There may be something of this in Rauschenberg, too; but in his case it is supported by a living communion with the mystery of creation, by great sensitivity to color and form, by an attentive participation in the conditions and situations of our time.”<sup>91</sup>

Much of what Rauschenberg used, in being mass-produced, was discarded *en masse*. He was therefore not obliged to reuse the same object in order to use it repeatedly.

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<sup>88</sup> Aragon, “The Challenge to Painting,” p. 55.

<sup>89</sup> Aragon, “The Challenge to Painting,” p. 57.

<sup>90</sup> Rose interview, p. 121.

<sup>91</sup> Gillo Dorfles, “Rauschenberg, or Obsolescence defeated,” *mETRO* 2 (Milan, 1961): 32-35.

That is to say, the pair of khakis used in *Kickback* (1959) [fig. 4.46] need not be the exact same pair used in *Dam* (1959) [fig. 4.47] because in a city of 8 million people, a worn-out pair was being thrown out every minute.<sup>92</sup> An off-white men's tie with "stripes" of clustered polka dots appears in both *Kickback* and *Wager* (1957-59) [fig. 4.48]. Men's wear was a popular choice: t-shirts, sweatshirts, collared shirts, shirt cuffs, pants, socks, and dress shoes. Another trademark was the taxidermied animal, which figure whole or in parts in nine combine-paintings.<sup>93</sup> They actually represent a small proportion of his total output (about 5% according to the count in the exhibition catalog, *Rauschenberg: combines*, which identifies over 150 works), but the presence of animals that by industry standards were made to seem especially life-like is hard to overlook, which explains why these nine paintings are also the best known.<sup>94</sup>

*Factum I* and *II* (1957) [fig. 4.49] are a very literal demonstration of the availability in multiples of mass-printed materials. Each painting contains the same newspaper clippings, the January 1958 to December 1958 pages from identical agendas, the same letter "T" from a poster, and swatches taken from the same printed fabrics. The elements are placed identically on the two canvases, one mirroring the other. Once the found collage elements were laid down, Rauschenberg painted around, over and on them with a loaded brush, first marking one canvas and then making the same mark on the

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<sup>92</sup> I'm unsure of the exact numbers. I only mean to imitate the convention for reporting statistics; eg, "1,500 Americans die of cancer every day," which are grim but true numbers for 2001, reported by the American Cancer Society.

<sup>93</sup> Untitled (Man with White Shoes) (c 1954), *Satellite* (1955), *Odalisk* (1955/ 58), *Hazard* (1957), *Painting with Grey Wing* (1959), *Canyon* (1959), *Inlet* (1959), *Monogram* (1955-59) and *Gold Standard* (1964). The combine-paintings with taxidermy seem to be concentrated in two phases of the series.

<sup>94</sup> A display in the University of Michigan's Museum of Natural History details the history of the institution's use and arrangement of taxidermied animals. According to the label, at about the time of Rauschenberg's animals, taxidermists first constructed a frame of the animal in a dynamic position over which the pelt would be laid. Finishing touches were then added by hand. The aim was to "capture" the animal as though it were in nature; for example, the eagle in flight in *Canyon*.

other. (He claims to have painted them simultaneously so that neither originated from the other.) Thus art-as-collage “has truly ceased to be individual.” It was not only a matter of not being able to honestly attribute an individual hand to a collage because of the mass-produced materials used, as Aragon means it. A collage could easily be remade or duplicated if mass-produced materials were used because, by their very nature, multiple copies of the same were available. It was then simply a question of duplicating the handmade part of the process, as *Factum I* and *II* seemed to make a point of demonstrating.<sup>95</sup>

By the mid-fifties, dripping paint marks had come to encapsulate the abstract expressionist way of painting, and Rauschenberg’s replicating such marks on two canvases has been understood as a parody of abstract expressionism’s claims to the singular, authentic, expressive gesture of the artist’s hand.<sup>96</sup> Cage finds a more constructive lesson in them than a pointed critique of abstract expressionism, however. For him the crux of these paintings lies not in the repetition of elements but in the variance across repetition: paint will never drip the same way twice, the scissor in hand will never waver in the same pattern clipping out two images even if they are identical, and two canvases painted at the same time and with the same material will never patina in synchronicity. The realization was eye-opening:

Hallelujah! The blind can see again. Blind to what he has seen so that seeing this time is as though first seeing. How is it that one experiences this, for example, with the two Eisenhower pictures which for all intents and purposes are the same? (A duplication containing duplications.) Everything is so much the same, one becomes acutely aware of the differences, and quickly. And where, as here, the intention is unchanging,

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<sup>95</sup> Aragon, “The Challenge to Painting,” p. 60. “The marvelous must be made by all and not by one,” p. 72.

<sup>96</sup> For example, see Paul Schimmel, “The Faked Gesture,” in Russell Ferguson, ed., *Hand-painted pop: American art in transition, 1955-62*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1992), pp. 19-66.

it is clear that the differences are unintentional, as unintended as they were in the white paintings where nothing was done.<sup>97</sup>

These inconsistencies support rather than challenge the matchlessness of any single intention's outcome, even if the intention is to replicate that outcome. More to the point, they demonstrate that two identical elements can never be used in the same way, because they are not the same thing.

Looked at from Cage's point of view, a case could be made for the uniqueness of any individual collage even if it appears to be a copy of another, which is one of the conditions for art. However, the non-luxury nature of collage material combined with the attendant do-it-yourself scrapbook aesthetic makes it look "cheap" as compared to painting: "[Painting] is a luxury item. The canvas is a jewel.... Collage is poor. For a long time to come its value will be denied. It appears to be freely reproducible. Everyone believes they can make their own."<sup>98</sup> This is precisely the point, for using such material offers painters an out from the "moneyed domestication" that art had suffered in recent decades: "Today, patrons...display side by side their furniture and the paintings with which they brighten their walls. The style of the Café du Dôme or of the bourgeois apartment now necessitates the inclusion of a Brancusi or a Miró."<sup>99</sup> This taste for the ephemeral is absolutely counter to what Aragon describes as that "instinct" for permanence "which causes painters to brood ignobly over their own work."<sup>100</sup> That is to say, the weight that painters place on the creation of each canvas says something of the value they accord to their work.

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<sup>97</sup> Cage, "On Robert Rauschenberg," p. 43.

<sup>98</sup> Aragon, "The Challenge to Painting," p. 61.

<sup>99</sup> Aragon, "The Challenge to Painting," p. 61.

<sup>100</sup> Aragon, "The Challenge to Painting," p. 68.

Art magazines from the fifties are filled with advertisements for tubes of paint, oils and varnishes that presume permanence is a top priority for painters (see appendix). “Weber Vehicles give the painting *extra* life—help keep the colors pure, brilliant, unchanging.” One brand says it all with the name: “permanent pigments.”<sup>101</sup> Another capitalizes on the new technology of plastic: “MAGNA!—revolutionary in development, and revolutionary in its end-result: for in MAGNA, the pigments are *locked* in the molecular structure of the vehicle. The color and the carrier are not simply blended; they are actually and ideally *one!*... MAGNA IS PERMANENT! The miracle new plastic vehicle preserves the eternal, unchanging essence of color as the oil oils never could. Under Fadeometer tests equal to 200 years of aging, Magna colors remain constant!”<sup>102</sup> A column in the October 1950 issue of *Art Digest* written by Ralph Mayer, a practicing artist, addresses the question of alternatives to canvas for paintings, namely panels made of wood, paper board or metal. Mayer equates easel paintings to “works of a serious or permanent nature.” Masonite Presdwood is preferred because of “an equal, if not better, expectancy of permanence in our climate than wood.”<sup>103</sup> Museums safeguard exceptional works for future generations and posterity in climate-controlled and security-patrolled vaults, further confirming that paintings are inherent treasures. The main goal of a work of art is to stick around in as close to the original condition as possible.

The politics of collage artists, on the other hand, run counter to the painter’s. They subscribe to a logic of impermanence (Aragon gives the extreme example of Picabia’s picture drawn with chalk on a blackboard for the express purpose of being erased) and make “objects particularly ill-suited for entry into the Louvre,... which nevertheless find

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<sup>101</sup> *ARTnews* (January 1954), p. 72.

<sup>102</sup> *ARTnews* (December 1953), p. 49.

<sup>103</sup> Ralph Mayer, “The Material Side: Panels,” *Art Digest* (October 1950), p. 26.

their way in, since everything gets classified.”<sup>104</sup> Like Aragon, Krauss attributes a politics of subversion to collage in her consideration of Rauschenberg’s use of the technique in the combine-paintings: his use of common junk objects undermined the painting’s stature as a unique object of value, and challenged its fate of luxury-object-ification as a commodity hanging in a living room.<sup>105</sup> In the mid-seventies, when Krauss was writing her article, Rauschenberg was increasingly vocal about his opinion of the institutionalization and gross commercialization of the art world (as everyone was) following the landmark Scull sale in October 1973, which set a record for contemporary painting at \$2,242,900. Rauschenberg, whose work was on the auction block, was present at the event. Two of his paintings were in the sale: *Double Feature*, which was bought for \$2,500 and sold for \$90,000, and *Thaw*, which the Sculls paid \$900 for and received \$85,000 back. Afterwards he bitterly denounced the “profiteering of dealers and collectors” to the press.<sup>106</sup>

It makes sense, then, that Krauss frames Rauschenberg’s practice in such terms. When he started the series in 1954, however, Rauschenberg was not in a position to be accusing buyers of “infidelity.” In fact, he hardly had any buyers at all. As Carol Vogel reports,

In those days, Mr. Rauschenberg said, he was so poor he had to sell everything he made as fast as he could...

Once he walked 30 blocks uptown with one of his so-called black paintings—canvases with expressionistic black brush strokes that incorporated odd bits of detritus—and tried to sell it to a rich collector for \$15. ‘I won’t say who,’ Mr. Rauschenberg said impishly.

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<sup>104</sup> Calls to mind *Erased de Kooning Drawing*. The aim for both pictures is to be erased.

<sup>105</sup> Krauss, “Rauschenberg and the Materialized Image,” p. 38.

<sup>106</sup> Jerry E. Patterson, “Facts, figures, questions about the Scull sale,” *ARTnews* (December 1973), p. 80. Earlier in the year *ARTnews* ran an article on “The growing corporate involvement in the arts” (January 1973).

“She said she couldn’t buy it so cheap,” he continued. “I almost gave it to her, at the thought of walking another 30 blocks home with the painting. But I thought, well, if she couldn’t afford to pay so little for it, she certainly couldn’t afford to take it for nothing.”<sup>107</sup>

The story is corroborated by Emile de Antonio who represented many of the pop artists early in their careers. He recalls that in 1955, “you couldn’t give away one of [Rauschenberg’s] paintings.”<sup>108</sup> Vogel continues that Rauschenberg, “longing to reclaim a ‘Combine’ for himself,” bought back *Aen Floga* (1961) for \$1.5 million from the estate of the New York collector who’d paid \$1,000 for it—another bitter pill to swallow, no doubt.

A photograph of a combine-painting by Rauschenberg hanging in a collector’s dining room drives this last point home [fig. 4.50]. *Rebus* (1955) [fig. 4.51], formerly owned by Victor Ganz and now at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, features three panels, parts of which are plastered with fabrics of various sorts: a kitchen towel, a few kerchiefs, a square of paisley print (he was rather fond of this motif, which appears in several combine-paintings, or perhaps it was everywhere available). A series of color strips that run across the length of the three panels divides the work into lower and upper halves. Above the strips, several different types of printed reproductions have been arranged square with the canvas, each image, as a general rule, given its own space (ie, not layered over another). These include a section of campaign posters torn off of a wall (the part where the paper was buckling away) graffiti-ed with the “Pony Boys,” a Vermont cowboy group whose music was very popular at the time; pictures taken from books or magazines on art (Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus* and a page from *ARTnews* on Durer’s sketches), sports (track runners caught mid-stride on film) and insects; the

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<sup>107</sup> Carol Vogel, “The Robert Rauschenberg Reunion Tour,” *New York Times* (18 December 2005), p. 38.

<sup>108</sup> Warhol, *POPism*, p. 5.



obligatory scraps of newspapers and the funnies; and pre-printed wallpaper.<sup>109</sup> After these elements were affixed to the canvas, Rauschenberg added his own hand with vigorous paint strokes that dripped down the canvas as they dried, and pencil scribblings. Twombly's hand is represented here as well with a drawing. There is not a single section of the painting that one could characterize as neat, and the large areas of bare canvas were inevitably soiled as Rauschenberg worked on it, and further yellowed with age. The paint drips in *Rebus* perfectly complement the mass of cords that "drip" off *Ennead* (1966) by Eva Hesse, which hangs to the left. Juxtaposed against the clean lines and refined elegance of the glass dining table and leather chairs (and the abstract Picasso on the other wall), the two paintings look dirty, messy and—truth be told, rather ludicrous. Krauss is onto something when she says that works of art like Rauschenberg's and Hesse's have "everything to do with understanding it, 'getting it,' seeing its point, and nothing to do with owning it."<sup>110</sup> Outside of the space of the studio and in isolation, a combine-painting looks out of place.

The several photographs of Rauschenberg in his studio with five of his earliest combine-paintings, on the other hand, show them in their element: they are at home. I have been arguing that Rauschenberg was working towards a more fluid and flexible version of painting than the typical easel variety with the process of collage and modular, multi-panel construction. A photograph in the case of a painting that can be altered after its picture is taken becomes a snapshot of the work at a particular moment—the (combine-) painting is in no way bound to its form as captured on film. At the same time, these photographs clearly show that he was attached to and invested in how certain works

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<sup>109</sup> Thank you, Alex, for clarification regarding the Pony Boys.

<sup>110</sup> Krauss, "Rauschenberg and the Materialized Image."

had come together. The oft-photographed works were “thought pieces” that Rauschenberg used to work through specific problems, any number of which can be located in these five densely articulated prototypes, thus generating the larger body of combine-paintings that *were* for sale.

The photographs also suggest that Rauschenberg found a certain advantage in “reading” the paintings’ varied terrain of pictorial and non-pictorial elements as a unified and flat image, with the differentiation of material properties blunted and homogenized. Kirk Varnedoe’s discussion of the place of photography in Rodin’s studio practice is particularly relevant since the photographs, he argues, show the sculptor’s lack of concern for conventional hierarchies and boundaries within the field of artistic endeavor, much like Rauschenberg. Photography challenged the artist’s preconceived image of his own work, and could be used to provide detachment. “Photography, not only by affording him a quick method of objectifying his work, but also by providing him cheap and dispensable miniature surrogates, facilitated the roles of reflection, experiment, and play (in the most serious sense) in his process of creation.” Significantly, Rodin’s—and Rauschenberg’s—photographs were conceived primarily as private documents, intimately connected with the working life of the studio.<sup>111</sup>

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### ***Conclusion***

Benjamin found it curious, “how much more readily apprehensible a picture, sculpture, and architecture are in a photo than in reality,” the reason being that “methods of mechanical reproduction are a technique of diminution that helps people to achieve a

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<sup>111</sup> Kirk Varnedoe, “Rodin and Photography,” in Albert E. Elsen, ed., *Rodin rediscovered* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, c1981), pp. 204-07.

degree of mastery over the works of art.”<sup>112</sup> Photographing an object causes a change in scale that, in the case of art, is almost always of diminution, thus transforming it into an image that can be grasped in the hand and held up to the eye. A photograph places a subject that in the world extends beyond one’s field of vision, the whole of which can only be taken in by scanning from one end to the other, within a frame that can be apprehended all at once.

This capacity for photography to miniaturize and hence enable mastery over great works is for Benjamin analogous to commodification: “photography has made more and more segments of the field of optical perception into saleable commodities. It has conquered for commodity circulation objects which up to then had been virtually excluded from it.”<sup>113</sup> That is to say, photography renders the service of making reproductions quickly and mechanically at little additional cost, its very procedure inherently exploitable by and for the commodity economy. Photography was servant to the arts as well: in the hands of many a painter, photographs, cheaply and readily available, became a technical adjunct, as they did in Picasso’s hands. In these scenarios, photography is completely instrumentalized to serve a higher end, the relationship marked by a base utilitarianism. We now know Rauschenberg resisted such a subjection of one element to another, its use for an end other than its own. The whole of his practice embodies this idealistic wish for all elements of a work to have equal representation, so to speak, and retain autonomy, most obvious in his career-long commitment to collage.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Benjamin, “Little History of Photography,” p. 290.

<sup>113</sup> Benjamin, “Letter from Paris (2),” p. 303.

<sup>114</sup> Rauschenberg has remarked on his astrological sign and how it might account for certain personality traits. This idea of “fairness” among composite pieces is very much in line with a Libran sensibility.

Rauschenberg insisted that the semantic issue of what to call his works was not very interesting for him, and that the neologism *combine-painting* had in fact arose

because some people started saying my work was more like sculpture than painting, while others disagreed and said it was more like painting than sculpture. Instead of actually *looking* at the work of art, they would argue why it looked more like sculpture or painting. It went on and on... so I had to start calling the work I was doing something... My work was sculpture and painting, a combination of the two. So the next time someone asked me, I said “combine”. After that no one asked.<sup>115</sup>

Though Rauschenberg claims his work was a combination of sculpture and painting, painting is without question the privileged term—we do not now speak of combine-sculptures. “I was already out in the room. By the time you stretch the canvas you are out in the room.”<sup>116</sup> Further, “I think they [the different arts] weren’t ever as far apart as has been implied by this exaggeration about whether you are doing three-dimensional or you’re doing flat something.”<sup>117</sup> To think in terms of a work of art imag(in)ed as a picture, rather than the specific (type of) picture itself, enables us to consider varied practices together as engaged in the same project, which, under the regime of medium-specificity and the questions of dimensionality that dominate this discourse, was precluded. For Rauschenberg, this way of thinking about painting—and precisely the reason why painting, for him, could take such a wide range of forms so long as the work was pictorially oriented—crystallized in and through his engagement with photography. Rauschenberg’s work gives us the opportunity to go beyond what Barthes very appropriately refers to as the “usual blah-blah” of photography—“Technique,” “Reality,” “Reportage,” “Art,” etc.

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<sup>115</sup> J. M. Olson, “Rauschenberg, the Extraordinary Ragpicker,” *Soho Weekly News* (31 March 1977), p. 23; cited in Feinstein, *Random Order*, p. 191.

<sup>116</sup> Rauschenberg, “Is Easel Painting Dead?” transcript, p. 3.

<sup>117</sup> Rauschenberg, “Is Easel Painting Dead?” transcript, p. 23.

## Conclusion

### *Assemblage, Environments & Happenings— and Painting*

Jasper Johns remarked that the combine-paintings were a “fantastically prolific conception of what art was.”<sup>1</sup> The innovations embodied by Rauschenberg’s combine-paintings, beyond their obvious move into three-dimensions, afforded him a far more flexible and provisional form of painting than the traditional easel picture. His practice of working on panels as opposed to a single surface allowed composite pieces of any painting to be interchangeable and rearrangeable such that a painting was not bound to a “final” configuration until it left the studio. This further implied that a painting on an individual panel could also become a composite of a larger, multi-panel painting, as we saw him do with “failed” paintings in the last chapter. It is indeed possible that Rauschenberg thought of the entire series as a body or set of modular units. The option to change a combine-painting post-haste was “built into” its composite form, an idea that, as we saw in chapter two, had its genesis in the black paintings. This provisionality also functioned at what one might call the micro-level of the collage form that typified the surface of his paintings: an element could always be added to or taken away without destroying the “unity” of the work.

The possibilities were endless, not only for Rauschenberg, but for the young artists who were his main audience during this period. They saw in his characteristic way

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<sup>1</sup> Jasper Johns, cited in Calvin Tomkins, “Everything in Sight,” *The New Yorker* (23 May 2005), pp. 75-76.

of working between and across all media an alternative to the dead-end of abstract expressionist painting. Allan Kaprow, one of the young impressionable artists that Rauschenberg inspired, was particularly instrumental in shaping understandings of the combine-paintings and their relationship to the new performance-based art that he pioneered. Whereas Rauschenberg remained fairly committed to the painting's rapport with the wall, Kaprow expanded upon the idea of assemblage implicit to the form of the combine-paintings and moved into the room, filling the entire space or becoming one, which he termed "environments" [fig. 5.1].<sup>2</sup> In these spaces Kaprow staged theatrical "happenings" about nothing of seeming consequence (one was about "the life and death of a chicken vendor") and no material form after the events [fig. 5.2].

At the same time that Kaprow was pioneering these radical new forms of art making, he was also thinking about the broader implications of these new practices. Trained as an art historian, Kaprow wrote prolifically throughout his career as a practicing artist, continually reflecting on the historical and theoretical bases of his art. His writings on assemblage, environments and happenings were particularly instrumental in the construction of a particular narrative that has artists of his milieu abandoning painting and inaugurating a postmodern, postmedium sensibility for contemporary art. However, the common perception that the younger artists' move into room-size multimedia works and performance was tantamount to a rejection of painting misrepresents the link between these arts.

Kaprow's book *Assemblage, Environments & Happenings* examines the role of painting in the phenomenon of "mixed media" in art. Kaprow understands

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<sup>2</sup> *Off the Wall* is the title of Tomkins's user-friendly account of Rauschenberg's life and art, a double entendre that refers to both the artist's career-long reputation for being unconventional, as well as his practice of using real objects that activated the viewer's awareness of the space around a painting.

Rauschenberg's combine-paintings and assemblages like them to be at the forefront of painting's erasure of the distinctions between media:

[A] large body of diverse compositions referred to as Combines (Robert Rauschenberg's name for his own work), Neo-Dada, or Assemblage employs a variety of materials and objects in an equally varied range of formats, completely departing from the accepted norms required by "painting" as we have known it. But this has brought sharply into focus the fact that *the room has always been a frame or format too*, and that this shape is inconsistent with the forms and expression emerging from the work in question....

Rather than fight against the confines of a typical room, many [younger artists] are actively considering working out in the open....

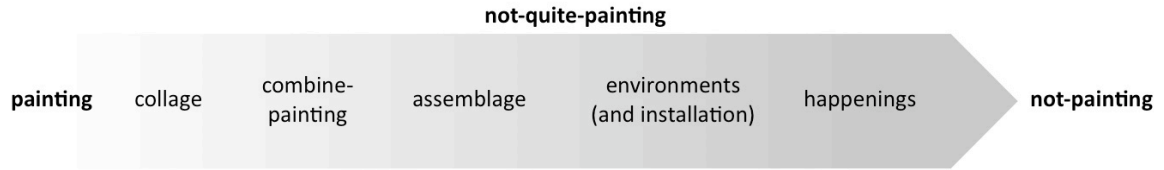
It should be evident from the foregoing that this suggests a crisis of sorts. Quite apart from the aesthetic re-evaluation it forces upon us, its immediate practical effect is to render the customary gallery situation obsolete.

What is important is to examine in some specific detail the principles involved, particularly with respect to painting. For the painters, with the relatively greater freedom their medium has allowed, have led the movement that has tended to erase the borders between their art and its related media.<sup>3</sup>

If this is the case, painting did not expire *per se* but was rather transformed into what Kaprow refers to as "not-quite-painting" that, crucially, does not simply go full-tilt into sculpture. Painting thus conceived is not a disjunctive syllogism, whereby a work of art is *either* a painting, *or* not. Indeed, such mutual exclusion was already being shown to be increasingly irrelevant by the blurred boundaries between the arts. The domain of alternatives to painting does not lie outside of the parameters of painting, but rather within the two poles "painting" and "not painting," and in effect constitutes a continuum that is opened up by thinking in such terms:

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<sup>3</sup> Kaprow, *Assemblage, Environments & Happenings*, pp. 154-55.



Whereas cubist collage remained “conventionally pictorial,” the most interesting alternatives to “pure” painting in Kaprow’s view required “relinquishing the goal of picture-making entirely by accepting the possibilities that lay in using a broken surface and a nongeometric field.”<sup>4</sup> By “picture” Kaprow means a representation or depiction that is distinguished from its (real and actual) environment, and he stresses that “painting” is not necessarily “picture-making,” this equivalence being a holdover from the Western tradition of painting. “Painting had become symbol rather than power, i.e., something which *stood for* experience rather than *acting directly upon it*.”<sup>5</sup>

Rauschenberg’s combine-paintings freed painting from having to represent things by using their readily available representations, or the very things themselves. In a happening, painting is one of a number of things that happen. Here we have the logical extension of Rauschenberg’s combine-paintings, as well as Kaprow’s early conception of the new painting, wherein paint is but one of “objects of every sort” that are materials for the new art. Conceptually, one might consider this a dehierarchization of the field of painting at a meta-level, where painting fits in relation to other actions, and in a sense finally liberating itself from action-painting or painting-as-action, and enabling the new painting to not-represent not only objects, but also abstract ideas like movement, sound, effects, impressions and feelings. Pictoriality is enfolded into this because the “not-quite-

<sup>4</sup> Kaprow, *Assemblage, Environments & Happenings*, p. 159. The larger point that Kaprow is making here is that art should shape and have a direct effect on life, rather than simply re-presenting it for contemplation, as traditional painting did.

<sup>5</sup> Kaprow, *Assemblage, Environments & Happenings*, p. 156.



paintings” of these experiences are still distinguished from the actual experiences themselves, much in the same way that pictures were “set apart” from their environment. The operation is no longer of depiction or representation.

Counterintuitively, the new painting was comprised of the same natural phenomena that have served as the principal subject of painting since its inception. The material of the new painting is not simply the “stuff” of nature—a leaf, a bird, pebbles, a butterfly—combined into new “molecules,” but our direct sensory experience of them as well: the *green* of a leaf, the *sound* of a bird, the *roughness* of pebbles under one’s feet, the *fluttering past* of a butterfly. While the material of this different kind of art is infinitely diverse, the process for making it is built on a single premise: juxtaposition, or, in Rauschenberg’s plainer terms, combination:

Each of these occurs in time and space and is perfectly natural and infinitely flexible. From such a rudimentary yet wonderful event, a principle of the materials and organization of a creative form can be built. To begin, we admit the usefulness of any subject matter or experience whatsoever. Then we juxtapose this material—it can be known or invented, “concrete” or “abstract”—to produce the structure and body of our own work....

The theory, being flexible, does not say how much of one element or another must be used. *Because I have come from painting, my present work is definitely weighted in a visual direction while the sounds and odors are less complex.* Any of these aspects of our tastes and experiences may be favored. There is no rule that says all must be equal.<sup>6</sup>

Kaprow acknowledges that his environments and happenings were inevitably visually—and thus pictorially—oriented because his background was as a painter, which was the case for many artists of his generation experimenting with these new forms.

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<sup>6</sup> Kaprow, “Notes on the Creation of a Total Art” (1958), in Kelley, ed., *Essays on the blurring of art and life*, pp. 10-11, emphasis mine.

### *The debt to painting*

Environments were explicitly conceived as expanded paintings; i.e., painting-as-environment. An entire indoor space was treated as a single compositional field, thus enabling painting to do and be more than it could when committed to a wall. An environment was in essence a room-size painting that one could “Go IN instead of LOOK AT.”<sup>7</sup> Jim Dine confesses, “Frankly, what I did in so-called Environments was just larger works than painting or sculpture could be at that time.”<sup>8</sup> “This principle,” Kaprow explains, “may be named simply *extension*. Molecule-like, the materials (including paint) at one’s disposal grow in any desired direction and take on any shape whatsoever.”<sup>9</sup> Further, “the last vestiges of picture making have fallen away. The work begins to actively engulf the air around it, giving it shape, dividing it into parts, weighing” — all the while making a strong visual statement.

This new format of painting was not only spatial, but utilized radically new media: “the specific substances of sight, sound, movements, people, odors, touch. Objects of every sort are materials for the new art: paint, chairs, food, electric and neon lights, smoke, water, old socks, a dog, movies, a thousand other things that will be discovered by the present generation of artists.”<sup>10</sup> It was precisely the mixed-media nature of assemblage and environments that distinguished them from their traditional analogues, sculpture and architecture. The range and use of materials communicated the message that this was a radically new and nontraditional art. There was also a political economic

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<sup>7</sup> Kaprow, minutes of meeting with Allan Kaprow, 2 November 1959, Judson Memorial Church Archive, New York; cited in Julie H. Reiss, *From Margin to Center: The Spaces of Installation Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), p. 24.

<sup>8</sup> Dine, in Reiss, *From Margin to Center*, p. 17.

<sup>9</sup> Kaprow, *Assemblage, Environments & Happenings*, p. 159.

<sup>10</sup> See Joseph, “The Gap and Frame,” p. 48.

dimension to using junk for art, as Julie H. Reiss points out in her important history of installation art: “In an era that celebrated American prosperity and consumerism, there was a critique implicit in the use of the throwaway remains and excess of that culture. The use of junk could be seen as an assault on high art and the elite audience that it traditionally served.”<sup>11</sup>

Richard Bellamy, one of the founders of Hansa Gallery, where many of the first environments were shown, and then of the Green Gallery, the site of many seminal minimalist installations, wryly noted of Kaprow’s environments, “Nothing could be sold, nothing was purchasable in the exhibition... No one at that time or even now [1963] is prepared to purchase an environment by an artist.”<sup>12</sup> As I discussed in the final chapter, collage has been read as a subversion of or reaction against the preciousness and uniqueness of painting. One finds, however, that more damage can be done to painting from within, *as* painting rather than against it. Environments, as temporary constructions made of ephemeral, disposable material that were meant to be dismantled when the exhibition closed, refashioned painting into something that could not be sold or hung in the posh living rooms of collectors. “The ‘terrible children’ invaded Martha Jackson’s Gallery last May and June with more of those baffling *non-commercial commodities*, things you can’t use or sell or label even.”<sup>13</sup>

Paradoxically, the temporary existence of these free-form, ad-hoc and haphazard constructions made with junk that was meant to preclude commodification has also had the reverse effect, imbuing them with a romantic ephemerality that transforms traces of

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<sup>11</sup> Reiss, *From Margin to Center*, p. 22.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Bellamy, interview by Richard Brown Baker (1963), Archives of American Art; cited in Reiss, *From Margin to Center*, pp. 27-28.

<sup>13</sup> Jill Johnston, “‘Environments’ at Martha Jackson’s,” cited in Reiss, *From Margin to Center*, p. 36.

their existence into mnemonic vessels. One grows attached to the *idea* of the event or installation. Carolyn Brown recalls Niki de Saint Phalle breaking down in tears when leaving behind the installation that had served as her set for a happening:

Behind the Renaissance Club, one of the jazz spots on Sunset Boulevard, Niki had built a fantastic structure out of dozens of commonplace objects such as headless Maidenform-bra busts, an umbrella, mannequin heads, a baby seat, a child's scooter, a vacuum cleaner, cans of spray paint, artificial flowers, and Coke bottles. She'd then painted everything flat white. Dressed in a tight, white, space-lady bodysuit with black boots, shotgun in hand, she strode from place to place, mounted ladders and tables, took careful aim, and fired.... A stunning sight to behold. And what a fabulously good shot!.... As her meticulously placed shots found their mark in the cans of paint, a glorious array of *Vogue* decorator colors...splattered over, trickled down, sprayed across, stained and misted the formerly stark white three-dimensional wall of objects. The grand finale was a final shot into a tear-gas bomb! What street theater!.... [Later that evening, at a café,] Niki called Bob into a back room, burst into tears, and sobbed uncontrollably. She'd intended her work to have only the life of the moment—no afterlife.... Nothing to hang on a wall, nothing to sell, nothing even to view a second time. But walking away from the work without one glance at the results...was apparently intolerable to her. Later she did go back and took away four parts of it, but she told Bob she felt like a whore for doing it. Of course she was not the only scavenger. The next day we all went back for souvenirs, including Bob.<sup>14</sup>

Such a performance can never be recovered, which is fundamental to the concept. As de Saint Phalle's actions show, nostalgia for the lost original is often displaced onto the remainders of the event. Trash from the streets used to build an environment inspires sentimentality (recall how Rauschenberg couldn't help from "falling in love with" an old piece of can), and throwing it back into the garbage comes to seem overly repudiative. Photographs of temporary installations and performances accrue the authority of documentation of an irretrievable past.

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<sup>14</sup> Brown, *Chance and circumstance*, pp. 344-45.

Reiss identifies photography of installations as one of four main sources by which they can be reconstituted, however imperfectly, for analysis. “The photograph,” she writes, “preserves ephemeral art, and many major installations have been photographed. Because it is documentation rather than reproduction (a two-dimensional image of a three-dimensional space), the photograph of an installation cannot function as a substitute for the original.... Still, the photograph can be an extremely useful tool if viewed critically. The way an installation has been photographed says a great deal about the piece and its context.”<sup>15</sup> Contrast this to Kaprow’s “Note on the photographs,” found fifteen plates deep into *Assemblage, Environments & Happenings*:

Photographs of art works have their own reality and sometimes they are art in turn. Those taken of the subject of this book tend to be particularly free. They refer to their models, but strangely, as would a movie taken of a dream, stopped at unexpected intervals. A movie of a dream cannot be the dream, and a frame, here and there pulled from it, must leave the viewer guessing even more. Yet guessing is dreaming too, and if we can never know another man's dream as he knows it, we can come close to the spirit of his activity by engaging in a similar process. Beyond art, sharing in dream processes is probably what we call reality.<sup>16</sup>

Kaprow suggests that photographs of art works are freeze-frames of a continuous process, which is quite different from how Reiss conceives of them, as preserving static, finished works of art. Having established the shape of the new painting, the next task is to ask: what happens to the process of conceiving a painting when it takes such a form?

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Kaprow’s description of making an environment as compared to a conventional painting is illuminating in this regard:

In the freest of these works the field...is created as one goes along, rather than being there *a priori*, as in the case of the canvas of certain

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<sup>15</sup> Reiss, *From Margin to Center*, p. xix.

<sup>16</sup> Kaprow, *Assemblage, Environments & Happenings*, p. 21.

dimensions. It is a process.... Thus, if extension is the principle, it “begins” much less definitely than the first mark placed upon a canvas, whose relations to the outer edges are quickly weighed by any competent painter. However, unless one works out in the open, it must be admitted that old responses geared to a canvas’s dimensions and character are probably now transferred to the three-dimensional measurements of the room, and this may be a response to a “field.” But it is a different point of departure from the accepted pictorial one, being basically environmental.

This space is...a direct heritage of painting—therefore it is important to remember that the innovations which are under discussion have primarily grown out of the advanced painting of the last decade. For purely pictorial phenomena play a strong part. Effects of a painterly kind occur when two or more separated objects containing one or more elements in common (say the color red) appear to contradict or warp the literal space by the tendency of the mind to resolve them into a single spatial unit. This is quite similar to using a red in the foreground of a picture and the same color in the background, which allows them to be seen as one plane, thus restoring ‘flatness’ to the painting even while it is three-dimensional.<sup>17</sup>

A practice of painting wherein drawings or sketches no longer play the role they had in a more linear practice (i.e., one that begins with a concept or idea that is logically followed through to its realization in the final work) must also denote a shift in the creative, conceptual process of painting.

Rauschenberg always stressed the collaborative aspect of his working method, underscoring the contingent nature of his painting process. He did not go into a piece with a preconceived idea of what he was going to make. Rather, Rauschenberg’s combine-paintings were “worked out” directly on the panels, and so their conception did not proceed across intermediary surfaces. Furthermore, although the combine-paintings were, like environments, made of junk, they were meant to exist as a work—i.e., they weren’t *all* about process: the result mattered as well. Neither did he have to figure out how to represent something, which was another function served by sketches, since the use of real objects made that issue moot; nor plan out the composition. The “canvas” or,

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<sup>17</sup> Kaprow, *Assemblage, Environments & Happenings*, pp. 159-60.

in Kaprow's more general terms, the rectilinear field of painting, nevertheless remains the site or physical location of the work. It just so happened that in combine-paintings, process and conception played out on the same stage.

Despite the ostensible haphazardness with which environments were constructed, seeming to have been literally thrown together, they were in fact the product of schematic drawings and descriptive notes that were often scribbled on whatever paper happened to be on hand. On November 30, 1957 Kaprow attended the premiere of a suite of Cunningham dances at the Brooklyn Academy of Music: *Labyrinthian Dances*, *Changeling* and *Picnic Polka*. Rauschenberg by this time was fully committed to the Company as artistic director, designing costumes and sets. It was in this capacity that he produced one of his first combine-paintings, *Minutiae*. Given the centrality of photography in Rauschenberg's artistic sensibility, it is not surprising that he, according to Brown, fell in love with the company through the lens of his camera. (He would go to rehearsals to take photographs of the company at work for publicity.) "In the immediacy of the dancing (as opposed to painting), in the physicality and discipline it required, and in the familial spirit of our work atmosphere, he saw something he wanted to be a part of."<sup>18</sup>

Kaprow seems to have likewise been inspired by the company. Scribbled onto his program are ideas and notes for a happening: a list of what looks to be props, a sequence of nine actions, a diagram of the performance space [fig. 5.3]. He later added a stick figure drawing indicating specific movements. (He would have been taking Cage's class on experimental composition, and so it is likely that he was doing "homework.") At this

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<sup>18</sup> Brown, *Chance and circumstance*, pp. 83-84.

early stage in the development of happenings, Kaprow's pictorial imagination is especially legible in the drafts of his scores, conceived with a self-conscious awareness of how the event would look as and in pictures. "There are many ways to interpret a Happening," said Claes Oldenburg, "but one way is to use it as an extension of painting space," or the surface area of the painting.<sup>19</sup>

Pictoriality, because of its association with painting during a period when the notion of the death of painting was entering artistic discourse, has been downplayed in installation and performance art. Nevertheless, Rauschenberg's combine-paintings also serve within the developmental trajectory for art put forth by Donald Judd in the seminal text "Specific Objects" (1965), in which he identified the emergent trend of artists making three-dimensional constructions that ostensibly rejected painting [fig. 5.4].<sup>20</sup> This new work was neither painting nor sculpture—but neither was it *between* painting and sculpture; it was rather related in higher or lesser degree to *either* painting *or* sculpture. The motivation for using three dimensions was to get clear of these forms, which had become too particular and convention-bound. However, Judd emphasizes this attitude towards painting and sculpture was "disinterest," downplaying any perceived seditious intent in the new three-dimensional work.

For Judd and the minimalists, painting's move into three dimensions was the result of a stringent formalism that was very much in dialogue with modernist formalism. "The main thing wrong with painting," Judd writes, "is that it is a rectangular plane placed flat against the wall. A rectangle is a shape itself; it is obviously the whole shape; it determines the arrangement of whatever is on or inside of it.... The composition must

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<sup>19</sup> Oldenburg, interview with Glaser; cited in Reiss, *From Margin to Center*, p. 6.

<sup>20</sup> Donald Judd, "Specific Objects," *Arts Yearbook* 8 (1965): 74-81.



react to the edges and the rectangle must be unified, but the shape of the rectangle is not stressed; the parts are more important, and the relationships of color and form occur among them,” and not with the rectangle that is the shape of the painting.<sup>21</sup> Judd draws attention to the non-relationship between the rectilinear form of the painting and its content, or what is pictured in the painting. At the same time, the rectangle structures the composition, defining its edges, even as the shape is entirely subordinate to what it circumscribes.

In the new painting, Judd observes a reassertion of the rectangular shape long associated with painting, establishing it as a definite form. Such a painting becomes “nearly an entity, one thing, and not the indefinable sum of a group of entities and references.”<sup>22</sup> “In the new work the shape, image, color and surface are single and not partial and scattered. There aren’t any neutral or moderate areas or parts, any connections or transitional areas.”<sup>23</sup> The unity of shape and image is a cornerstone of minimalist aesthetic theory, which owed much to *gestalt* psychology.<sup>24</sup> Despite the new work’s “obvious” resemblance to sculpture in its use of three dimensions, it is in fact “nearer to painting,” Judd claims.<sup>25</sup> His own objects were wood and metal boxes fitted with Plexiglas in rich jewel tones [fig. 5.5]. This engagement with relationships of color and form is more in the realm of painting than sculpture, in which, as he points out, there is seldom any color.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Judd, “Specific Objects,” p. 75.

<sup>22</sup> Judd, “Specific Objects,” p. 76.

<sup>23</sup> Judd, “Specific Objects,” p. 78.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Morris, “Notes on Sculpture” (1966); reprinted in Gregory Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art: a critical anthology* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1968), pp. 222-35. See Reiss, *From Margin to Center*, pp. 61-62 on the origins of phenomenological readings of Minimalism.

<sup>25</sup> Judd, “Specific Objects,” p. 78.

<sup>26</sup> Judd started out as a painter, working in an expressionistic style.

Judd makes out two distinct kinds of new three-dimensional work: “that which is something of an object, a single thing,” which is the type of work he describes in “Specific Objects,” “and that which is open and extended, more or less environmental.”<sup>27</sup> Judd names Oldenburg as an example of an artist working in the latter, and it is clear that by environmental work he is referring to assemblage, environments and happenings, which we know were understood as expanded forms of painting. “The use of three dimensions makes it possible to use all sorts of materials and colors.”<sup>28</sup> Minimalist objects looked minimalist (sleek, streamlined, smooth) because of the industrial products and techniques used. Assemblage and environments were made of stuff on the opposite end of the material spectrum: junk. But it is significant that Judd finds that there isn’t as great a difference in their nature as their vastly differing appearance would suggest. Furthermore, Rauschenberg’s combine-paintings, which anchored the strain of avant-garde art that repurposed trash from the city, are named as preliminaries: “a few of Rauschenberg’s works, such as the goat with the tire, are beginnings.”<sup>29</sup> They are, however, unsuccessful in Judd’s mind, caught as they are between the radical path of three-dimensionality and the “rationalistic” one of two-dimensional painting and collage.

That Rauschenberg’s combine-paintings were understood to be foundational to two seemingly divergent tendencies in art of the sixties is significant. In fact, “installation” came into use with minimal art in the early sixties to distinguish arrangements of minimalist objects in a room from the art-into-life ethos represented by

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<sup>27</sup> Judd, “Specific Objects,” p. 78.

<sup>28</sup> Judd, “Specific Objects,” p. 80.

<sup>29</sup> Judd, “Specific Objects,” p. 78.

assemblage, environments and happenings.<sup>30</sup> It proves that the innovations of the combine-paintings to the conception and practice of painting detailed in my dissertation did indeed open up new possibilities for painting, no matter what artists claimed *against* painting. Regardless of the dimensions of a work of art—the usual two-dimensions of a photograph, the series of vignettes composed of people and objects that, strung together, made for a happening, or the rational placement of units in grid formations that was Minimalist installation; pictoriality remains central to the conception and efficacy of the work. That is to say, pictorial awareness, or consciousness of being-a-picture, is invariably built into both the artist’s understanding and the viewer’s experience of art, irrespective of form. No matter the polemic, art is still in the business of making pictures. After 1950, however, a critically engaged practice could no longer be just about making pictures. As I have argued throughout this study, it is in the new possibilities for mixed media opened up by thinking in terms of pictoriality that (the new) painting was able to weather the crisis posed by Modernist medium-specificity and the easel picture.

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<sup>30</sup> Kristine Stiles, “I/ Eye/ Oculus,” in Jason Gaiger, ed., *Frameworks for Modern Art* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press: 2003), p. 199.



fig. 0.1: Édouard Manet, *Portrait of Emile Zola* (1867-78)



fig. 0.2: Pablo Picasso, *Still life with chair caning* (spring 1912)

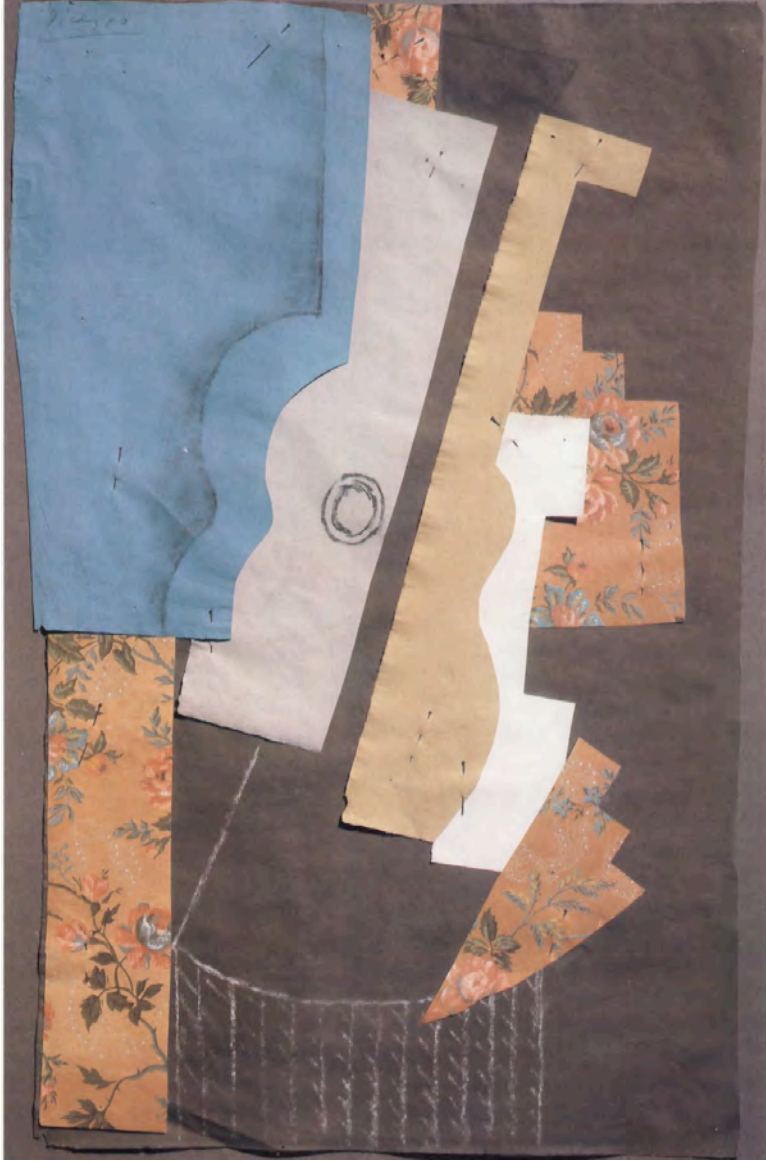


fig. 0.3: Picasso, *Bar Table with Guitar* (spring 1913)



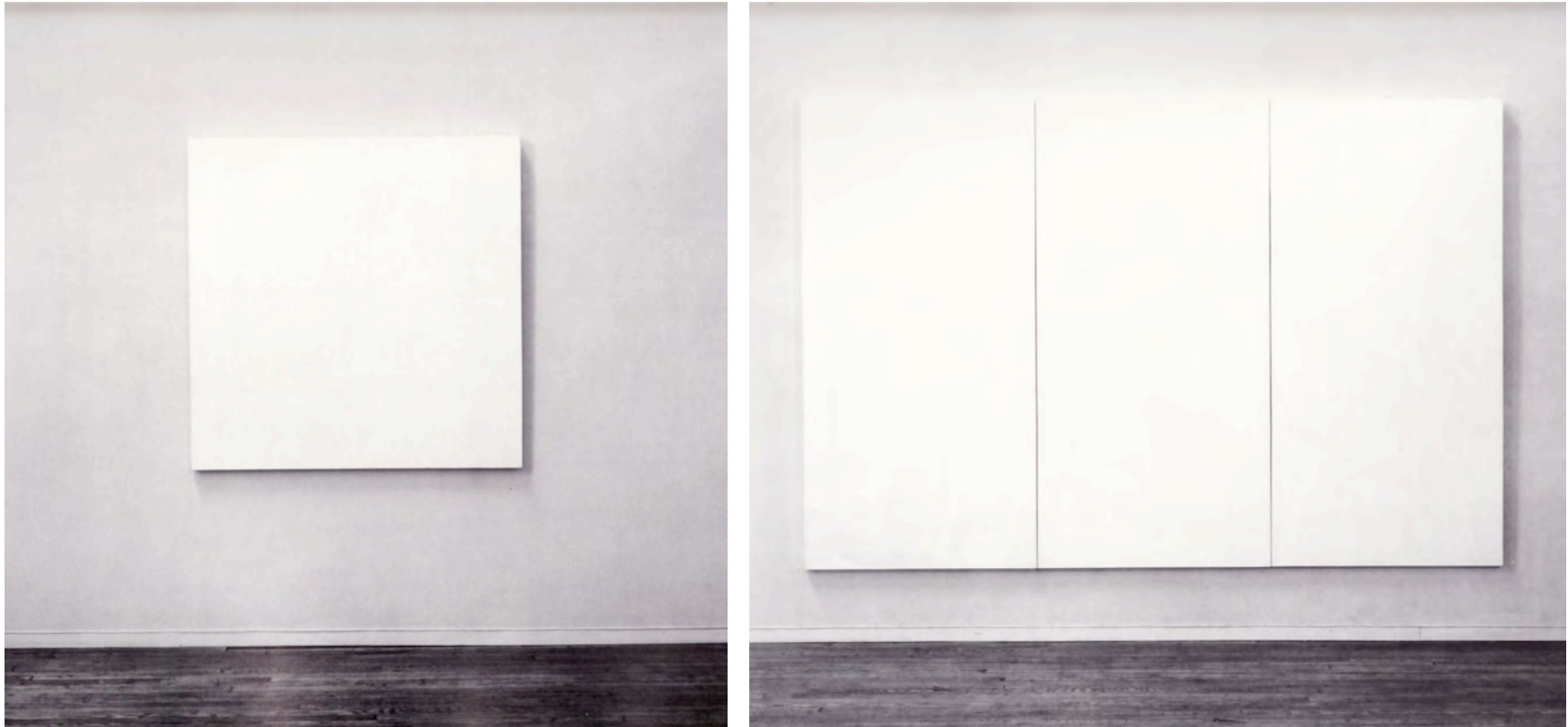
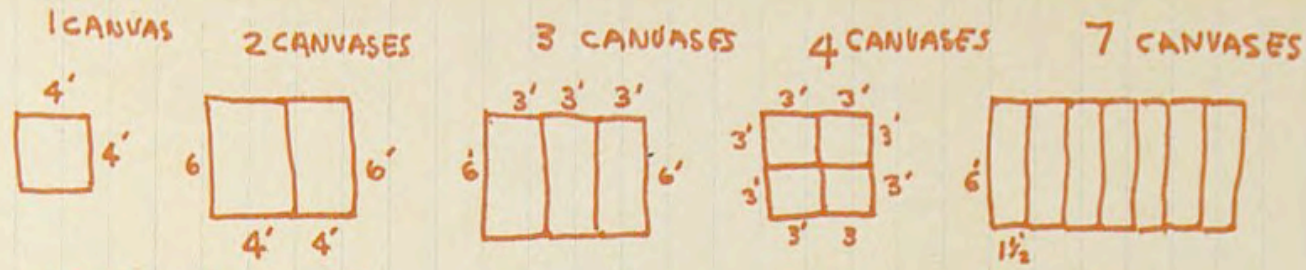


fig. 1.2: Robert Rauschenberg, one-panel and three-panel *White Paintings* (1951)





WHITE PAINTINGS - 1951

SMOOTH (NOT GRAINY OR ROUGH) CANVAS

STRETCHED TIGHT AND PAINTED EVENLY FLAT WHITE  
CANVAS PULLED AROUND BACK LEAVING SIDES FREE OF  
NAILS, OR STAPLES.

STRETCHER SHOULD BE BETWEEN 1 1/2" + 2" DEEP.  
SIDES ARE PAINTED TOO.

R. RAUSCHENBERG

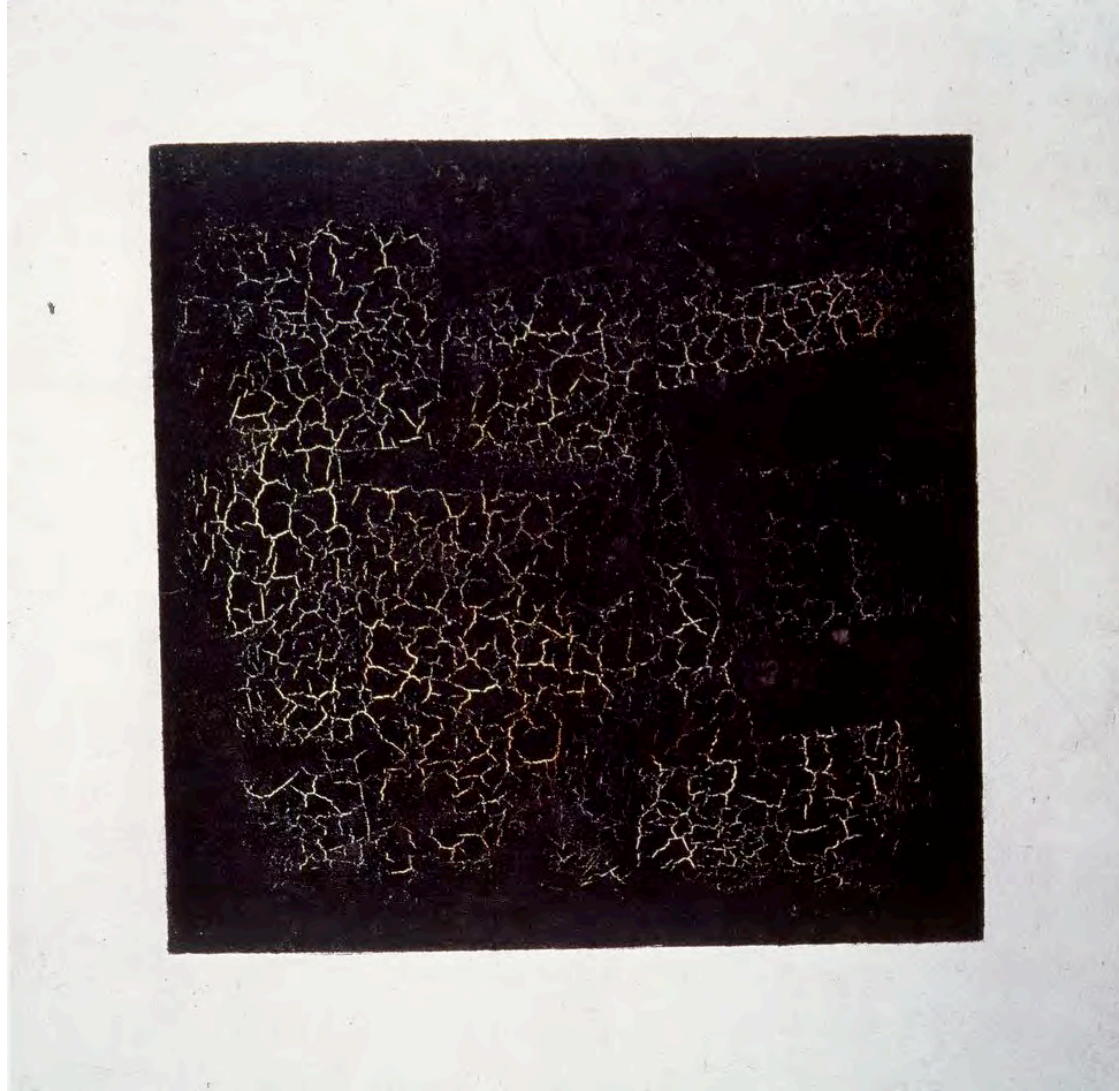


fig. 1.4: Kazimir Malevich, *Black Square* (1913-15)

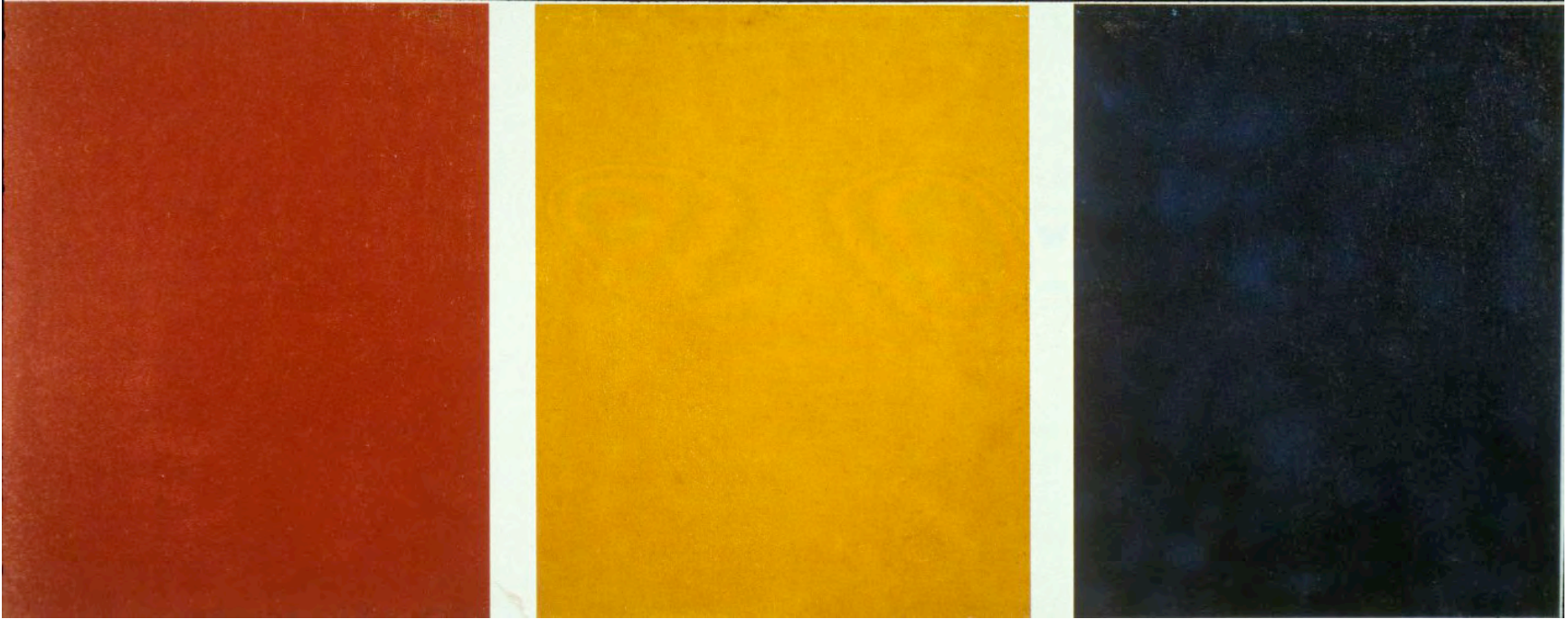


fig. 1.5: Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Pure Red Color*, *Pure Yellow Color*, and *Pure Blue Color* (1921)

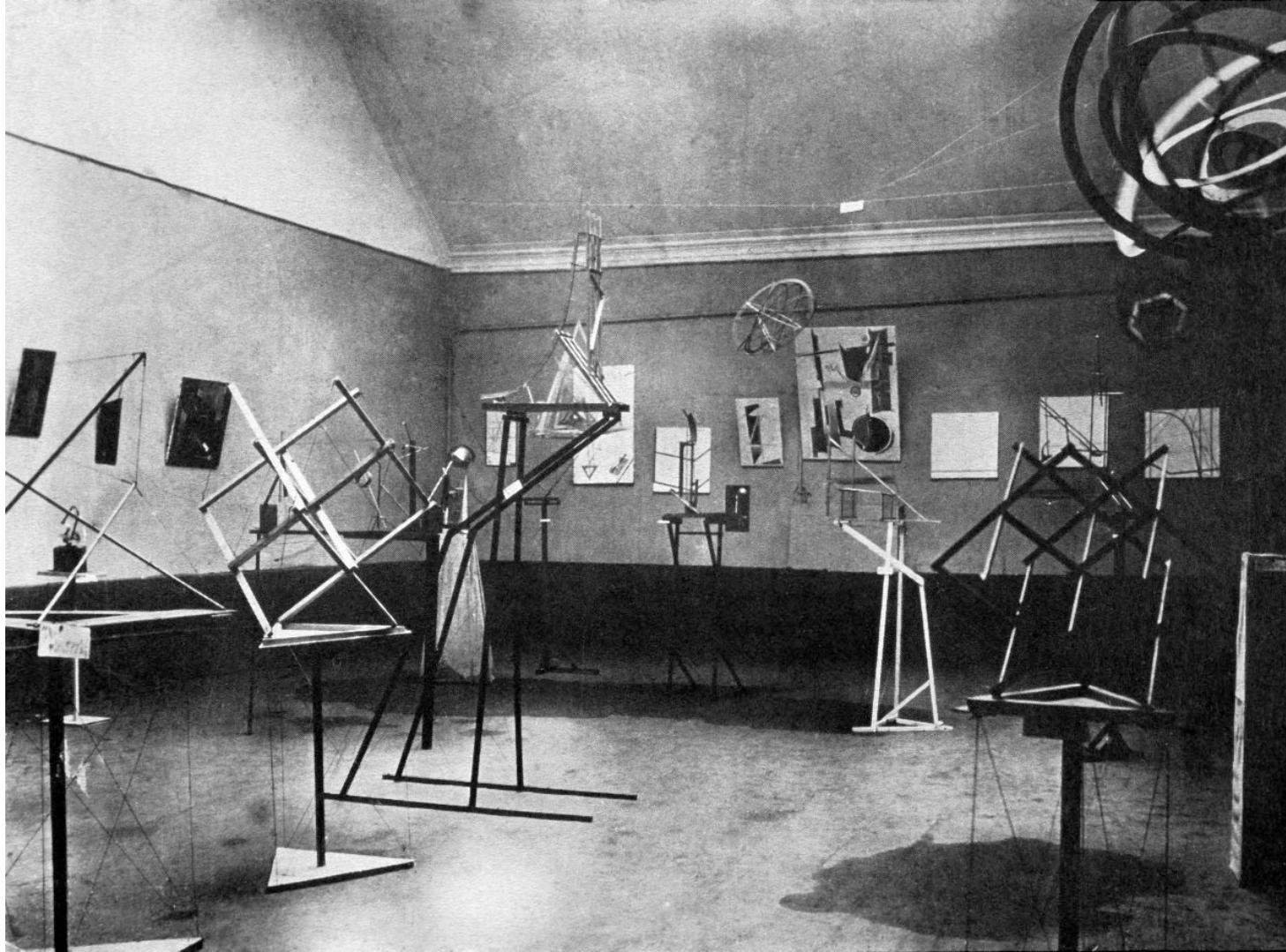


fig. 1.6: view of third OBMOKhU exhibition, Moscow, May 1921

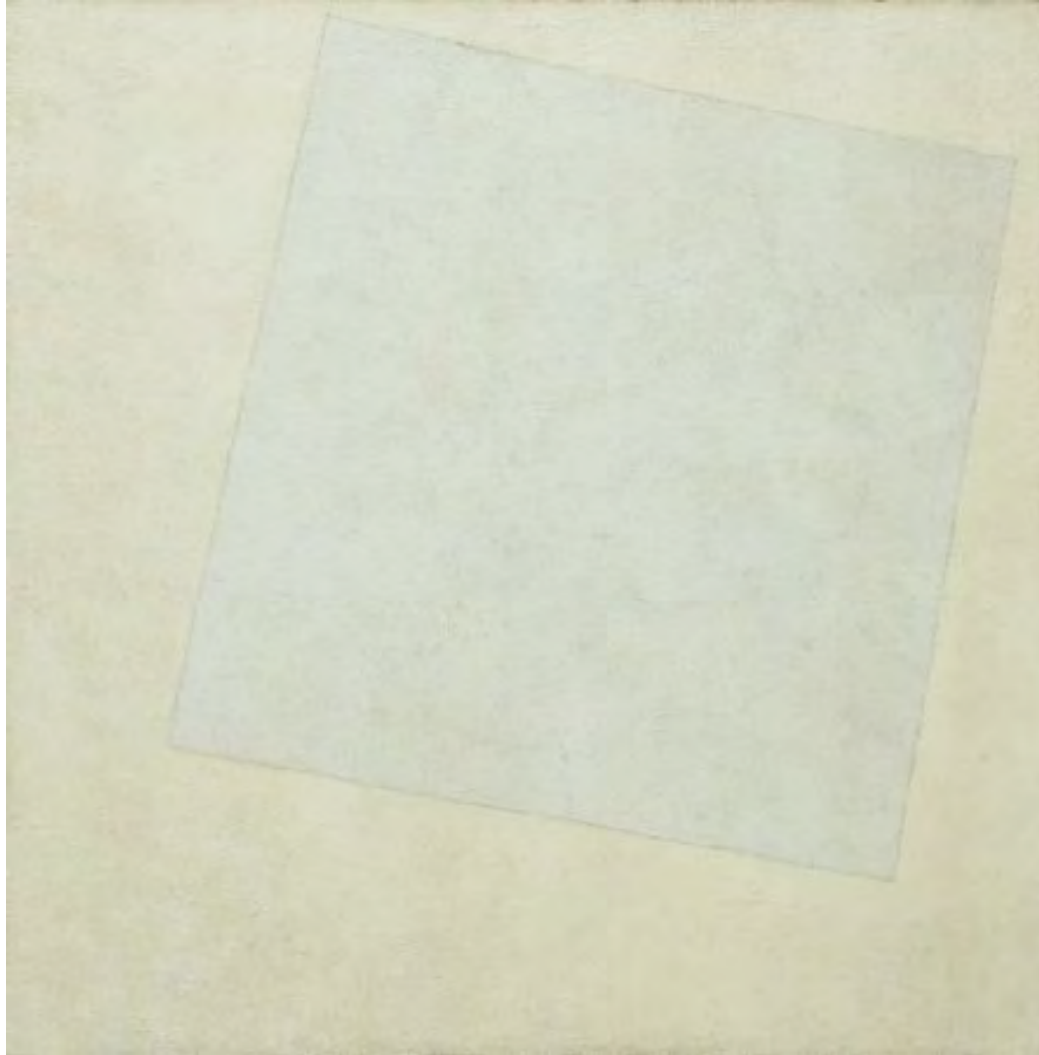


fig. 1.7: Malevich, *Suprematist Composition: White on White* (1918)



fig. 1.8: Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Non-Objective Painting no. 80 (Black on Black)* (1918)

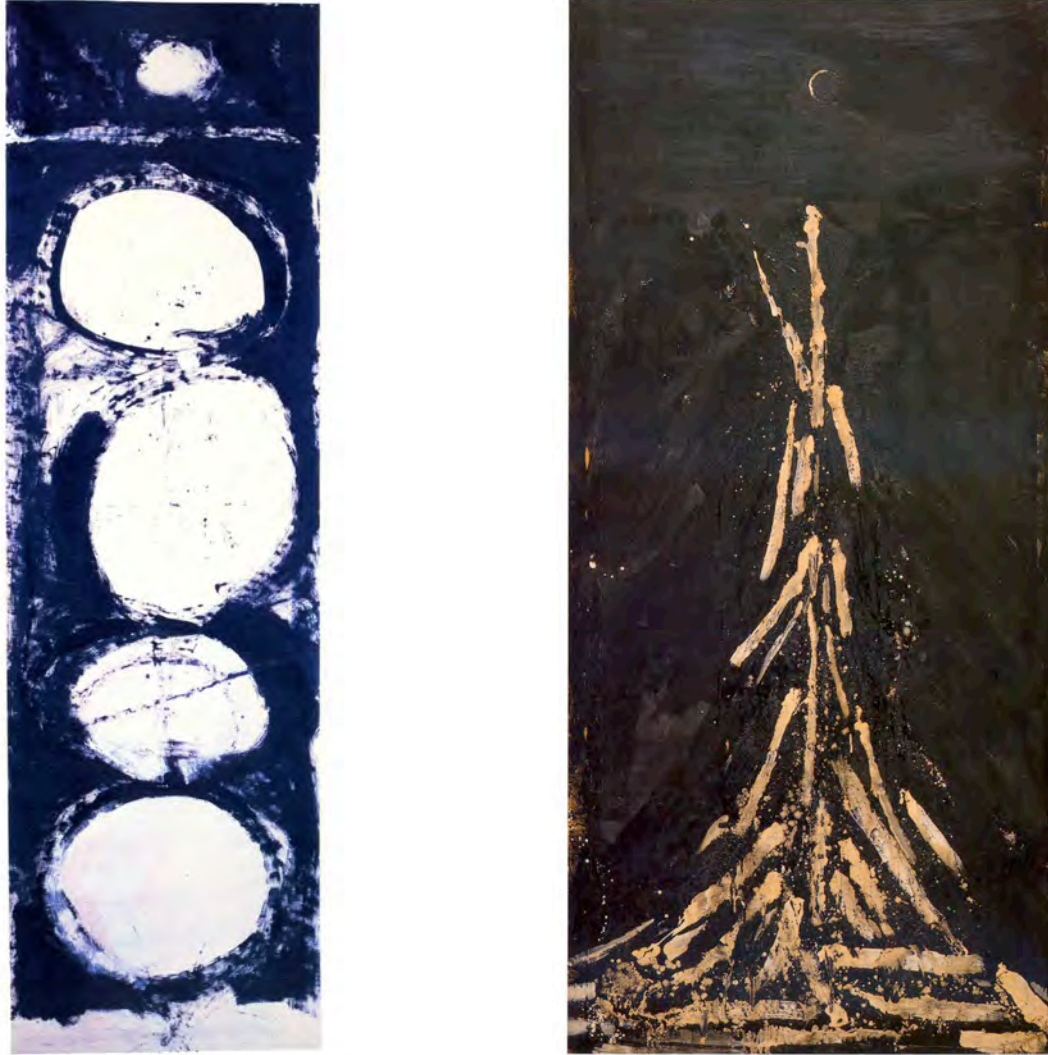


fig. 1.9: Rauschenberg, two untitled paintings from the *Night Blooming* series (c 1951)

fig. 1.10: Rauschenberg, Untitled (glossy black painting) (c 1951)







fig. 1.11: “Tworkov at work, with his color in a cup,  
discovers his subject through the act of painting.”  
*ARTnews* (May 1953); photo: Rudy Burckhardt



*House of the Sun* (1952)

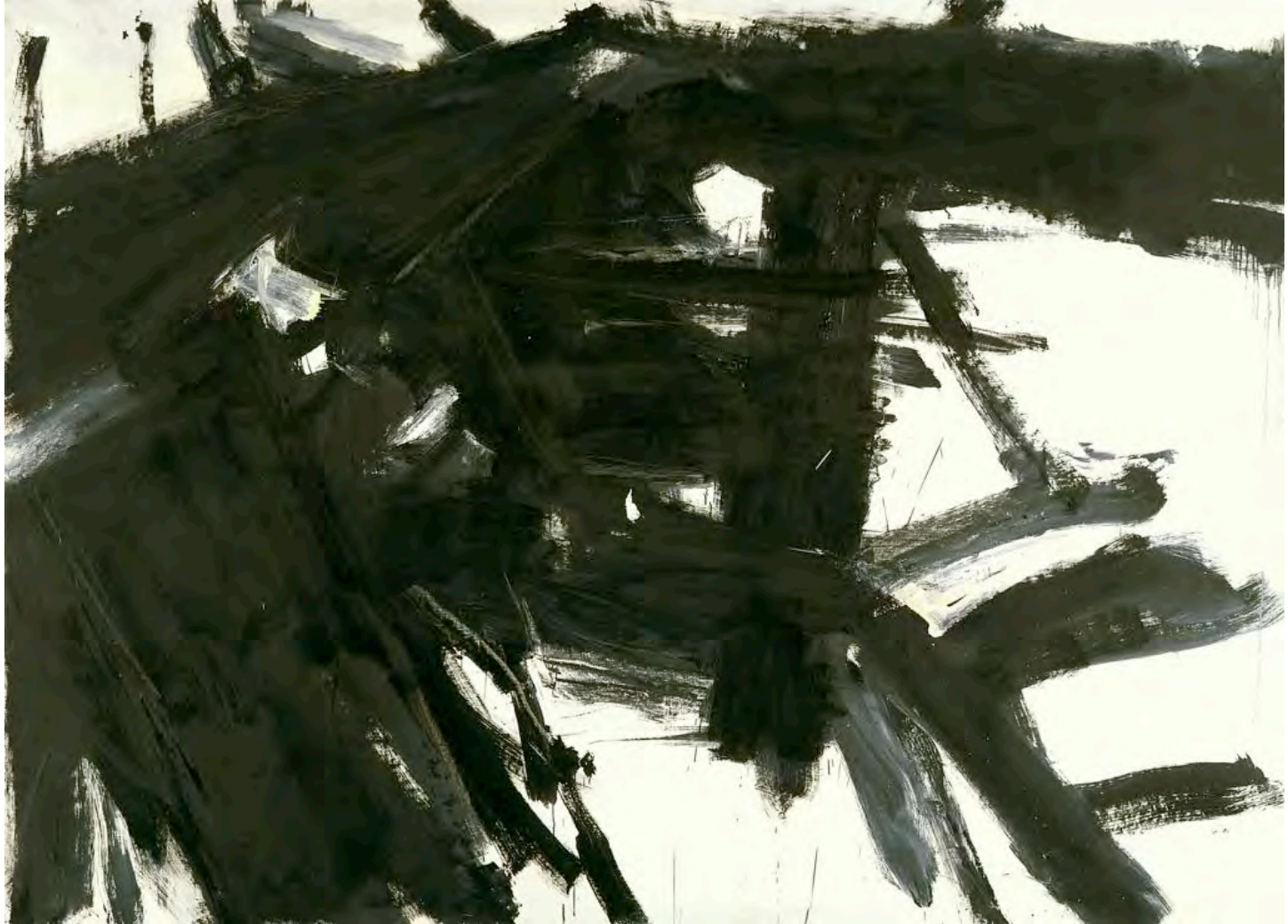


fig. 1.12: Franz Kline, *Siskind* (1958)



fig. 1.13: Rauschenberg, Untitled (horizontal black painting) (c 1953)

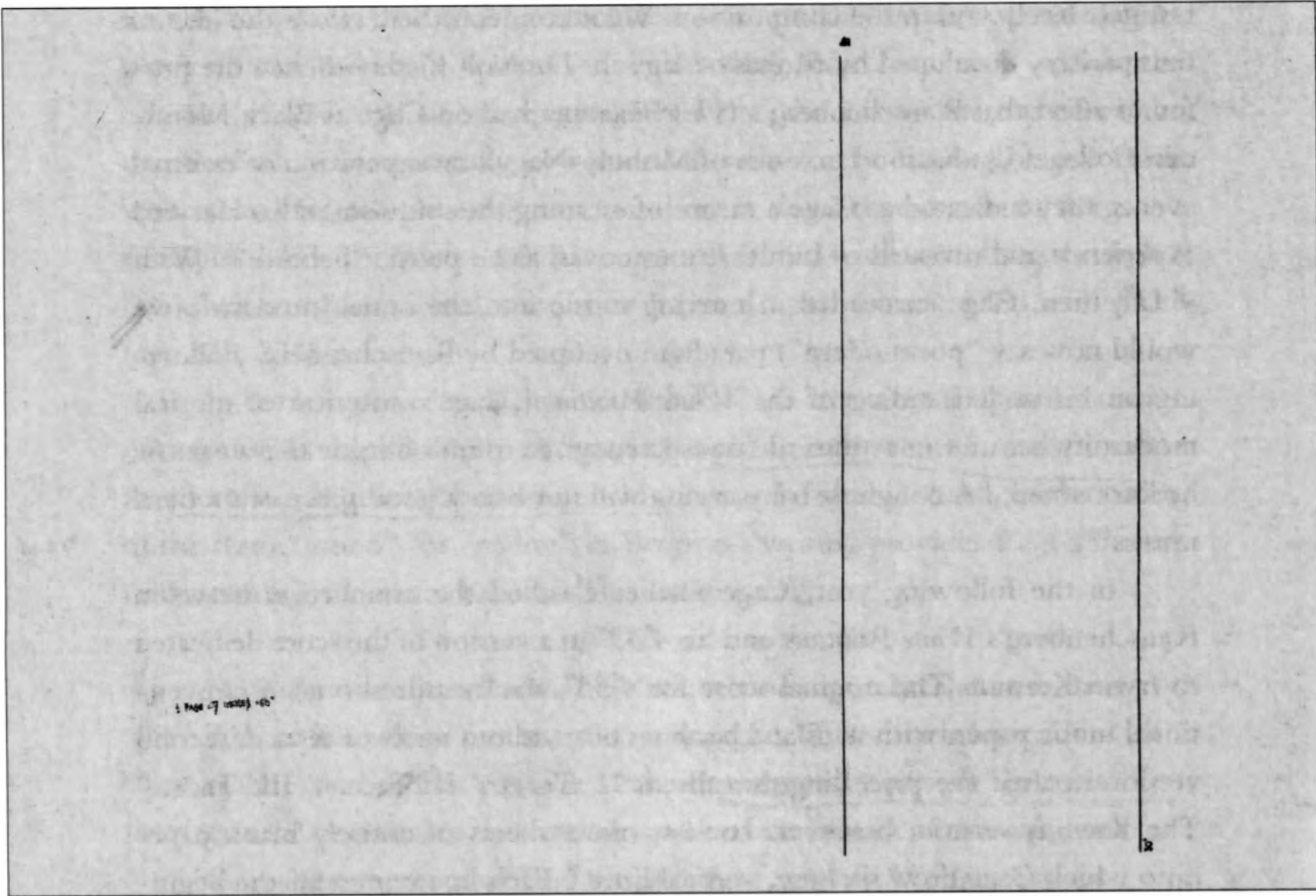


fig. 1.14: John Cage, 4'33" (1952); score in proportional notation (1953)

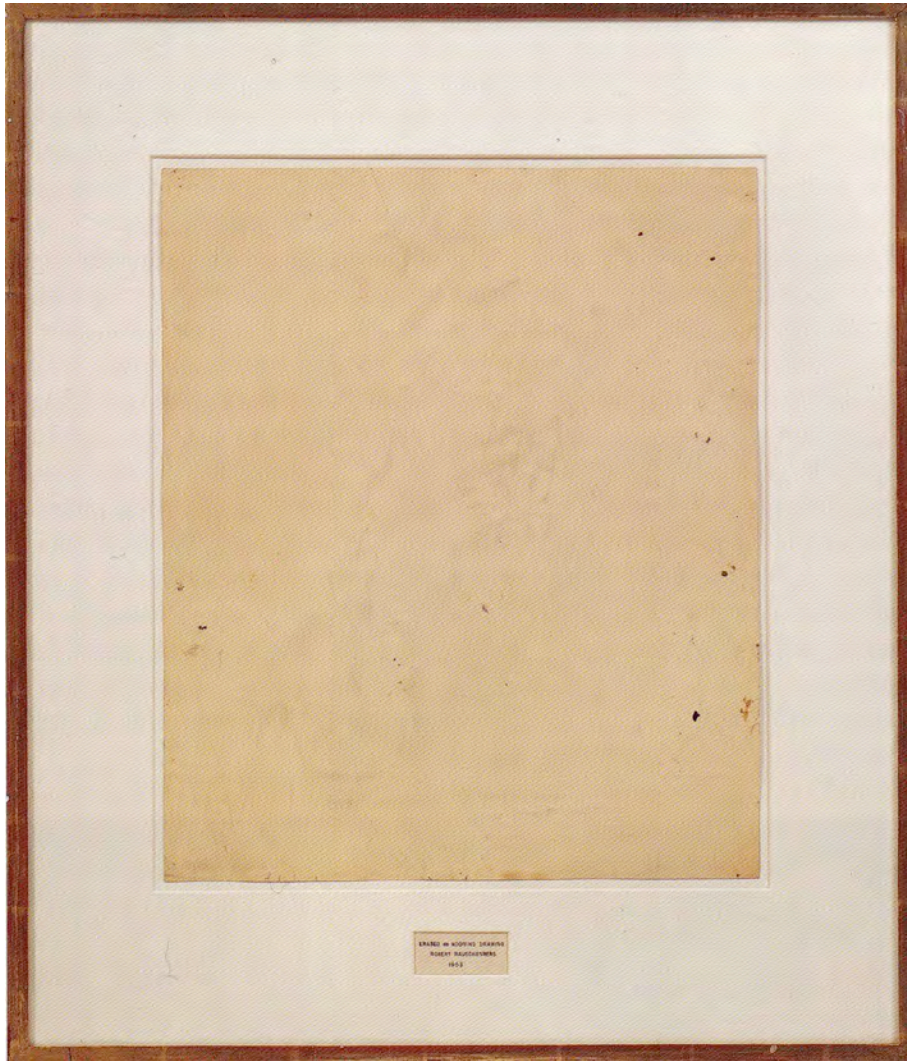


fig. 1.15: Rauschenberg, *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953)

*Man with White Shoes* (1955)



fig. 1.16: *Interview* (1955)

*Monogram* (1955-59)

*Bed* (1955)

*Odalisk* (1955/ 58)



fig. 1.17: Rauschenberg, *Growing Painting* (1953)

fig. 1.18: Rauschenberg, Untitled (red painting) (c 1953)





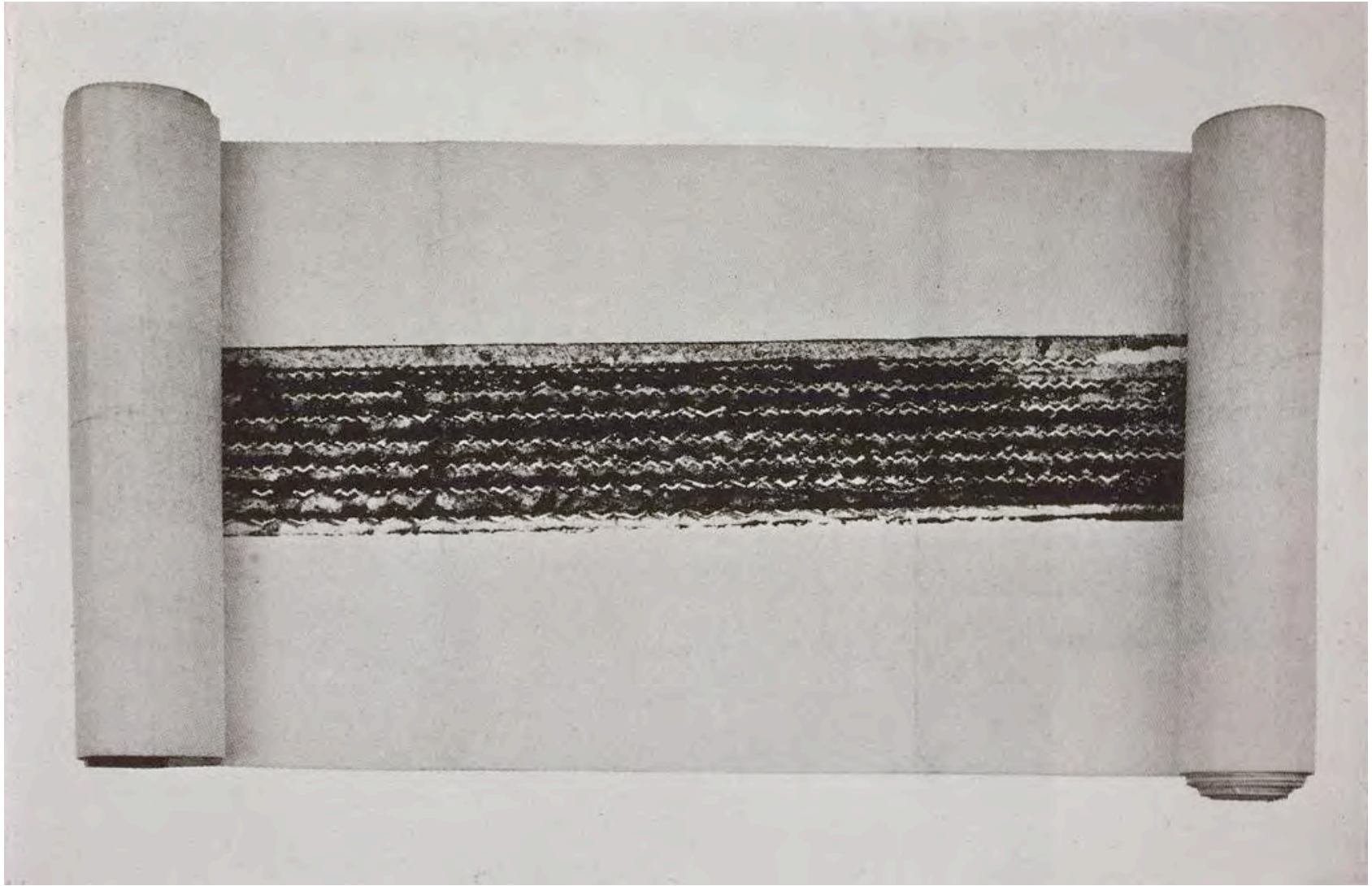


fig. 1.19: Rauschenberg, *Automobile Tire Print* (1951)



fig. 1.20: Rauschenberg, *Untitled (Elemental Sculpture, bricks and concrete)* (c 1953)



fig. 1.21: Rauschenberg, Untitled (*Elemental Painting*) (c 1952)

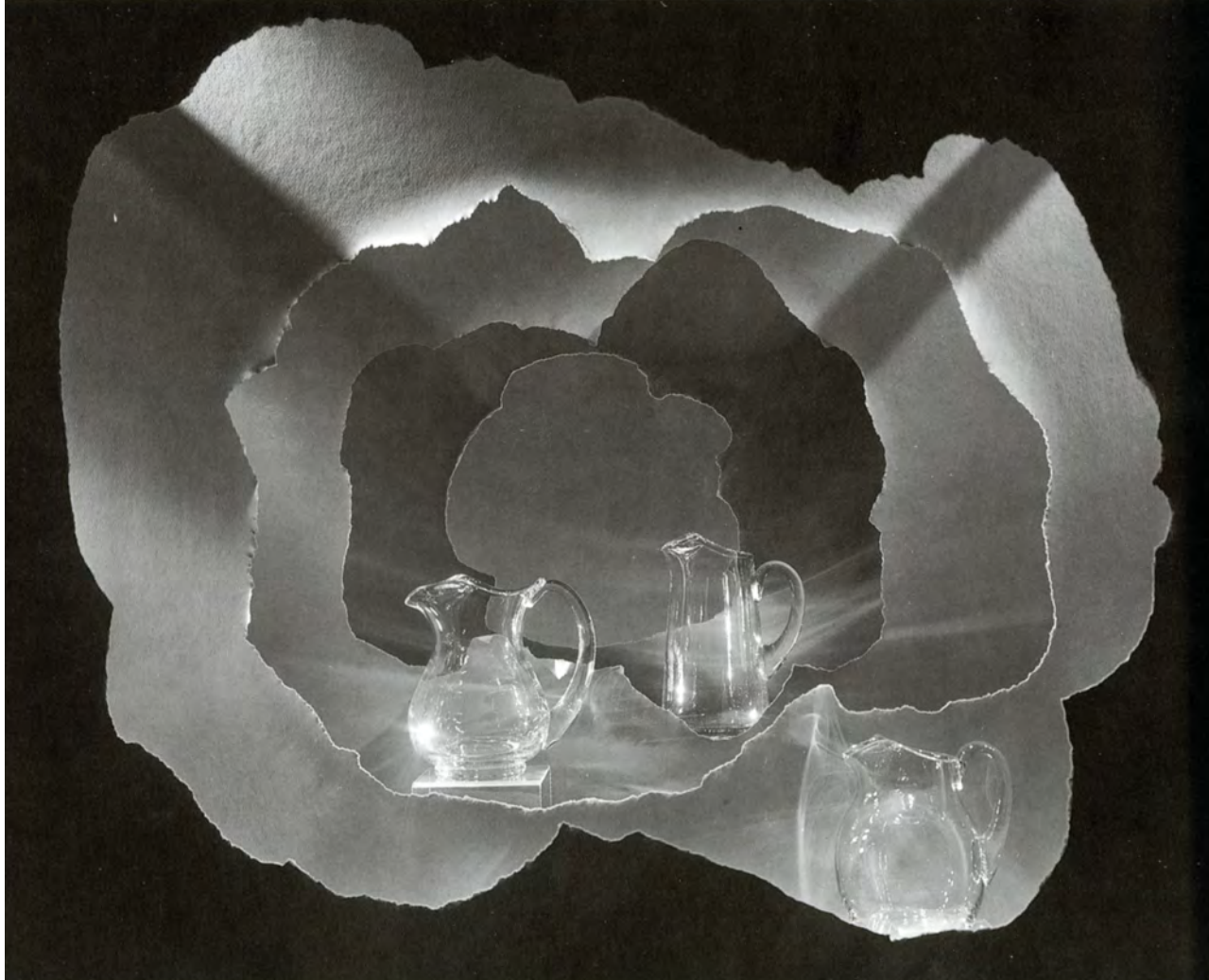
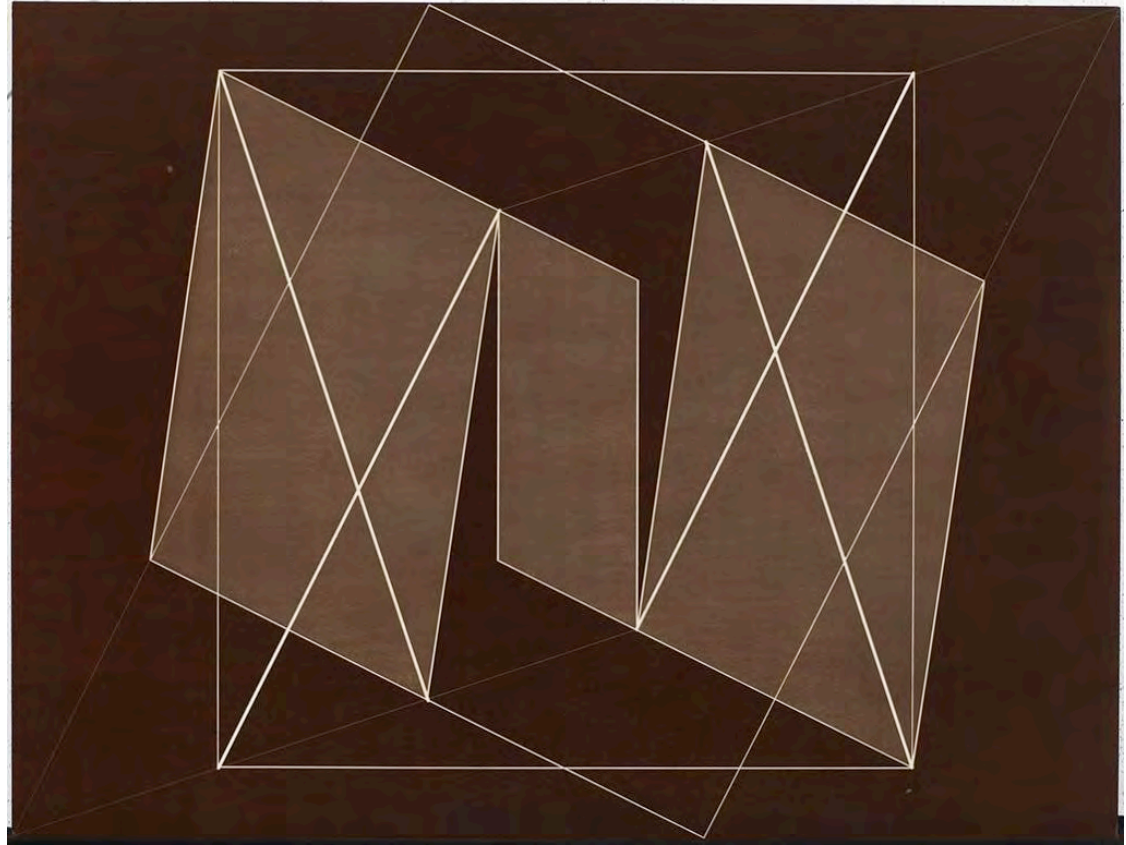


fig. 1.22: Matson Jones [Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns], window for Tiffany's (8 June 1956)



fig. 1.23: Albers teaching at Black Mountain



*Structural Constellation: Transformation of a Scheme No. 19 (1950)*



fig. 1.24

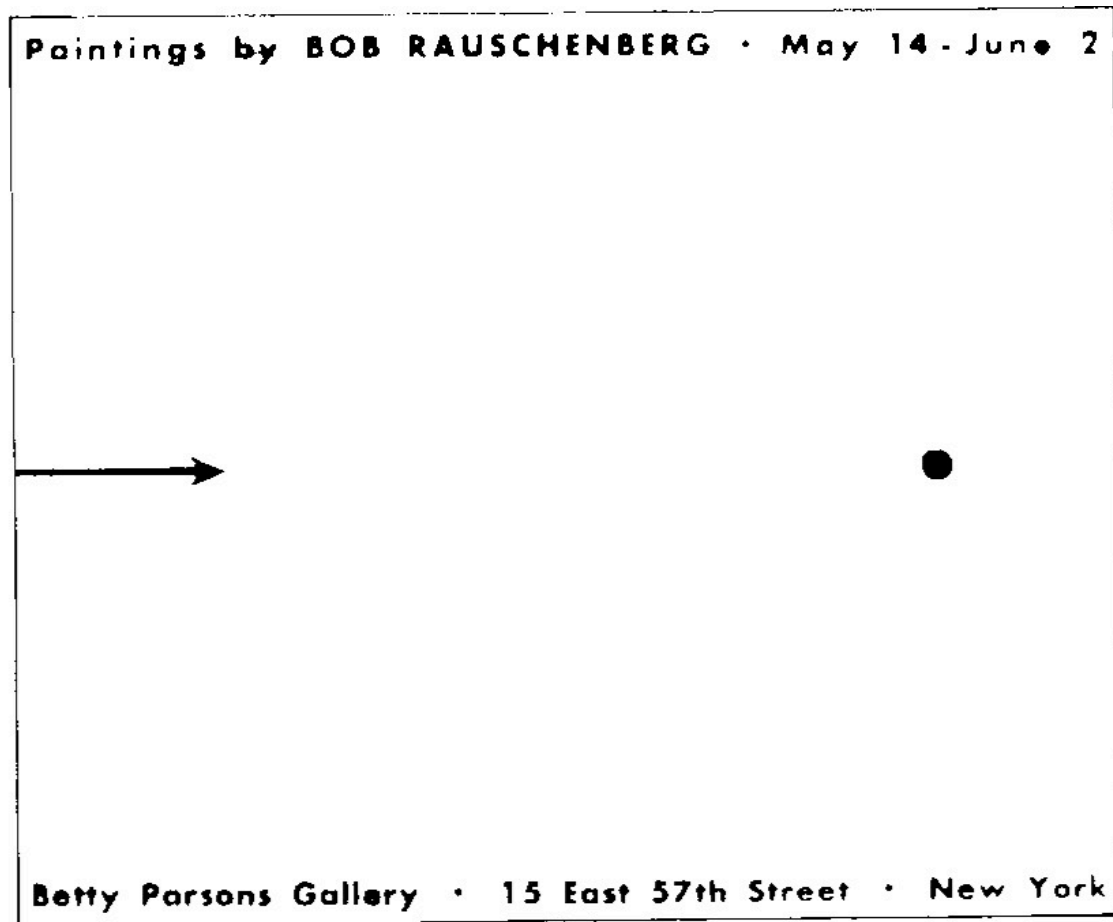


fig. 1.25: Rauschenberg, announcement for *Paintings by Bob Rauschenberg* (14 May-2 June 1951) Betty Parsons Gallery, New York



fig. 1.26: Rauschenberg, *Eden* (1950)



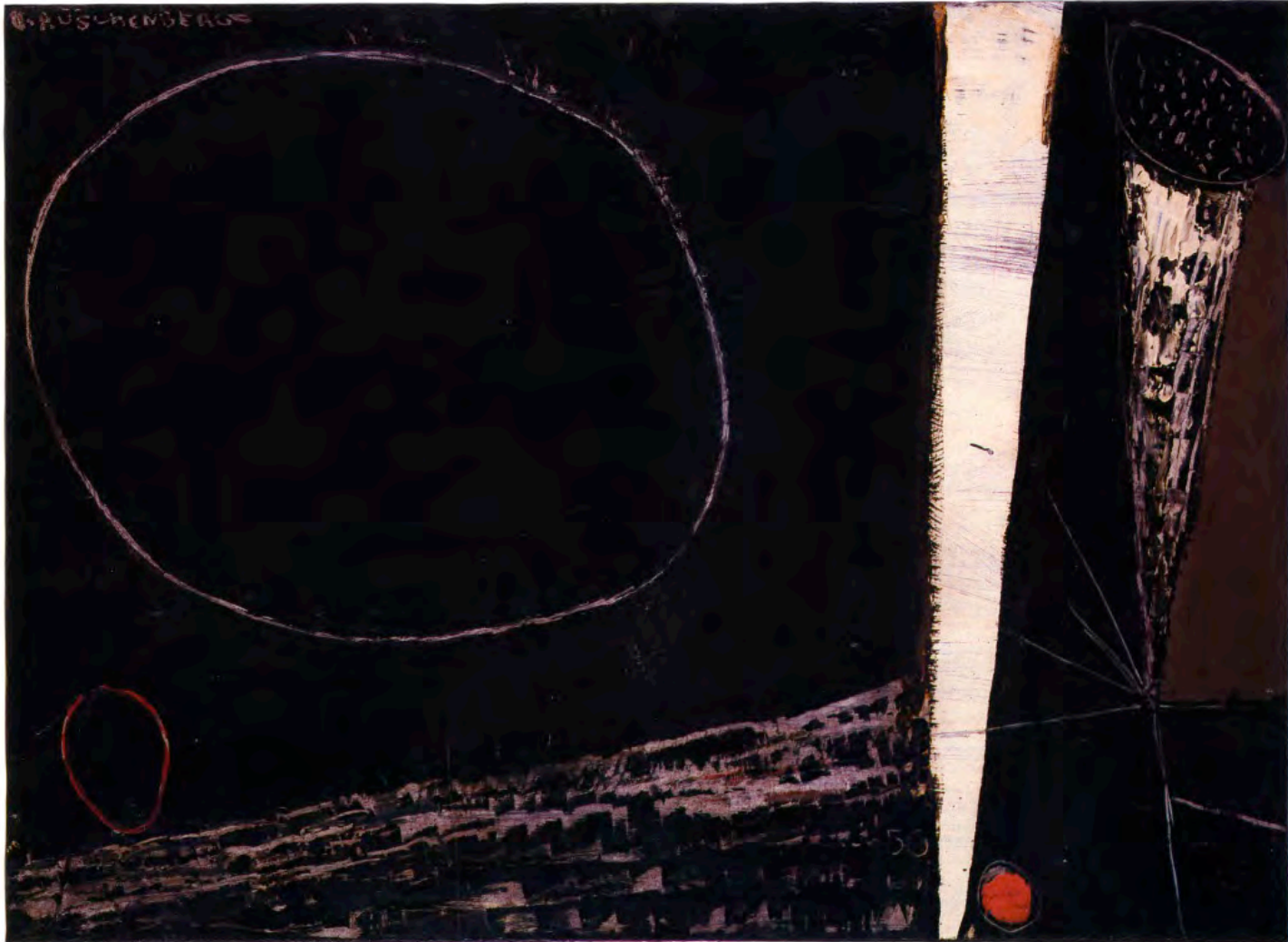


fig. 1.27: Rauschenberg, Untitled (with dark forms) (1950)

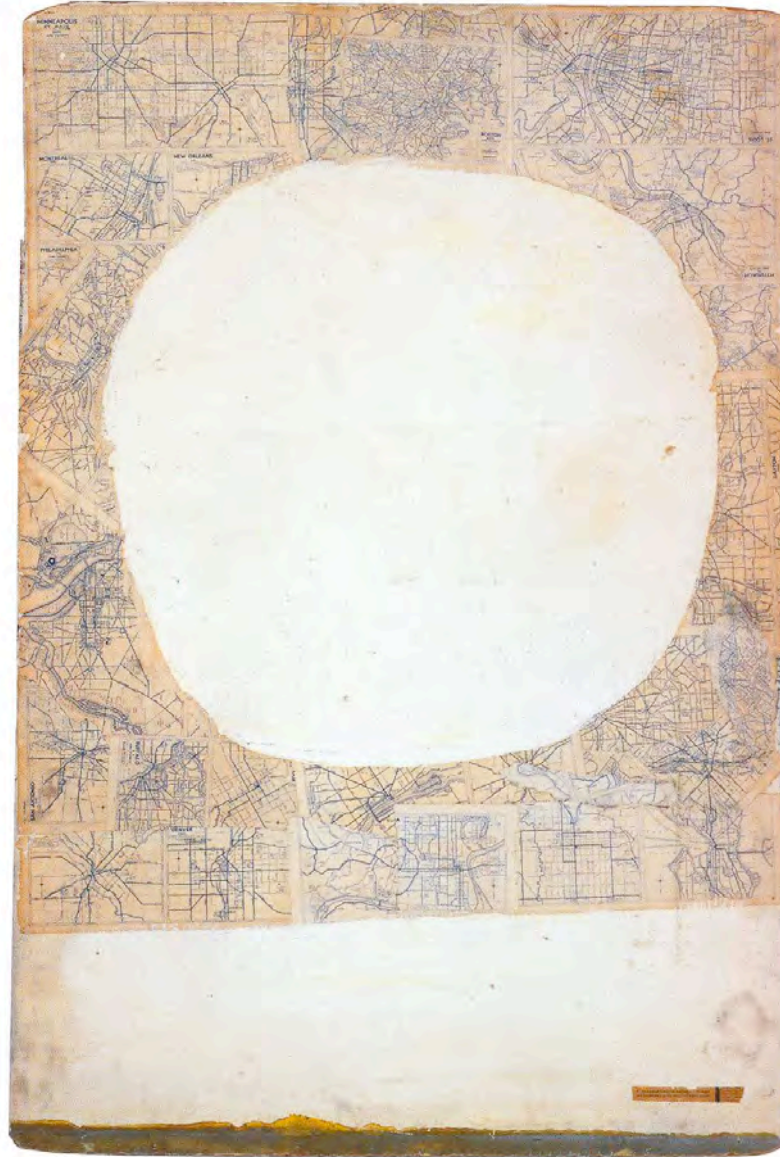


fig. 1.28: Rauschenberg, *Mother of God* (c 1950)



fig. 1.29: Rauschenberg, *Mother of God* (c 1950), detail

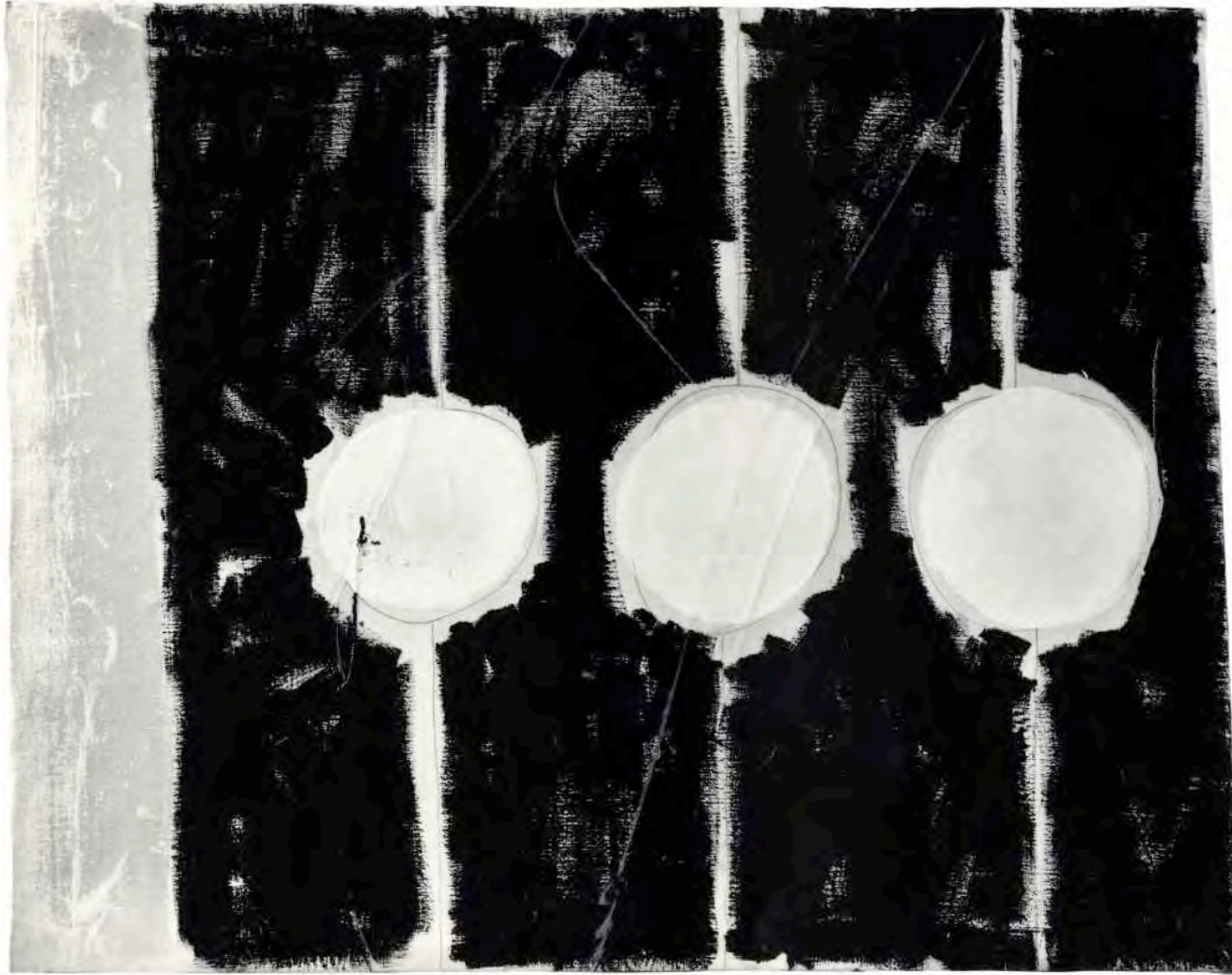


fig. 1.30: Rauschenberg, *Trinity* (c 1949)



fig. 1.31: Rauschenberg, *Ceiling and Light Bulb* (1950)

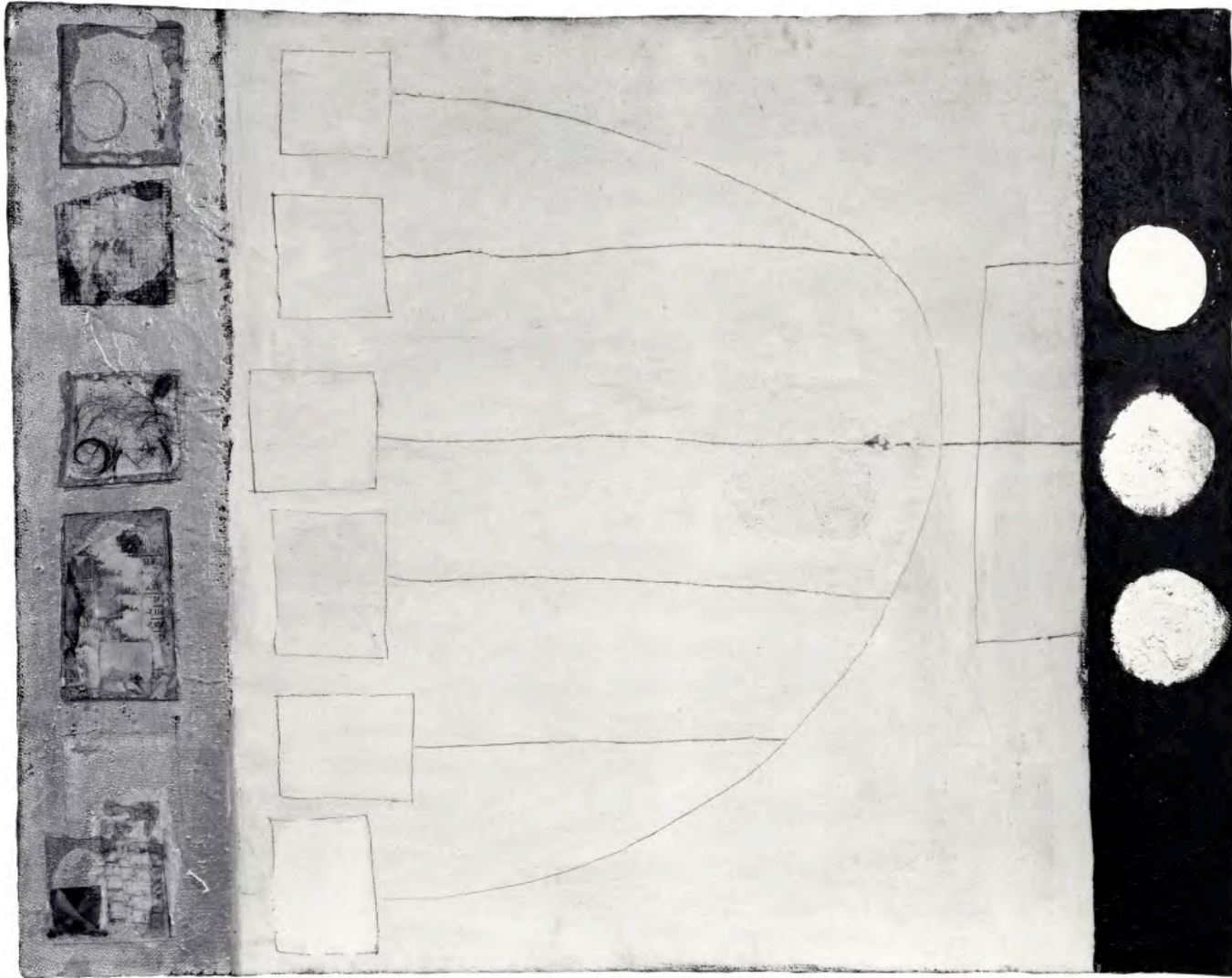


fig. 1.32: Rauschenberg, *Stone, Stone, Stone* (c 1951)



fig. 1.33: Rauschenberg, 22 *The Lily White* (c 1950)

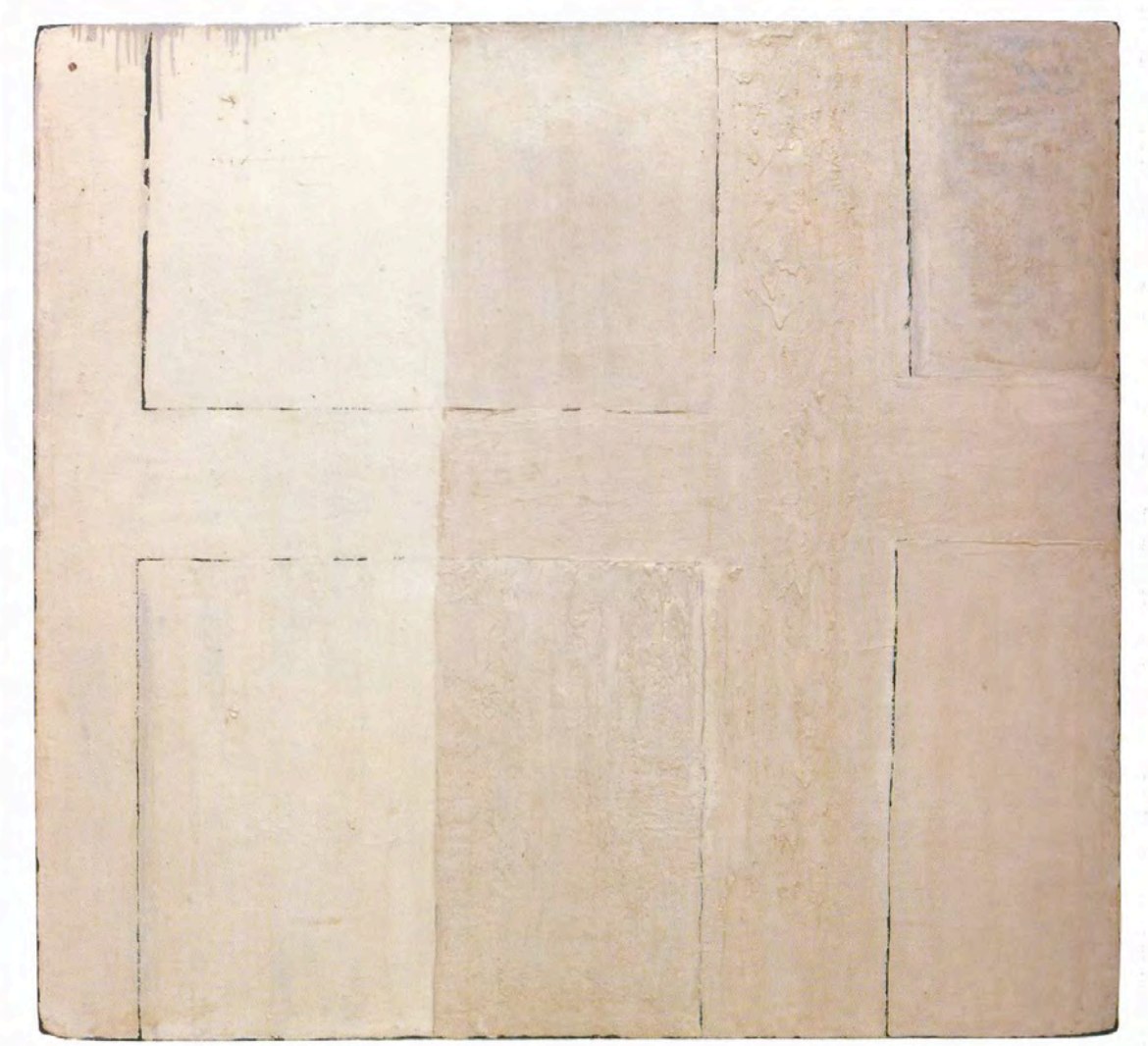


fig. 1.34: Rauschenberg, *Crucifixion and Reflection* (c 1950)



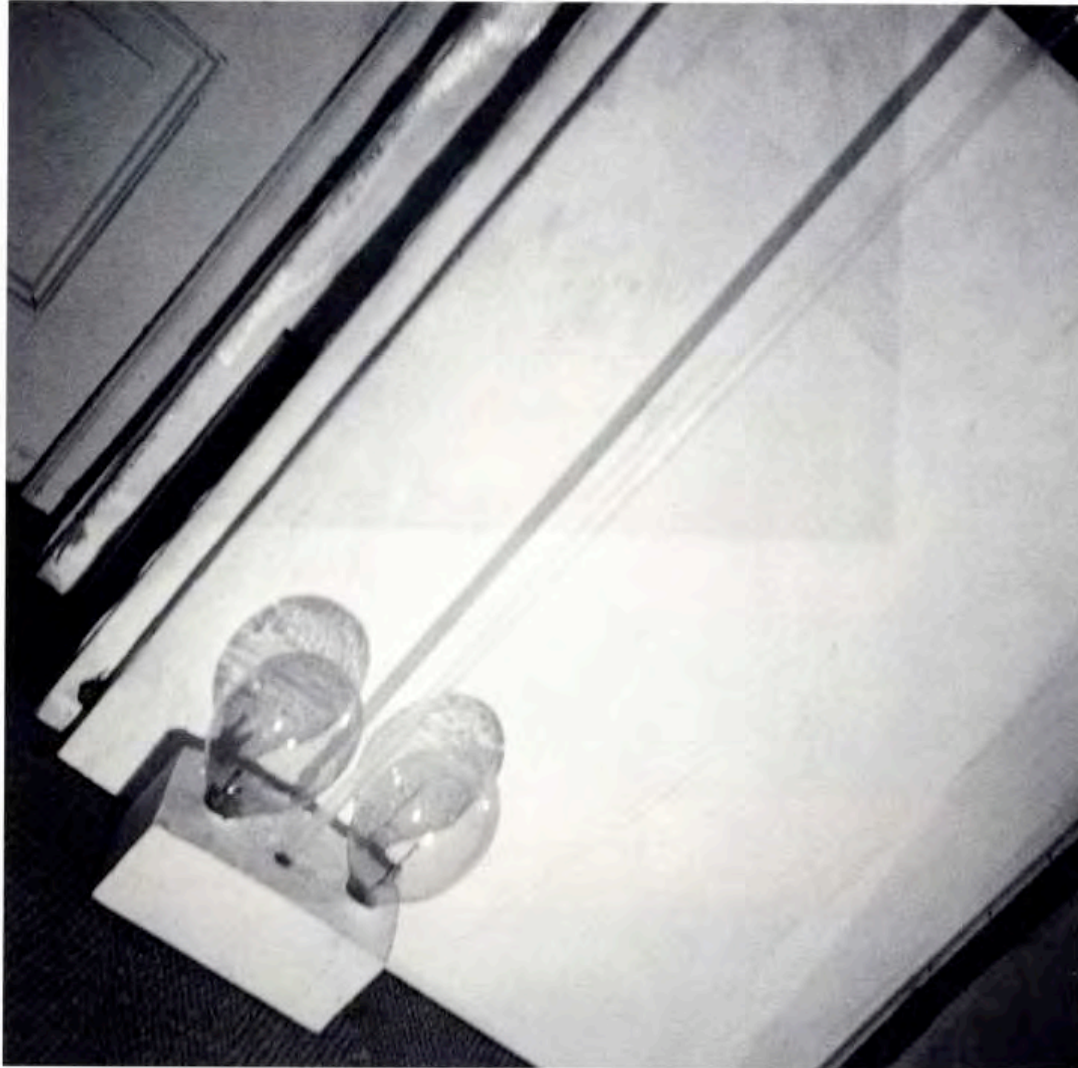


fig. 1.35: Rauschenberg, *The Man with Two Souls* (1950), photographed by artist



fig. 1.36: Mark Tobey, *Universal Field* (1949)

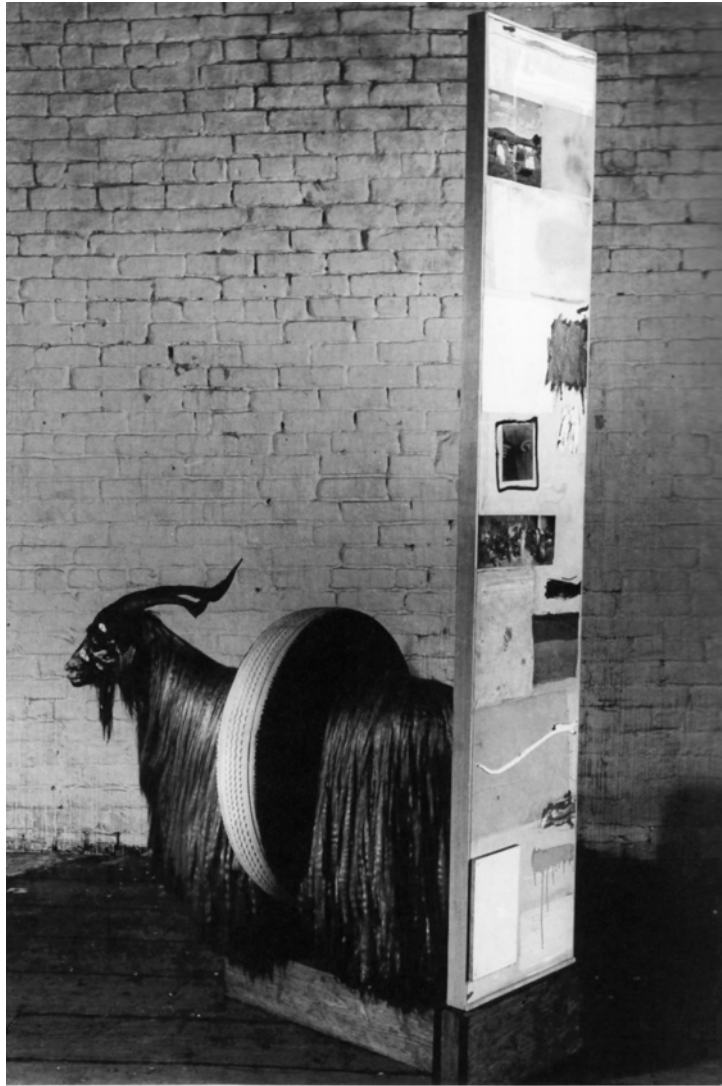


fig. 1.37: Rauschenberg, *Monogram*, second state (c 1956)



*Summerstorm* (1959)

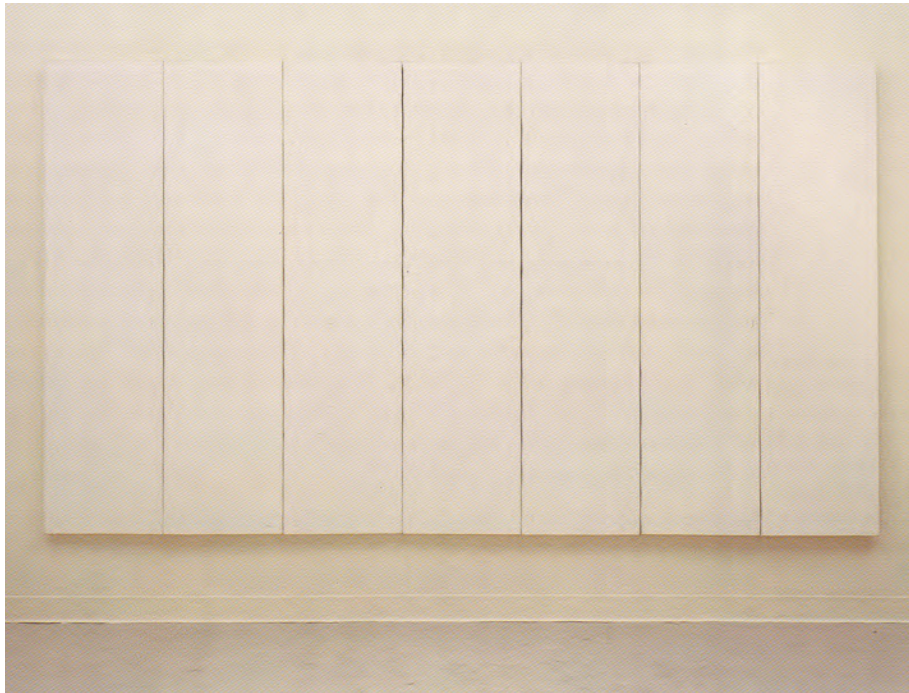


fig. 1.38: Rauschenberg, *Trophy II*  
(for Teeny and Marcel Duchamp) (1960)

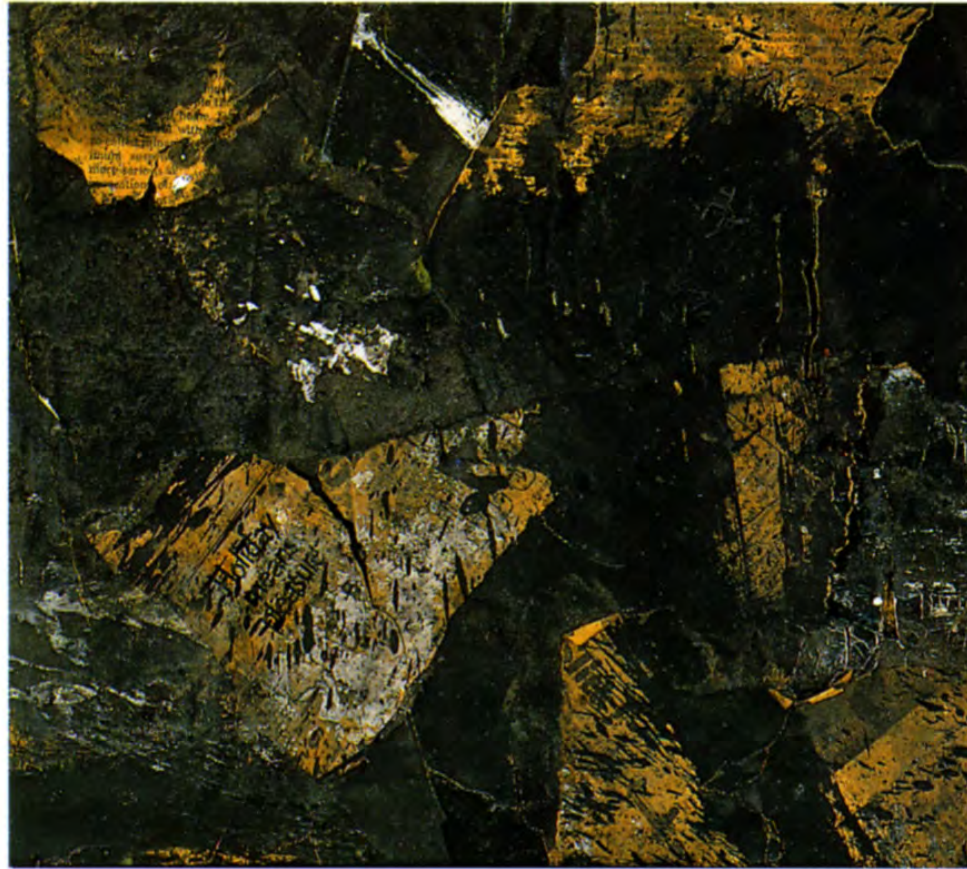


fig. 1.39: Rauschenberg, Untitled (horizontal black painting) (c 1953), detail



## ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG

Any incentive to paint is as good as any other. There is no poor subject.

Painting is always strongest when in spite of composition, color, etc. it appears as a fact, or an inevitability, as opposed to a souvenir or arrangement.

Painting relates to both art and life. Neither can be made. (I try to act in that gap between the two.)

A pair of socks is no less suitable to make a painting with than wood, nails, turpentine, oil and fabric.

A canvas is never empty. —ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG

fig. 2.1: Statement for the exhibition *Sixteen Americans* (16 December 1959–14 February 1960), Museum of Modern Art, New York



fig. 2.2: Rauschenberg, Untitled (*Night Blooming* series) (c 1951)



fig. 2.3: Rauschenberg, *New York (Stop)* (1951)





fig. 2.4: Rauschenberg, Untitled (glossy black painting) (c 1951), detail

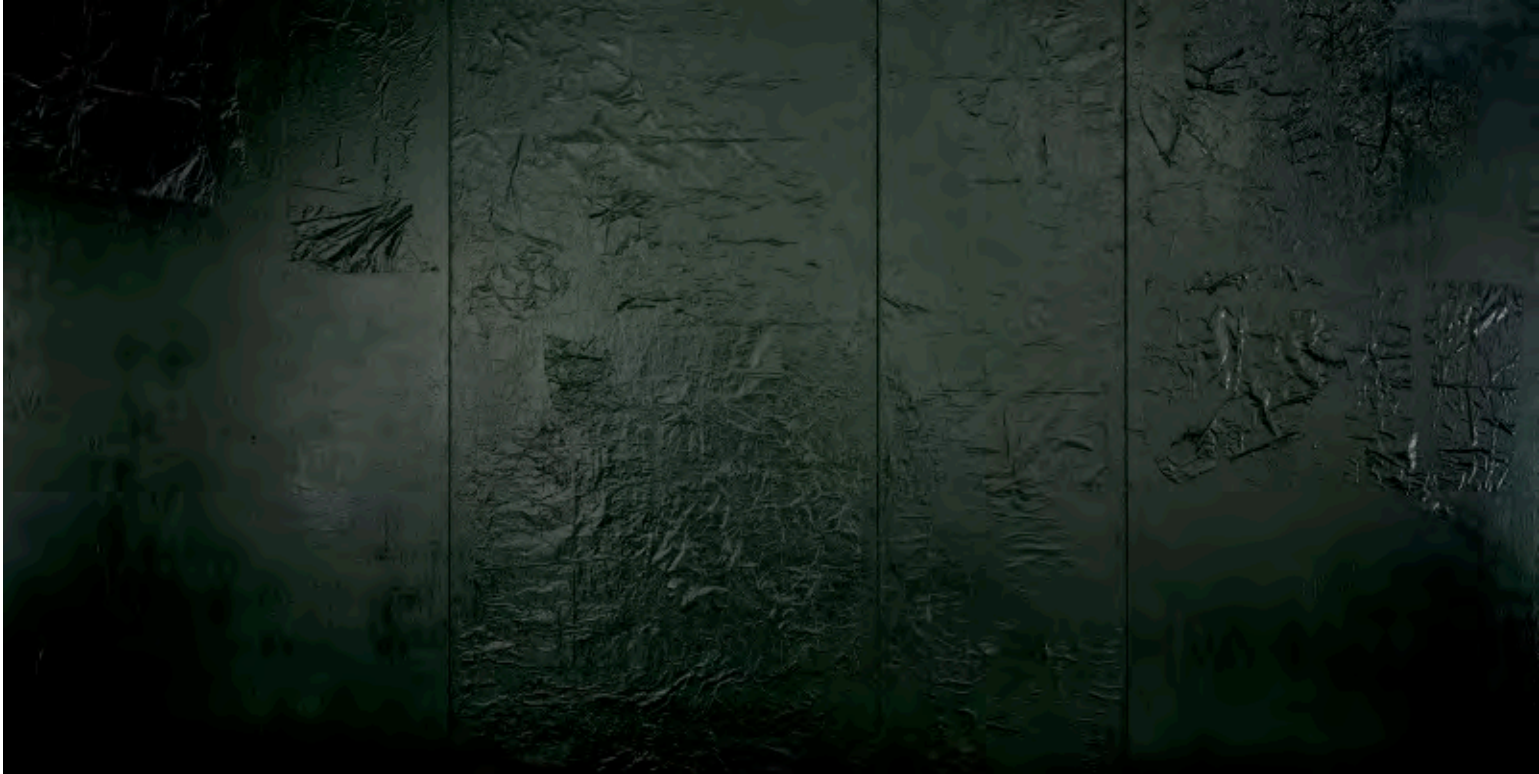


fig. 2.5: Rauschenberg, Untitled (four-panel glossy black painting) (1951)



fig. 2.6: Rauschenberg, Untitled (four-panel glossy black painting) (1951), viewed from left



fig. 2.7: Rauschenberg, Untitled (four-panel glossy black painting) (1951), viewed from right



fig. 2.8: Rauschenberg, *Untitled (matte-black painting with Asheville Citizen)* (c 1952)

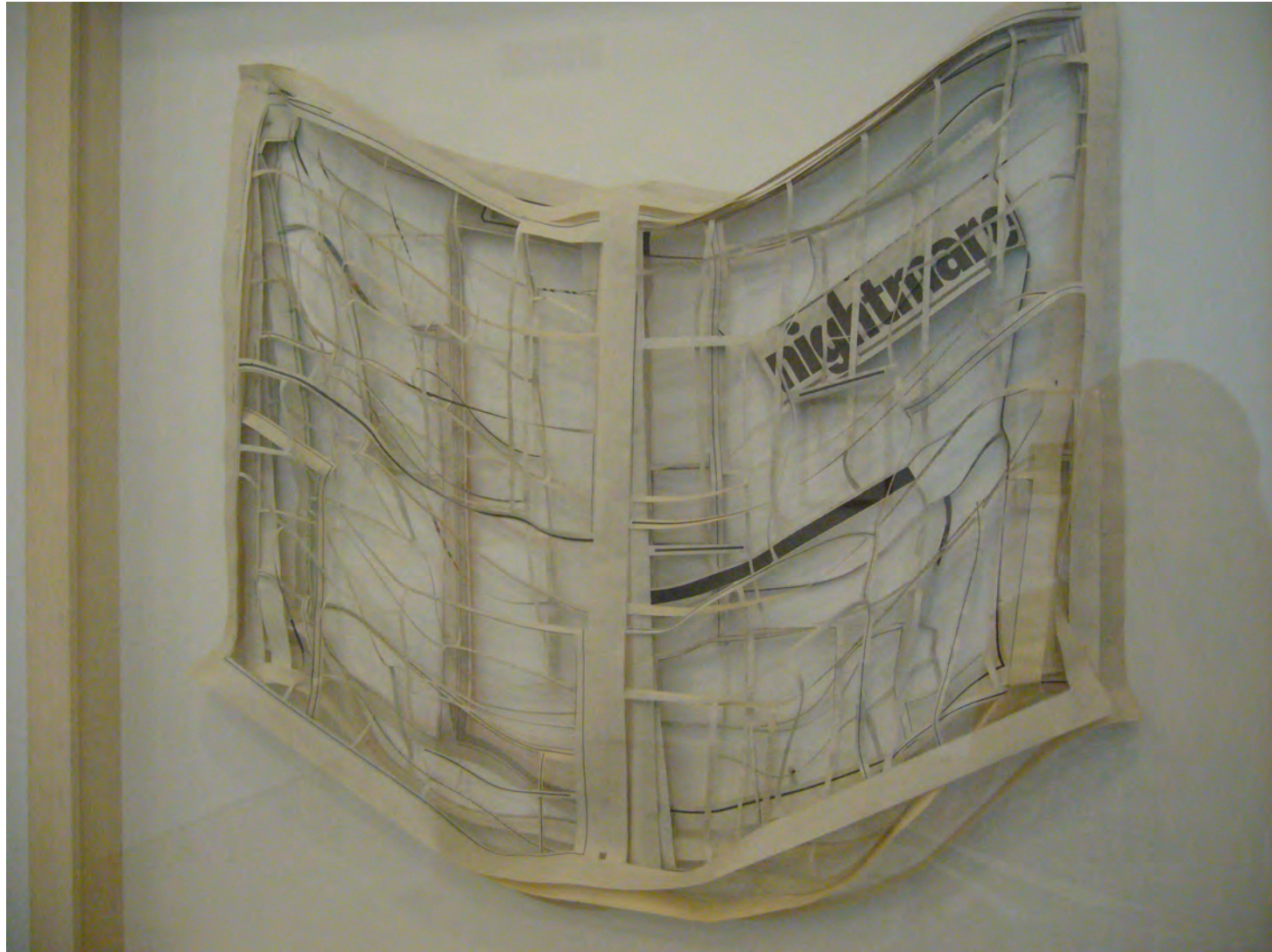


fig. 2.9: Jorge Macchi, *Nightmare* (2007)



fig. 2.10: Kurt Schwitters, *Disjointed Forces* (1920)

Using an old telephone book as a palette, Kline thins out the black oil paint with turpentine; on his work table are preliminary drawings made with sable brushes, often on telephone-book paper.



fig. 2.11



The final preparatory drawings—the last one includes bands of green and orange—give the clue to the large composition which was then sketched in on the over-size canvas with charcoal.

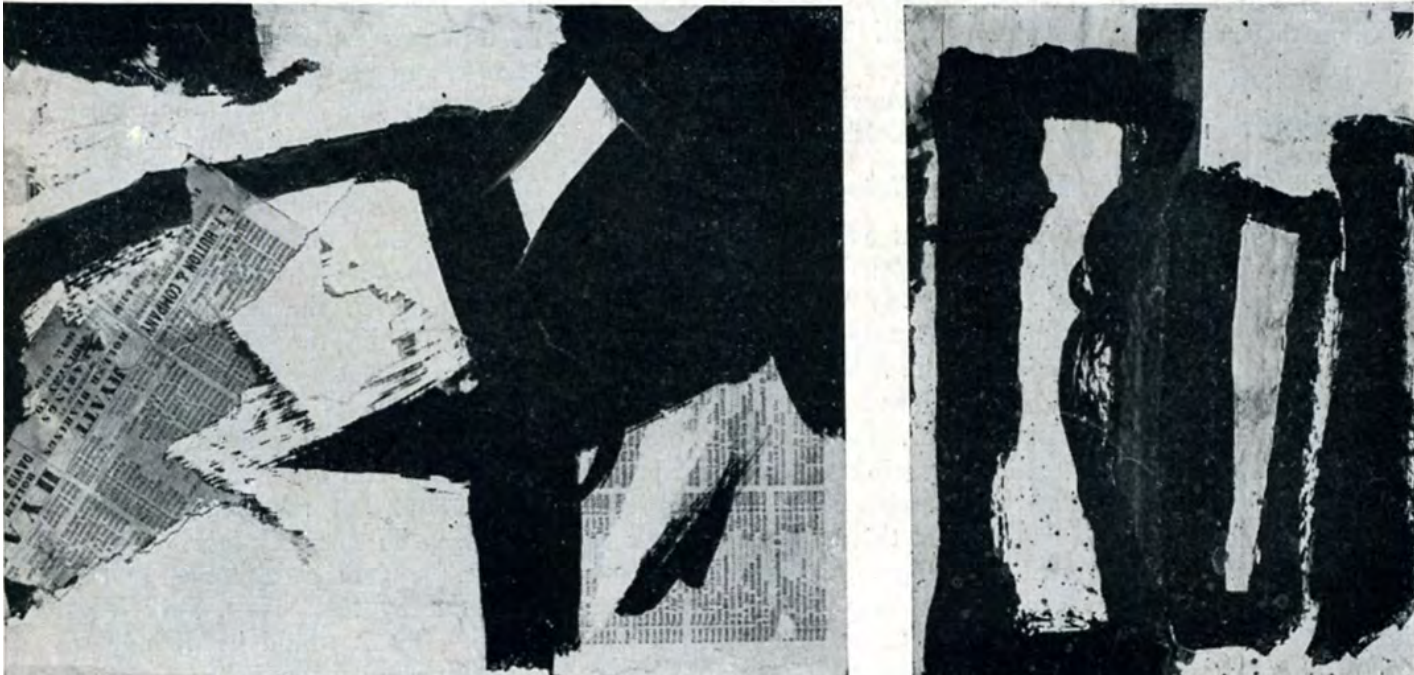


fig. 2.12



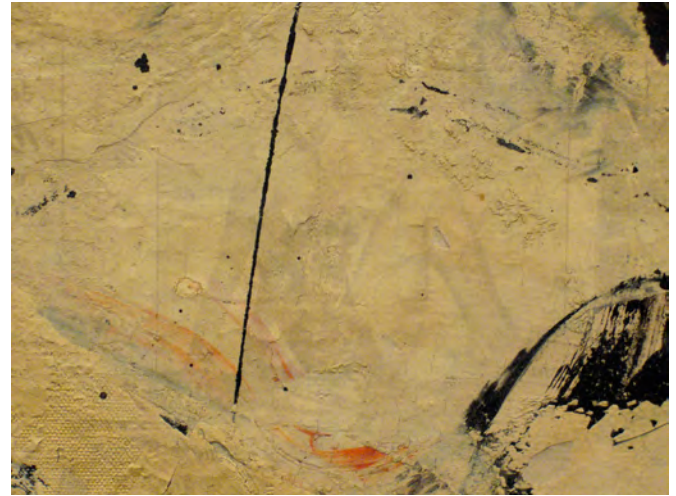
fig. 2.13: Jackson Pollock, Untitled (chicken wire covered with color drawings) (1951)



fig. 2.14: George Stillman, *8-14-50* (1950)



fig. 2.15: Willem de Kooning, *Attic* (1949)



detail of image transfer

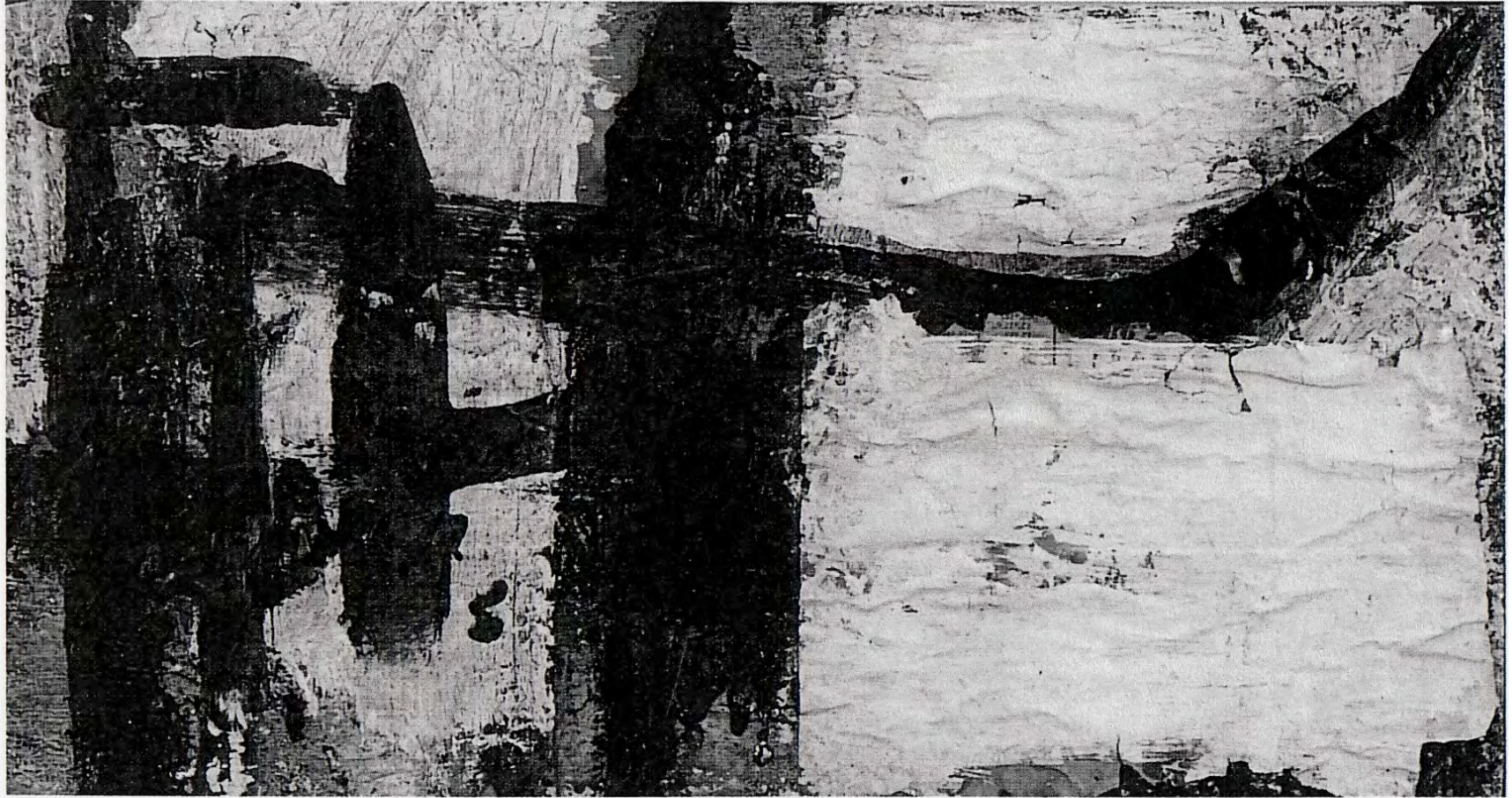


fig. 2.16: Cy Twombly, *Landscape* (1951)

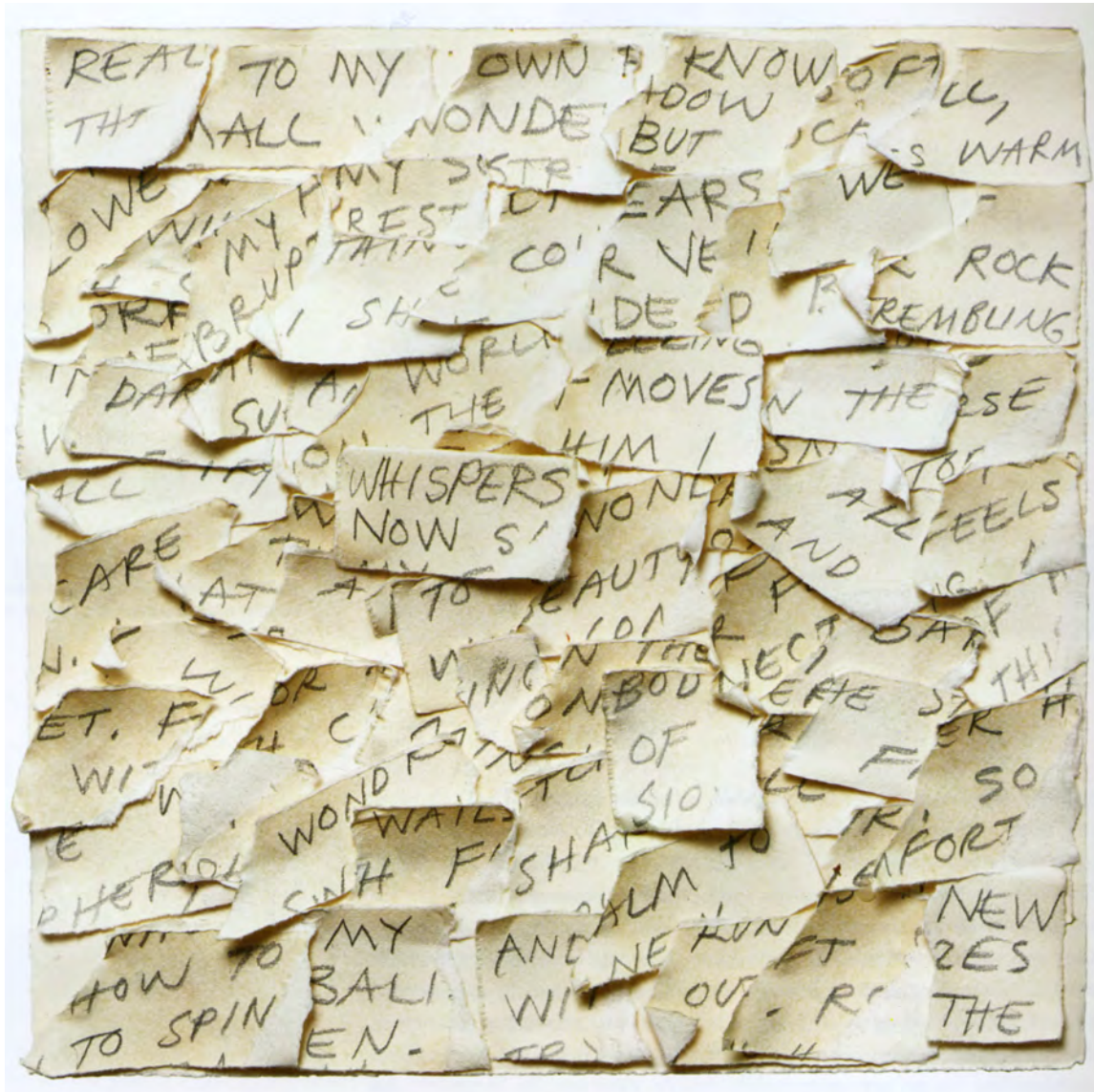


fig. 2.17: Susan Weil, *Secrets* (1949)



fig. 2.18: Arthur Rothstein, *Artelia Bendolph, girl at Gees Bend* (1937)



fig. 2.19: Rauschenberg, Untitled (four-panel glossy black painting) (1951), detail





fig. 2.20: Rauschenberg, Untitled (four-panel glossy black painting) (1951), detail



fig. 2.21: Cy Twombly, *Tiznit* (1953)



fig. 2.22: Rauschenberg, Untitled (small black painting over *Should Love Come First?*) (1953)

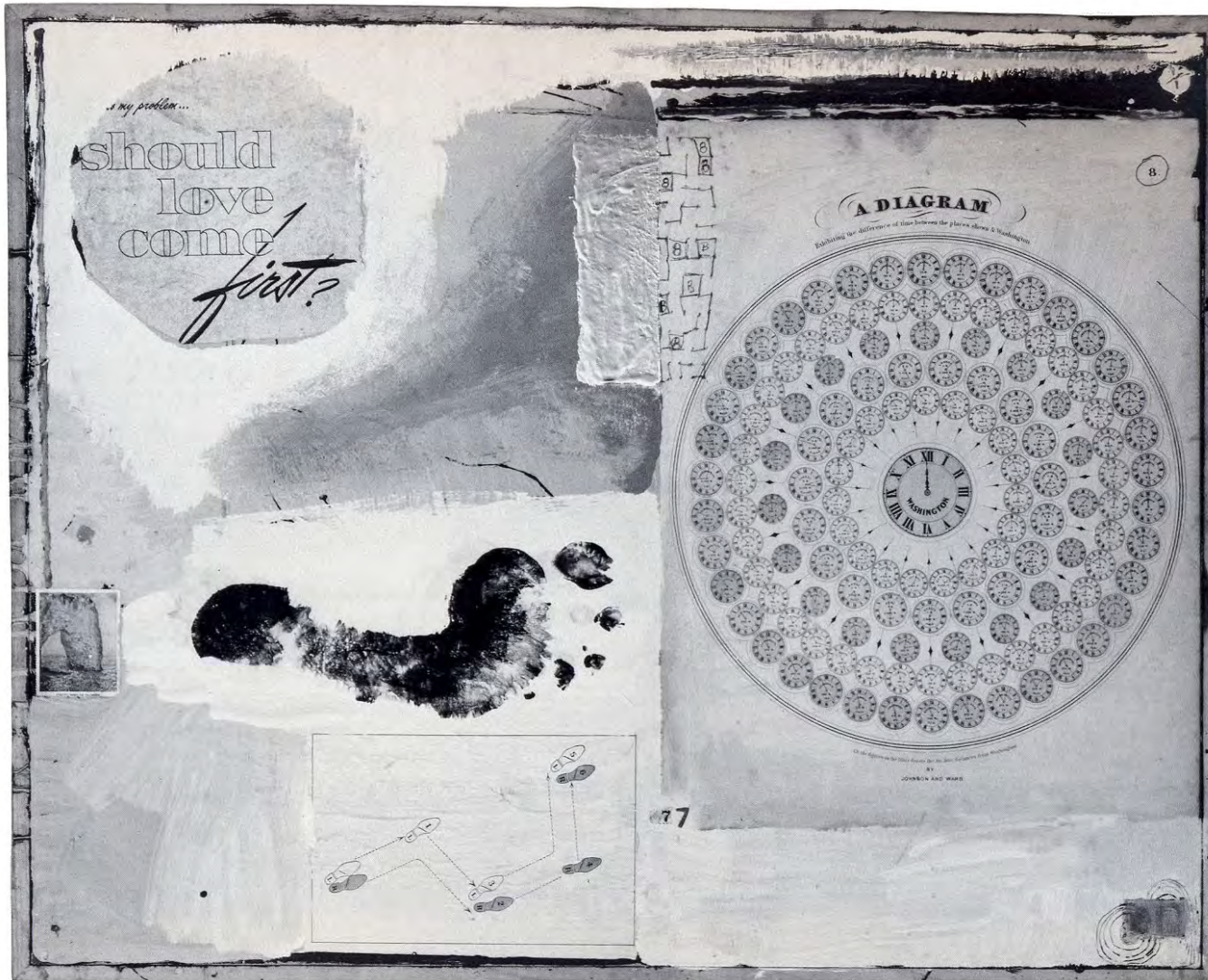


fig. 2.23: Rauschenberg, *Should Love Come First?* (1951)



fig. 2.24: Rauschenberg, Untitled (small black painting over *Number 1*, which was given to Cage) (1953)



fig. 2.25: Rauschenberg, seven-panel *White Painting* and *Untitled* (large black painting), Fulton Street studio, New York (c 1953)



fig. 2.26: Rauschenberg, Untitled (large black painting) (1953), photographed by artist, Fulton Street studio, New York



fig. 2.27: Rauschenberg, Untitled (four-panel glossy black painting) (1951), detail



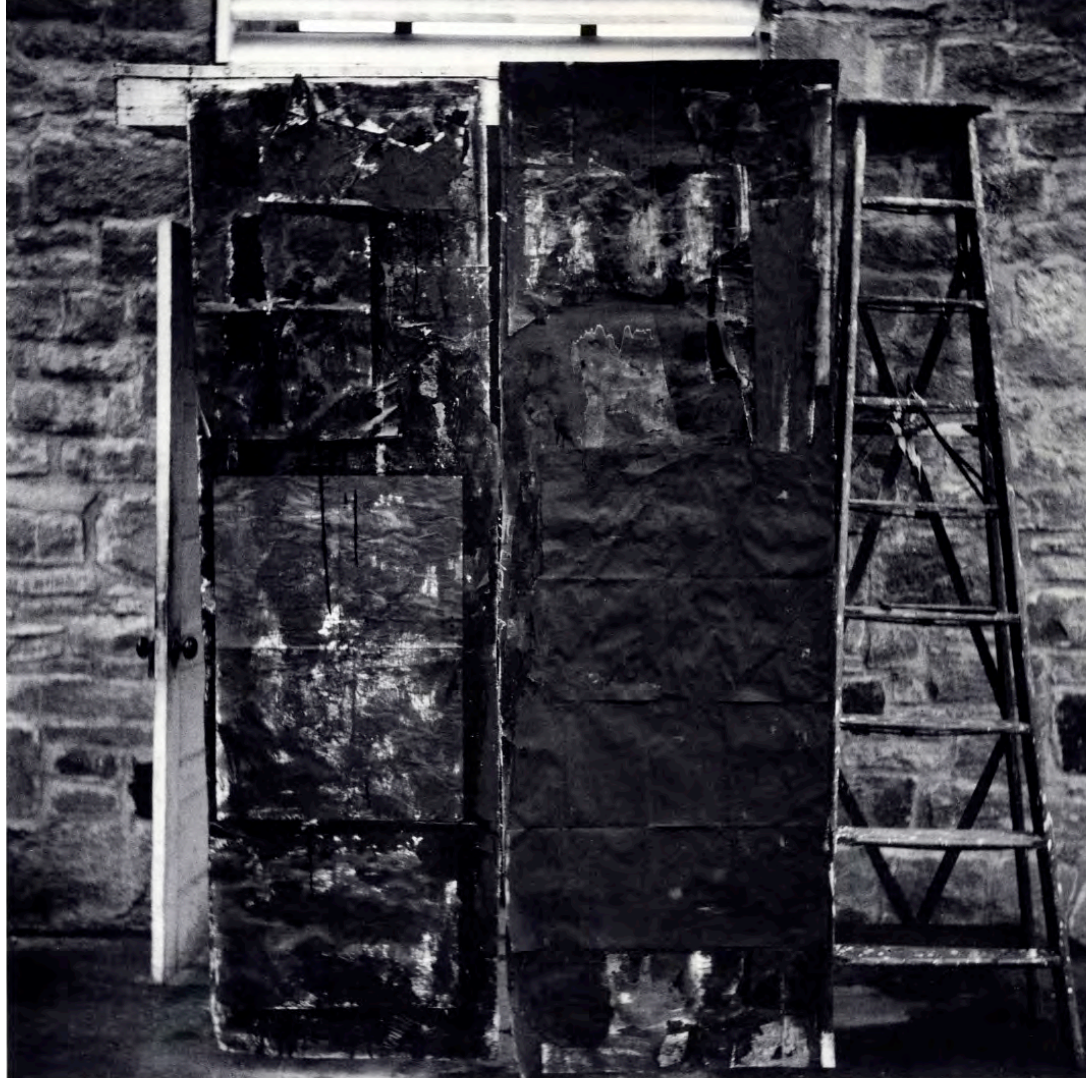


fig. 2.28: Rauschenberg, Untitled (black painting with grid forms), photographed by artist, Black Mountain College (1952)



fig. 2.29: Rauschenberg, *Interview* (1955)



fig. 2.30: Rauschenberg, *Winter Pool* (1959)



fig. 2.31: Rauschenberg, Untitled (vertical black painting), early state, photographed by artist, Black Mountain College (1952)



fig. 2.32: Rauschenberg, *Pink Door* (1954)

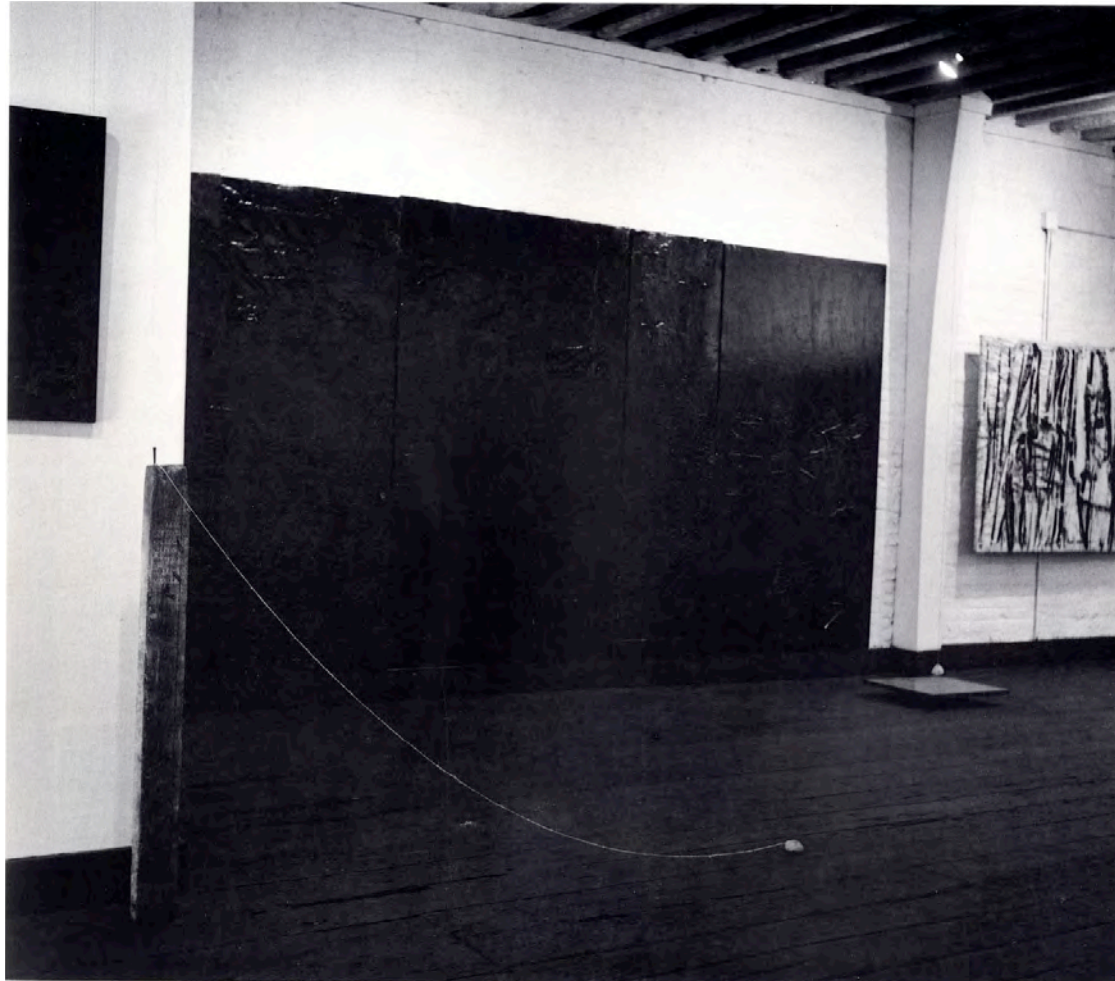


fig. 2.33: Installation view, *Robert Rauschenberg Paintings and Sculptures*, Stable Gallery, New York. From left: *Untitled* (black painting) (partial view), *Untitled (Elemental Sculpture)*, post with tethered stone, *Untitled* (four-panel glossy black painting, shown in early state with original five panels), *Untitled (Elemental Sculpture)*, mirror with hanging stone); all 1953.

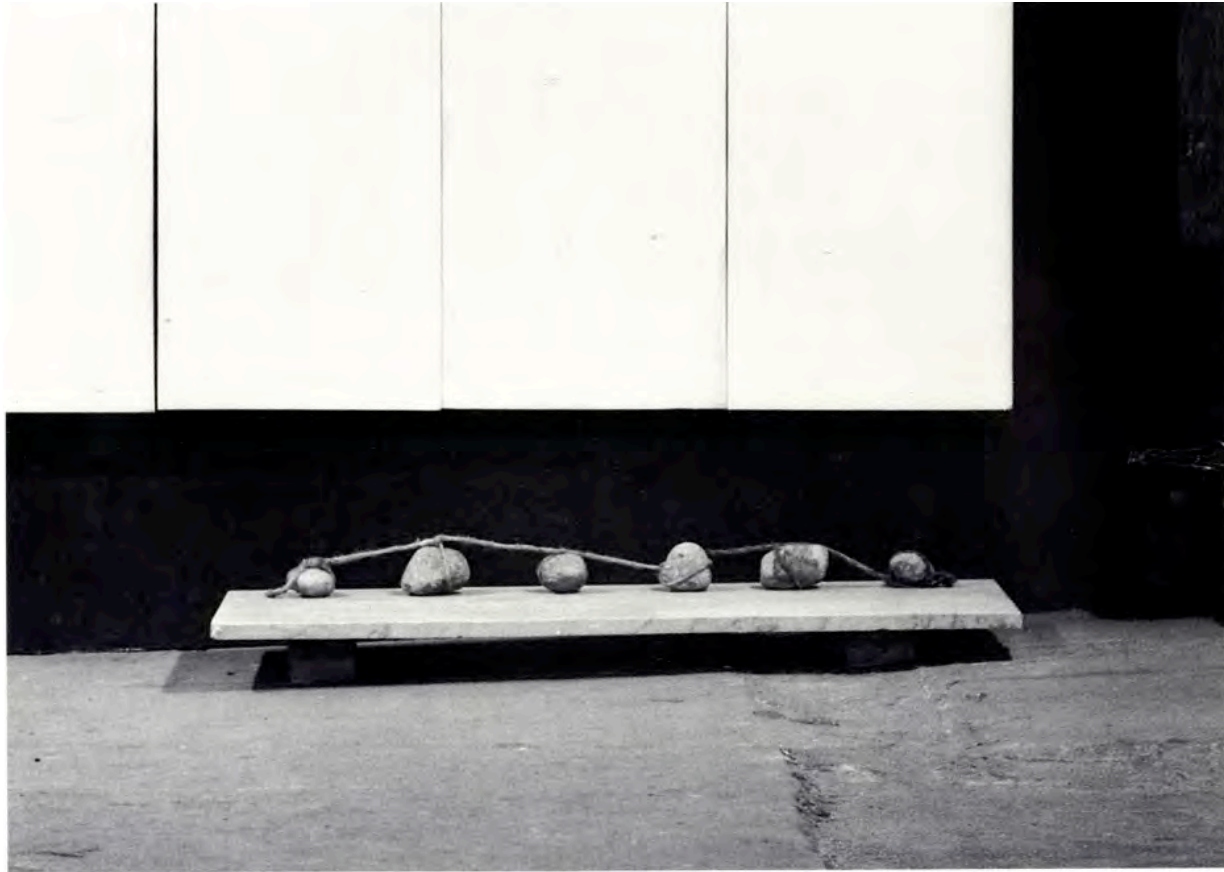


fig. 2.34: Installation view, *Robert Rauschenberg Paintings and Sculptures*, Stable Gallery, New York. From top: Rauschenberg, seven-panel *White Painting* (partial view) and *Untitled (Elemental Sculpture, plank with tethered stones)* (1953).



fig. 2.35: Installation view, *Robert Rauschenberg Paintings and Sculptures*, Stable Gallery, New York. From background: seven-panel *White Painting*, *Untitled (Elemental Sculpture, plank with tethered stones)* (1953) and *Untitled (Elemental Sculpture)*.





fig. 2.36: Installation view, *Robert Rauschenberg Paintings and Sculptures*, Stable Gallery, New York. From left: *Untitled* (black painting with grid forms) (1952), three untitled *Elemental Sculpture* (1953), two-panel *White Painting* (1951).

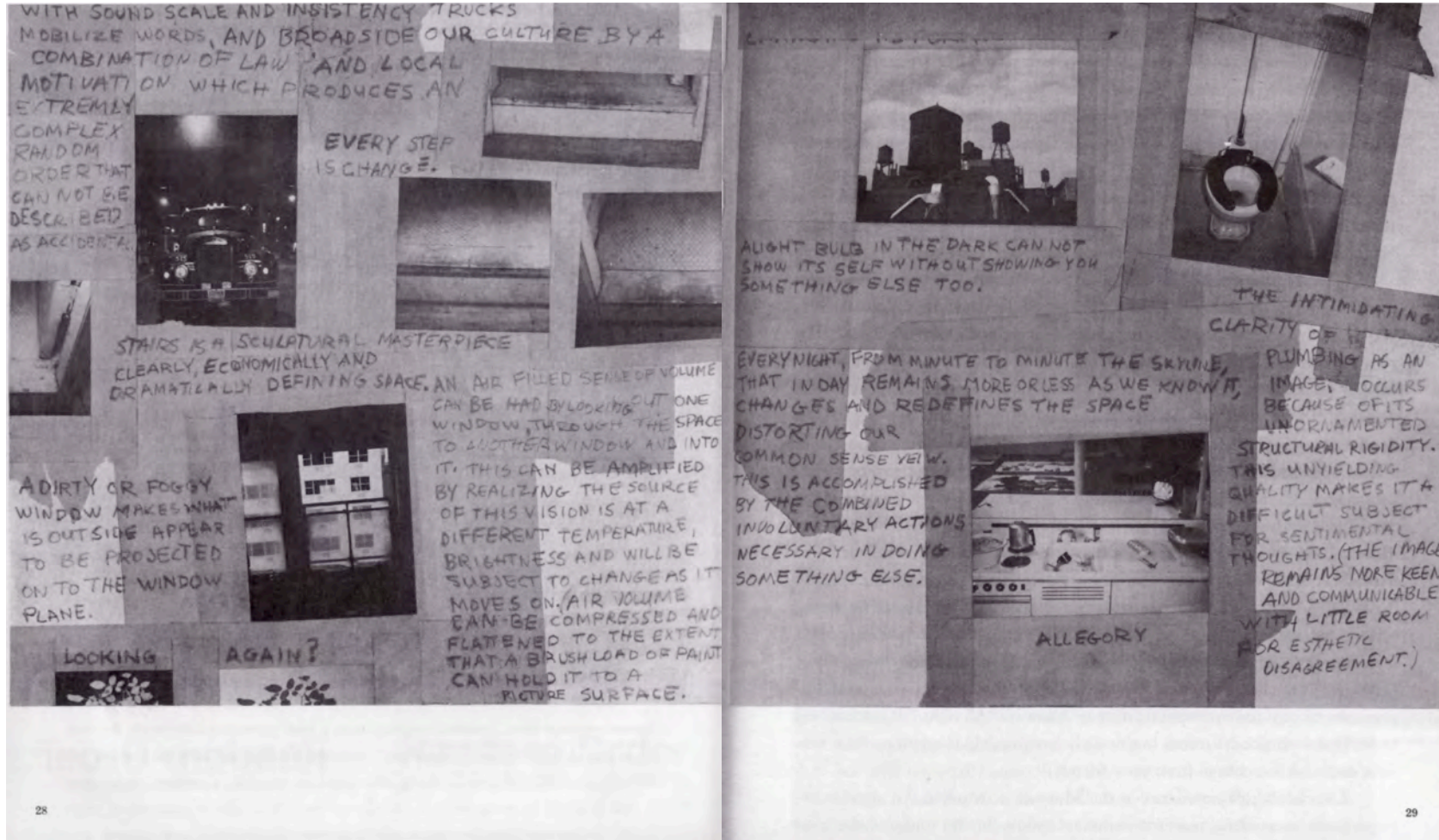
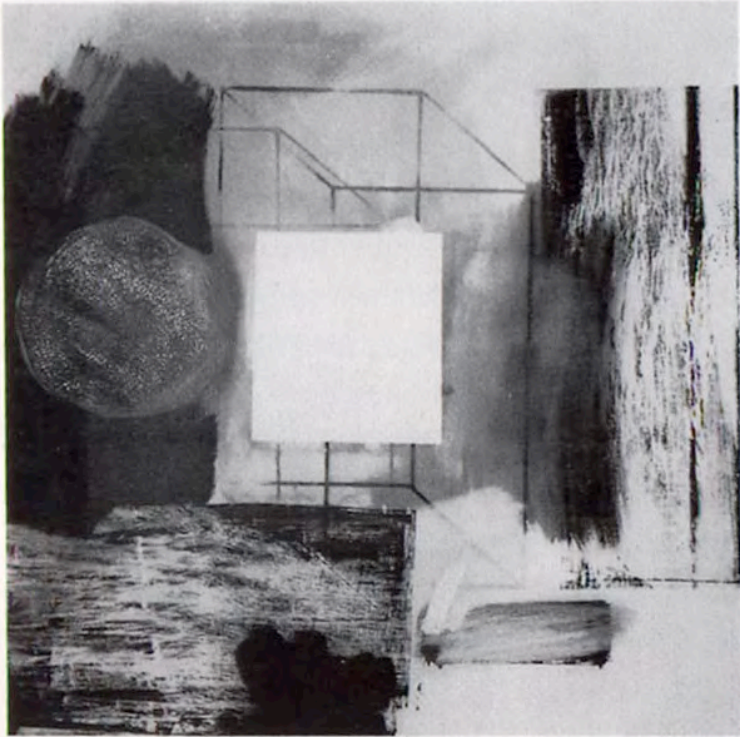


fig. 3.1: Rauschenberg, "Random Order," *Location* (spring 1963), pp. 28-29



Rauschenberg, Renaissance, oil, 36" by 36", 1962

View from the artist's studio

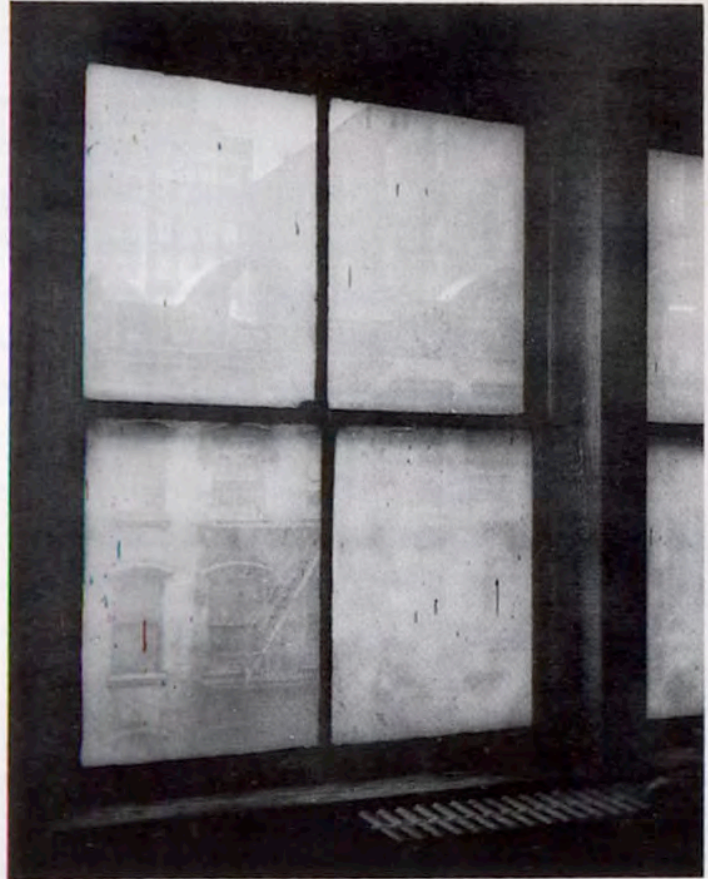


fig. 3.2: Rauschenberg, "Random Order," *Location* (spring 1963), pp. 30-31



fig. 3.3: Rauschenberg, *Quiet House* (1949)

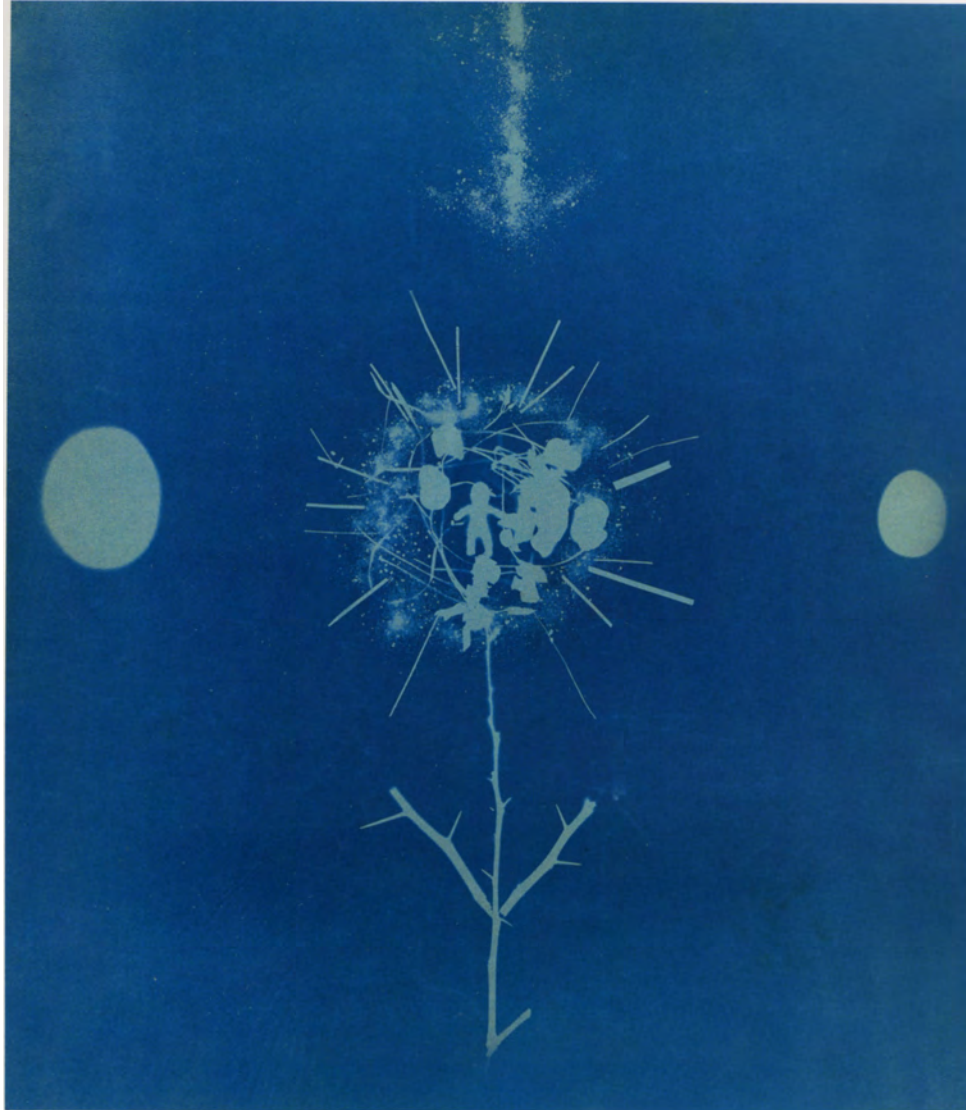


fig. 3.4: Rauschenberg and Susan Weil, Untitled (1952), detail



fig. 3.5: Rauschenberg and Susan Weil,  
Untitled (feet and foliage) (c 1950)



fig. 3.6: Rauschenberg, Untitled (*Interior of an Old Carriage*) (1949)



fig. 3.7: Rauschenberg, *Untitled (Cy on Bench)* (1951)





fig. 3.8: Aaron Siskind, *New York 3* (1951)



fig. 3.9: Rauschenberg, Untitled (*Rome Posters*) (1952)



fig. 3.10: Rauschenberg, Untitled (c 1951-52)



fig. 3.11: Hazel Larsen, *Merce Cunningham* (c 1948)



fig. 3.12: Ben Shahn, *Handball* (1939)



photo: *New York* (1936)



fig. 3.13: Motherwell, *Elegy to the Spanish Republic* (1957)



22

fig. 3.14: Rauschenberg, *Tangiers Street* (1952)



fig. 3.15: Shahn, *Untitled (Child of Fortuna Family, Hammond, Louisiana)* (October 1935)





fig. 3.16: Siskind, *Gloucester, Massachusetts (glove)* (1944)



fig. 3.17: Andrew Wyeth, *Winter, 1946* (1946)



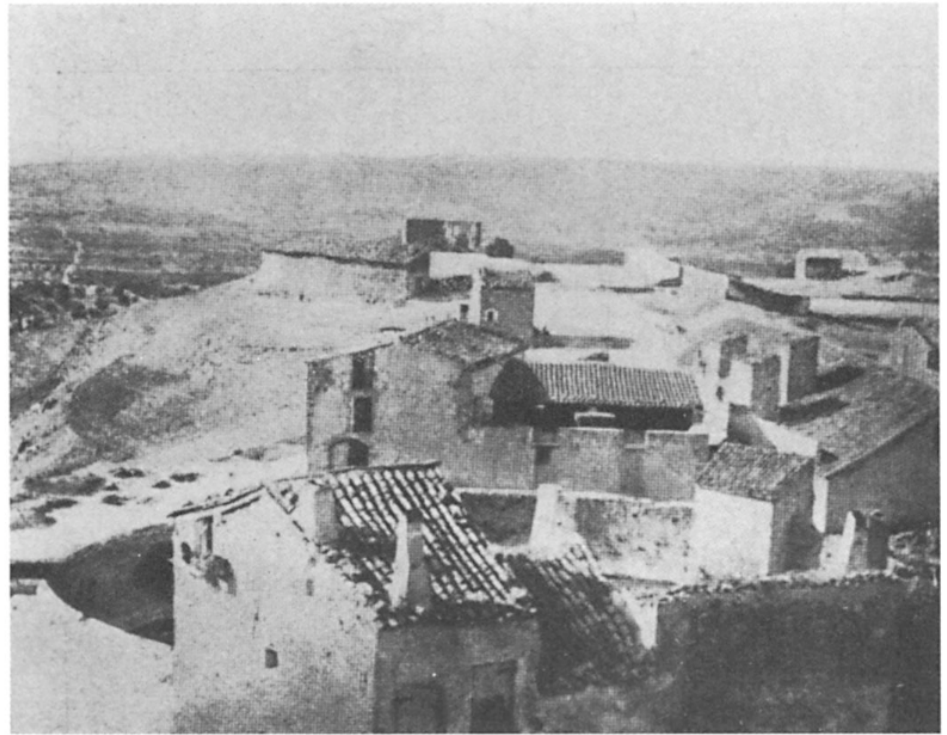
fig. 3.18: Rauschenberg, *Paint Cans* (1954)



fig. 3.19: Rauschenberg, *Palermo, Vendors* (1952)



fig. 3.20: Picasso, *The Reservoir at Horta de Ebro* (1909)



Horta de Ebro, photographed by artist (summer 1909)

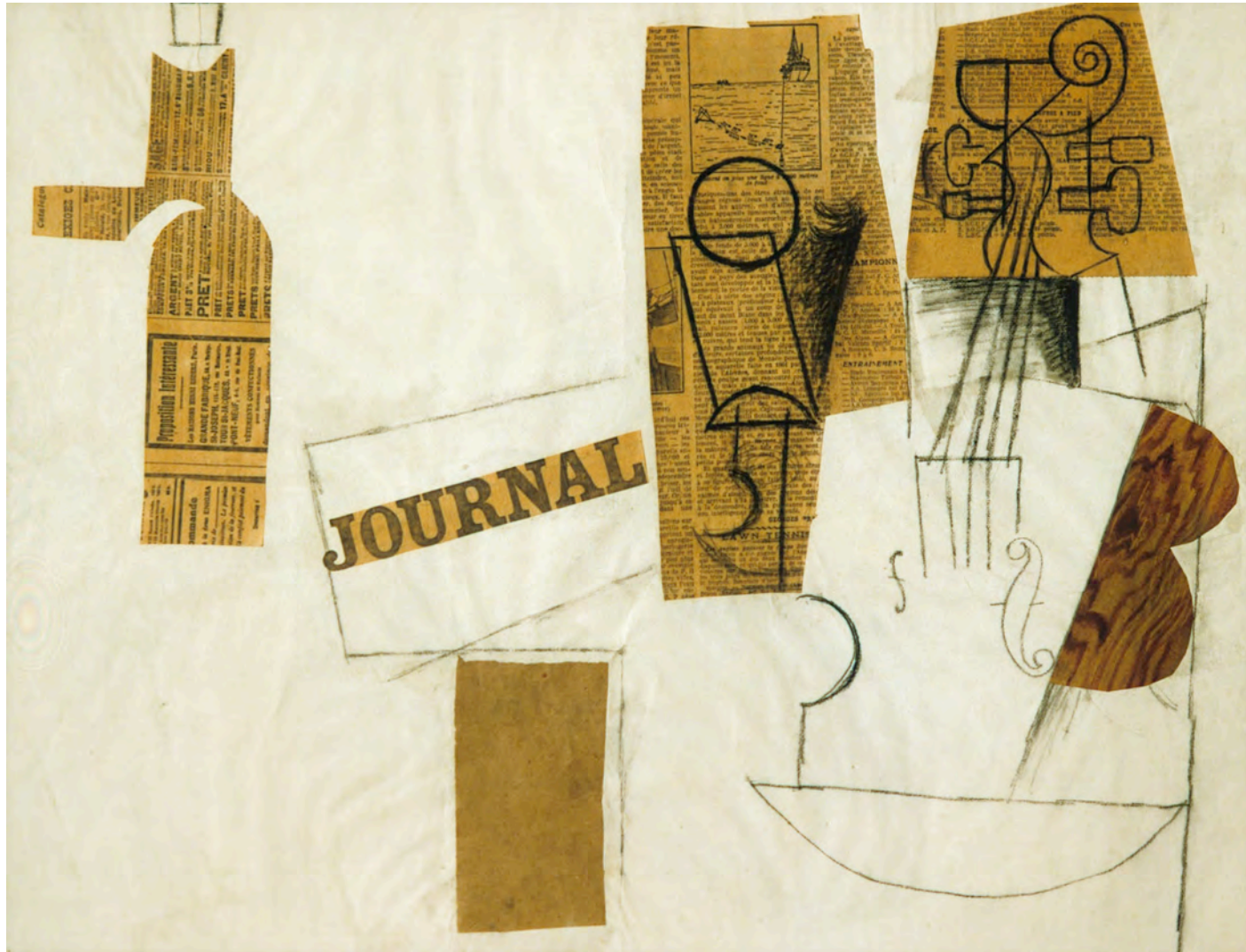


fig. 3.21: Picasso, *Bottle, Glass and Violin* (1912)



fig. 3.22: Rauschenberg, *Rome Flea Market (V)* (1952)



fig. 3.23: Raphael, *Terranuova Madonna* (1505)





fig. 3.24: George Frederick Watts, *Hope* (1886)



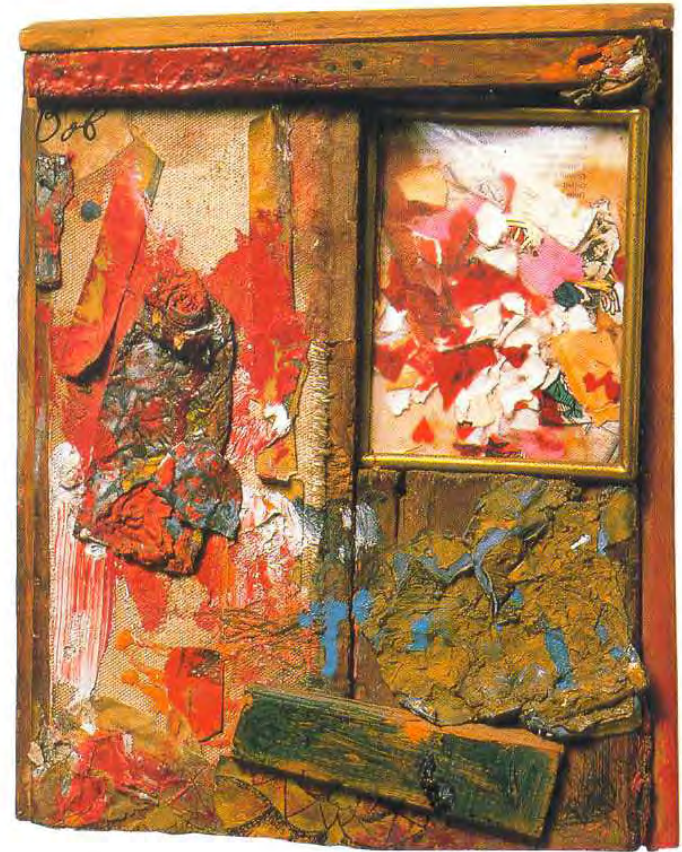
fig. 3.25: Shahn, *Mrs. Trische and daughter, Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana* (1935)



fig. 3.26: Rauschenberg, Fulton Street studio view, artist's domestic alcove (c 1953)



fig. 3.27: Rauschenberg, Untitled (c 1952)



Untitled (combine-painting) (c 1954)



fig. 3.28: Shahn, *Sign, Route 40, central Ohio* (1938)



fig. 3.29: Shahn, *Main Street, Lancaster, Ohio* (1938)



fig. 4.1: Rauschenberg (left to right), *Yoicks* (1954); unknown painting (c 1954);  
Untitled (with shelf and colored glass light box) (1954), photographed by artist



fig. 4.2: Rauschenberg, *K24976S* (1956)





fig. 4.3: Rauschenberg, *Monogram*, first state (c 1955)



*Rhyme* (1956)





fig. 4.5: Rauschenberg, *Monogram* (1955-59),  
combine-painting = horizontal orientation



*Skyway* (1964), silkscreen painting = vertical orientation



fig. 4.6: Perugino, *Christ Giving the Keys to Saint Peter* (1481)



fig. 4.7: Manet, *Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (1883)



fig. 4.8: Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, *Antonio Riccobono* (1743)



fig. 4.9: Barnett Newman, *Eve* (c 1950)



fig. 4.10: Jean Dubuffet, *Olympia* (1950)





fig. 4.11: Morris Louis, *Where* (1960)

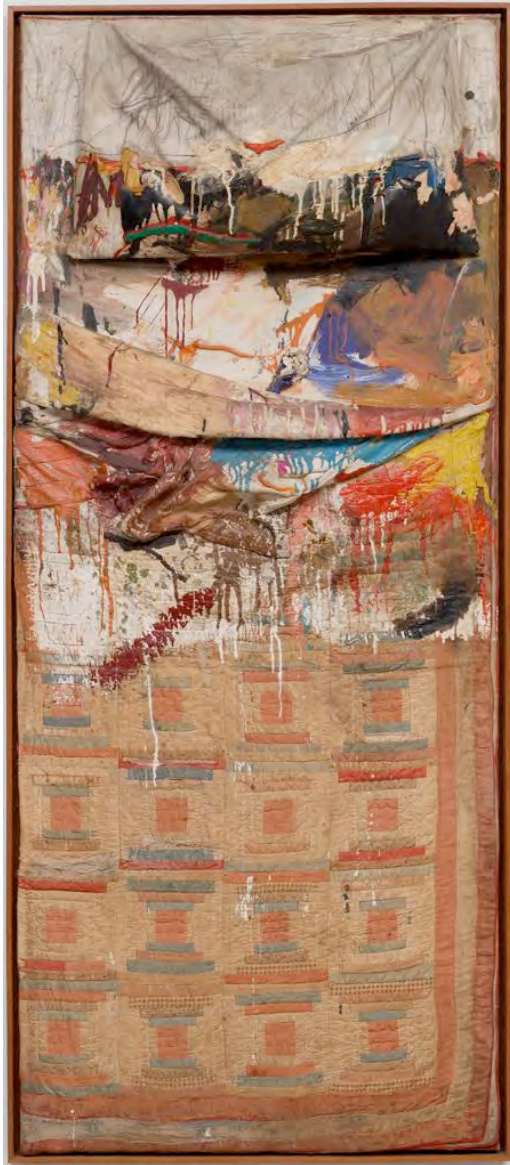


fig. 4.12: Rauschenberg, *Bed* (1955)



fig. 4.13: Rauschenberg, *Jasper-Studio N.Y.C. 1955 #2* (1955)



fig. 4.14:



fig. 4.15: Cy Twombly, *Robert Rauschenberg combine material* (1954), Fulton Street studio, New York



fig. 4.16: Rauschenberg, *Untitled* (combine-painting) (c 1954), photographed by artist, Fulton Street Studio, New York



fig. 4.17: Samuel van Hoogstraten, *Trompe l'oeil (Still Life)* (1655)



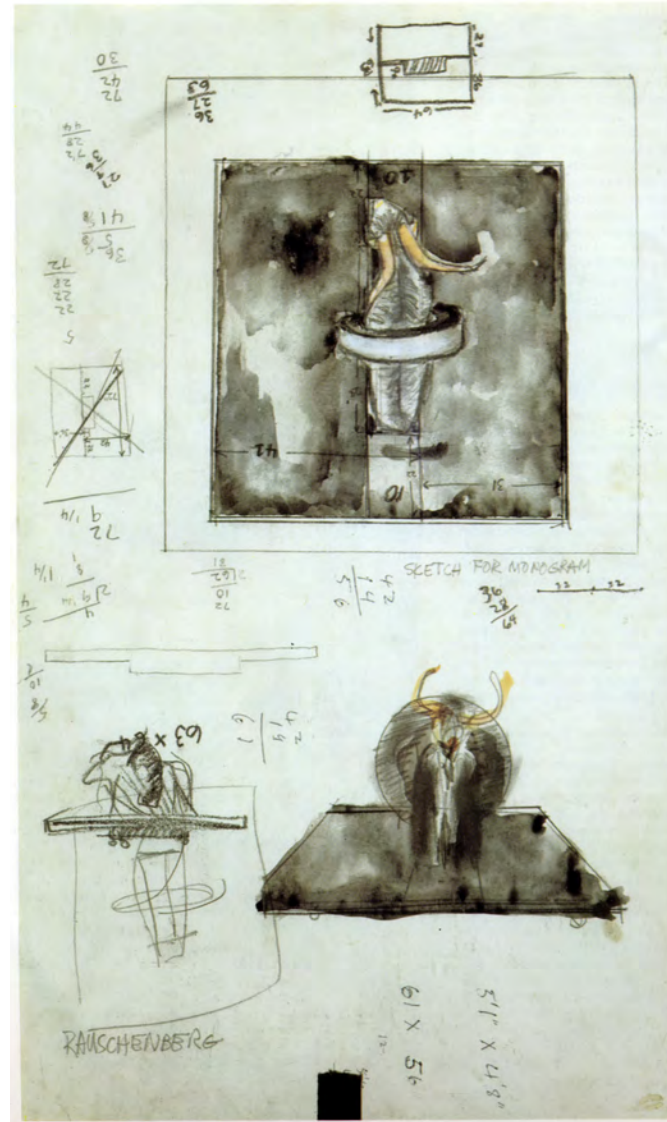
fig. 4.18: William Harnett, *Emblems of Peace* (1890)





fig. 4.19: Rauschenberg, *Monogram* (1955-59), view from rear

fig. 4.20: Rauschenberg, study for *Monogram* (1959)



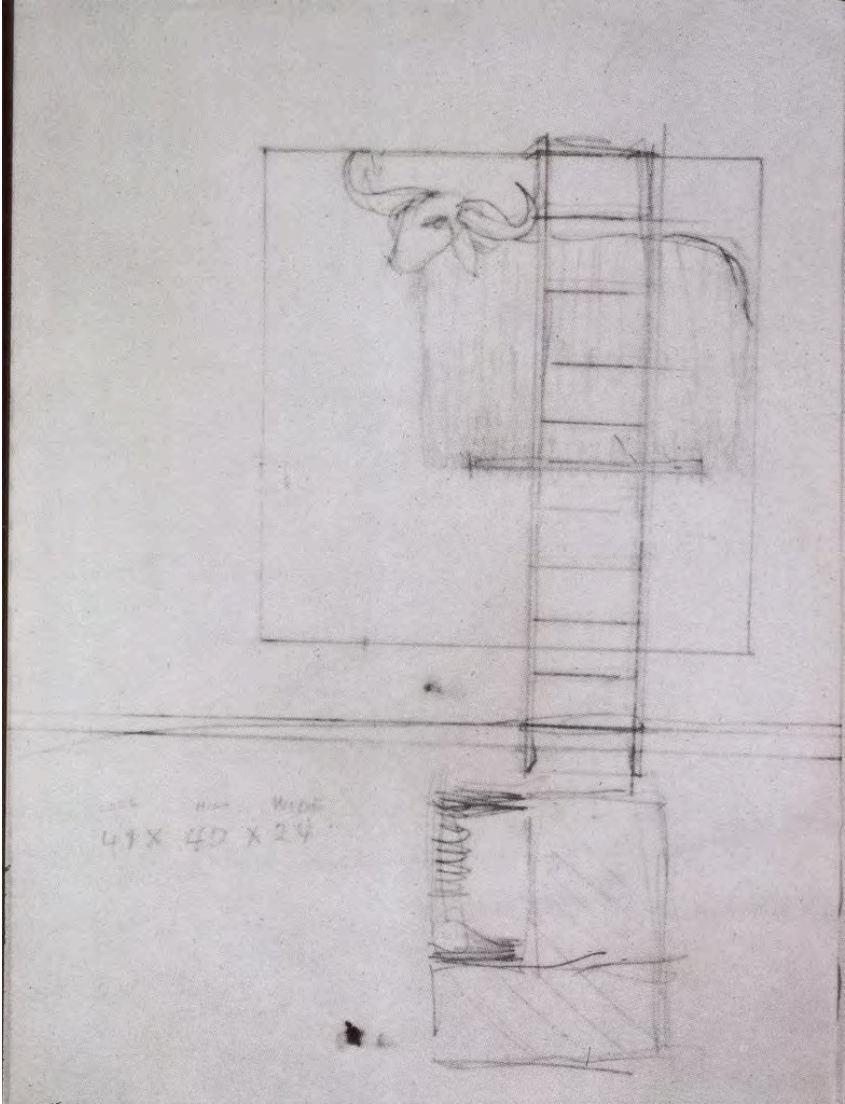


fig. 4.21: Rauschenberg, study for *Monogram*, first state (c 1955)

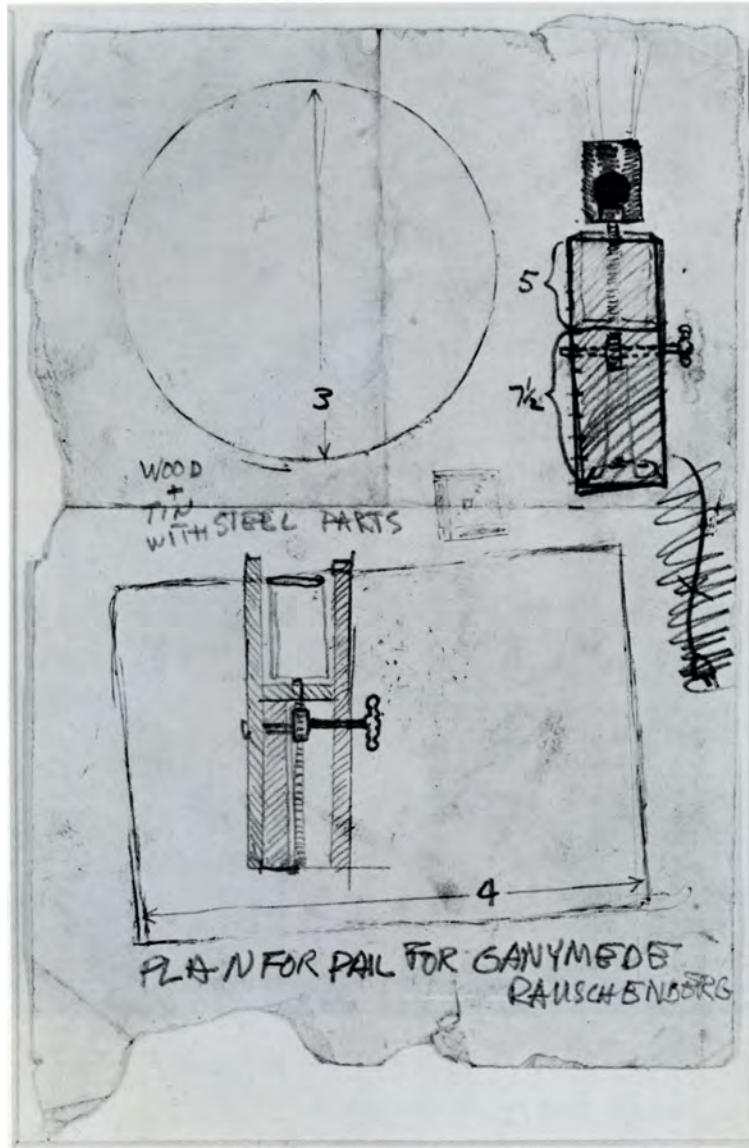


fig. 4.22: Rauschenberg, study for *Pail for Ganymede* (1959)



fig. 4.23: Rauschenberg with *Charlene* and *Man with White Shoes*, Fulton Street studio, New York (1954)

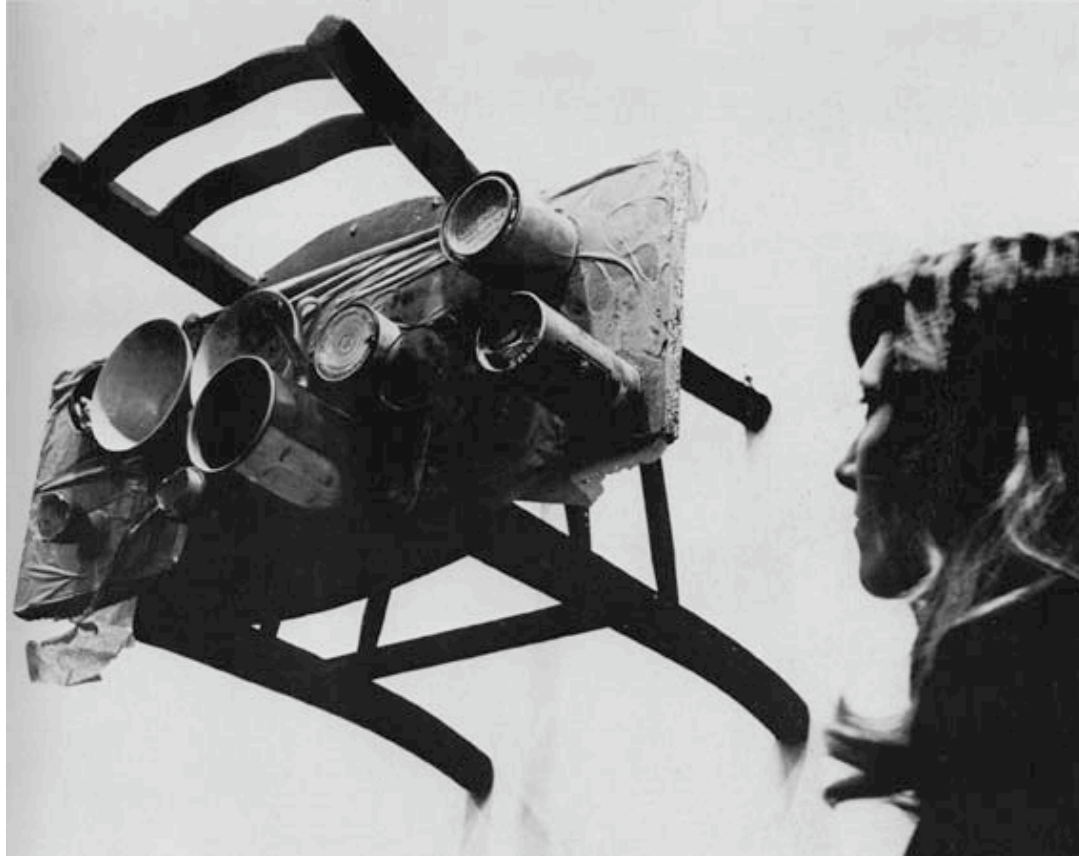


fig. 4.24: Daniel Spoerri, *Kichka's Breakfast* (1960)



fig. 4.25: Installation view, *Dylaby*, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (1962)



fig. 4.26: Rauschenberg, Untitled (*Mona Lisa*) (c 1952)



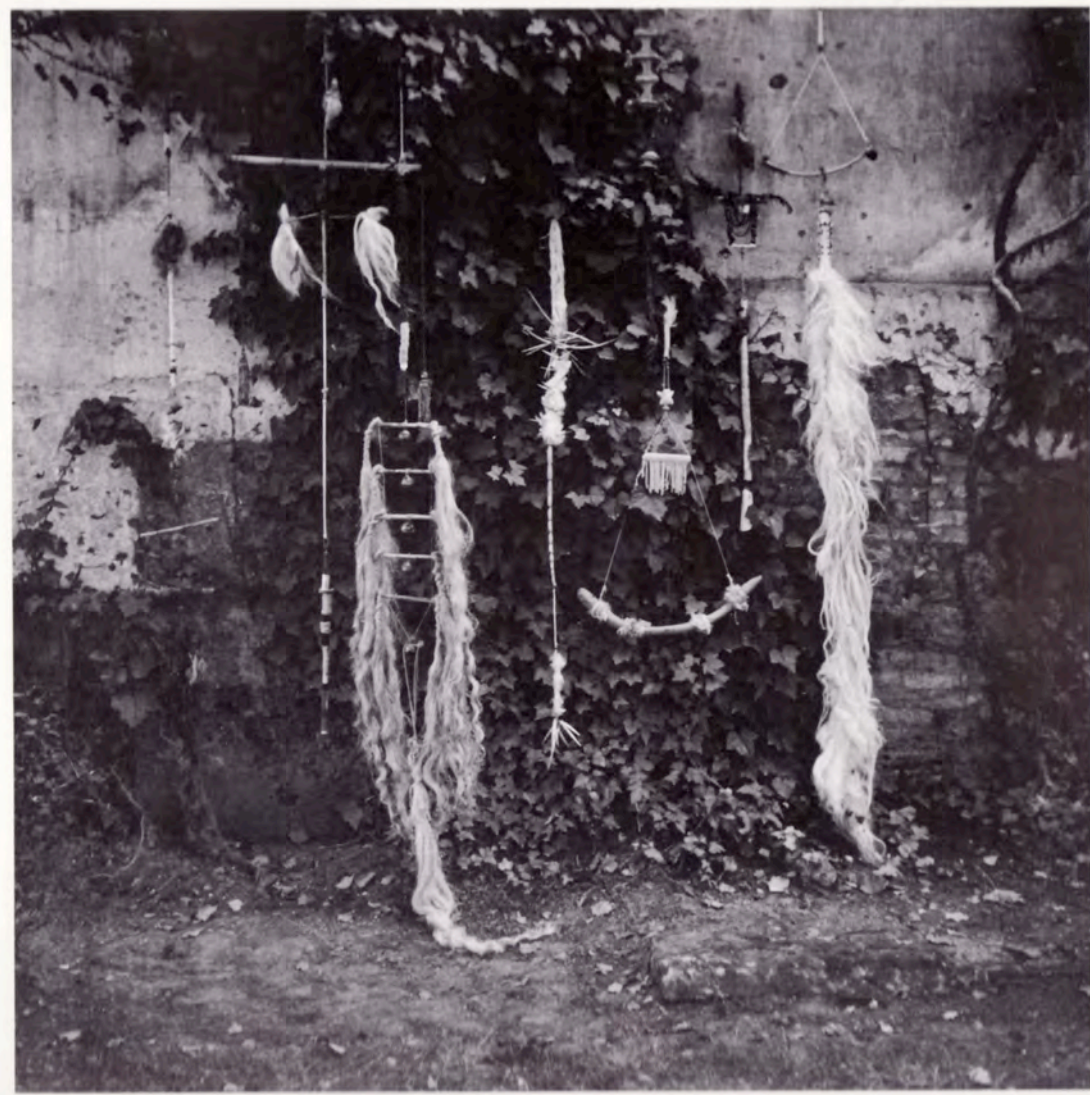


fig. 4.27: Rauschenberg, eight *feticci* arranged and photographed by the artist in Pincio Gardens, Rome (c 1952)



fig. 4.28: Rauschenberg, Untitled (from the *scatole personali* series, pink satin-lined box with beetle) (1953)



fig. 4.29: Rauschenberg, Untitled (from the *scatole personali* series, with hanging pearl) (c 1952)



fig. 4.30: Rauschenberg, *Rome Flea Market (II)* (1952)



fig. 4.31: Rauschenberg, *Tangier* (1952)



fig. 4.32: Rauschenberg, nine untitled hanging assemblages from the *feticci personali* series, Pincio Gardens, Rome (c 1952)

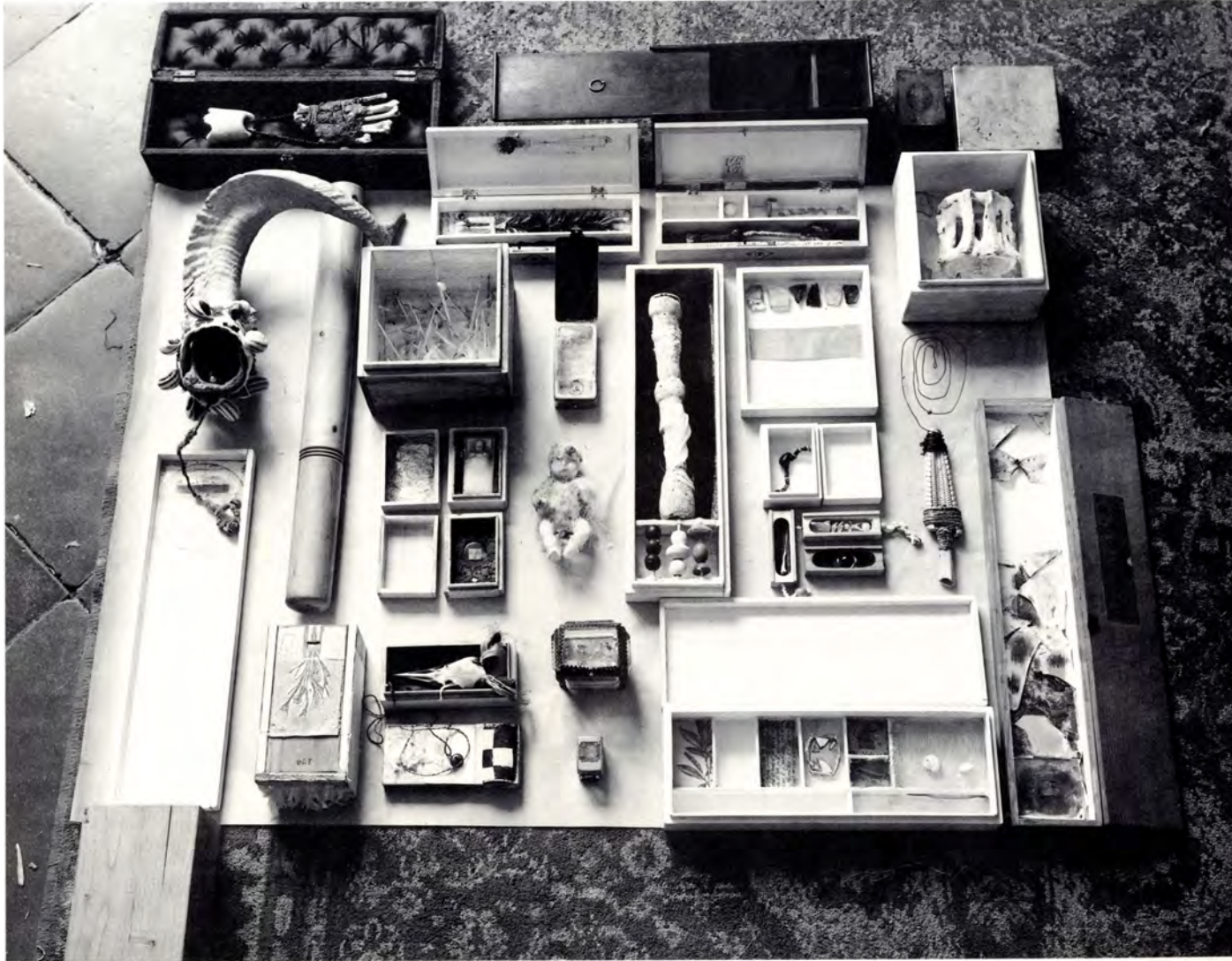


fig. 4.33: Rauschenberg, thirty *scatole personali* (1952), photographed by artist, Pension Allegi, Rome (1953)



fig. 4.34: Alberto Burri, *Sacco* 1953 (1953)





fig. 4.35: Rauschenberg, two untitled *scatole personali* (c 1952)

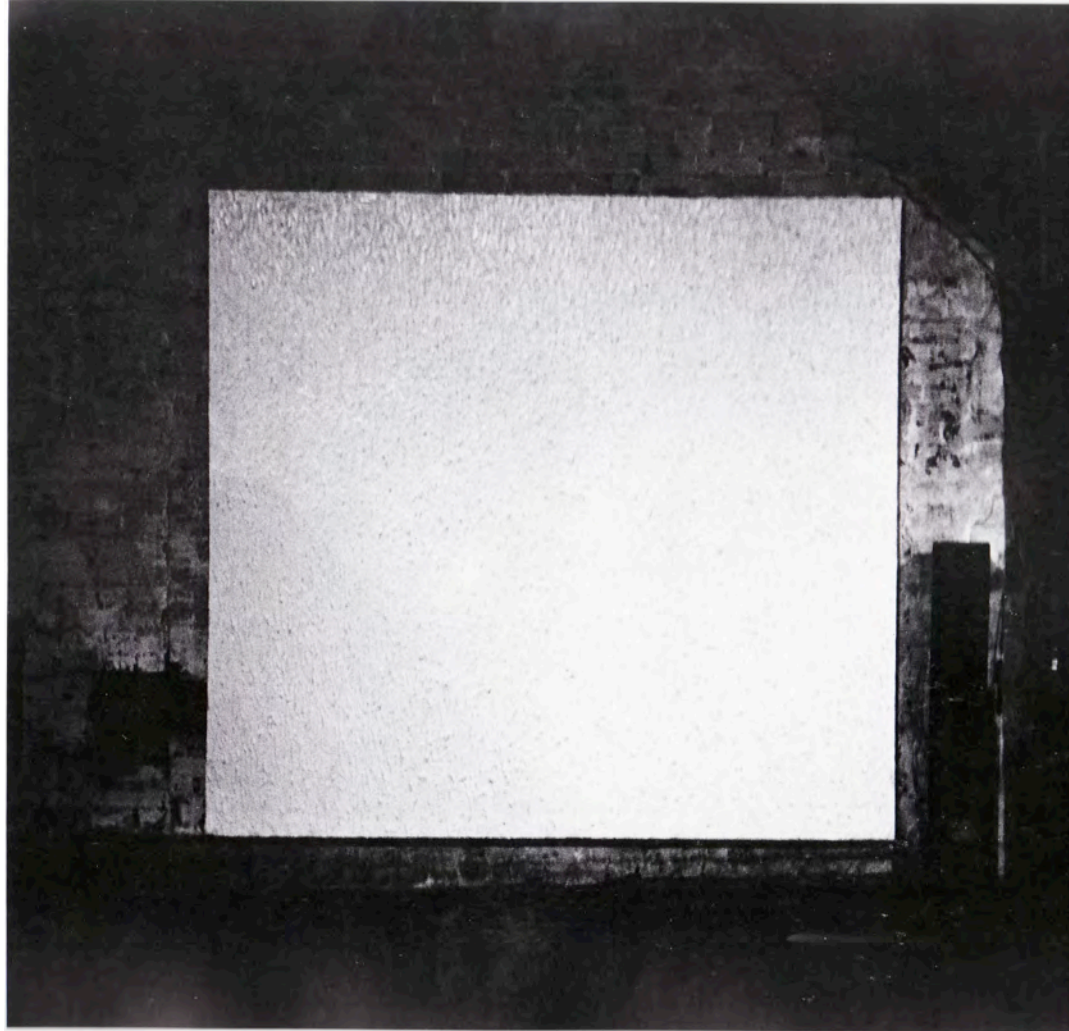
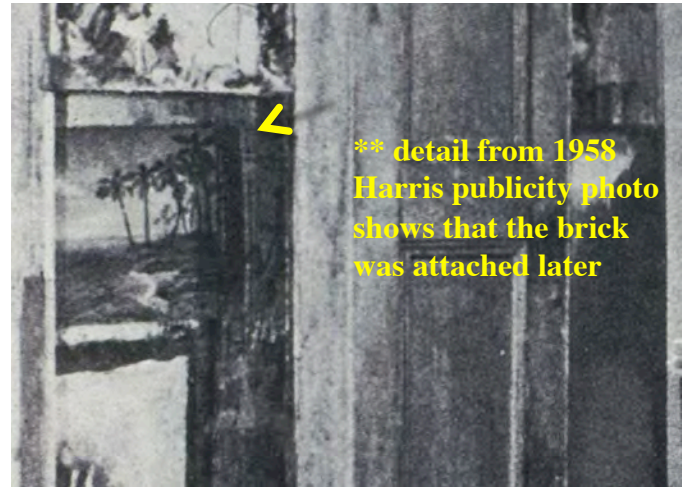


fig. 4.36: Rauschenberg, Untitled (white lead painting) (c 1953-54)



fig. 4.37: Rauschenberg, *Short Circuit* (1955)



\*\* detail from 1958  
Harris publicity photo  
shows that the brick  
was attached later

fig. 4.38: Rauschenberg, *Interview* (1955)



fig. 4:39: Rauschenberg, Untitled (red painting with novelty light bulb) (1954)



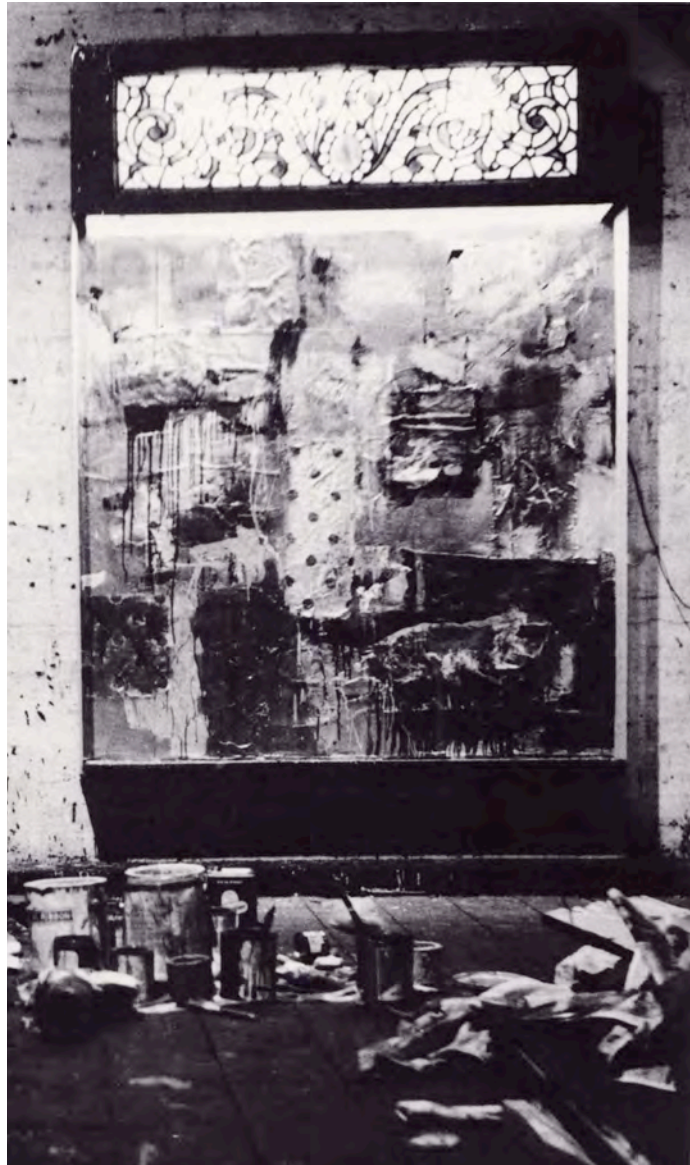


fig. 4.40: Rauschenberg, Untitled (with shelf and colored glass) (1954)

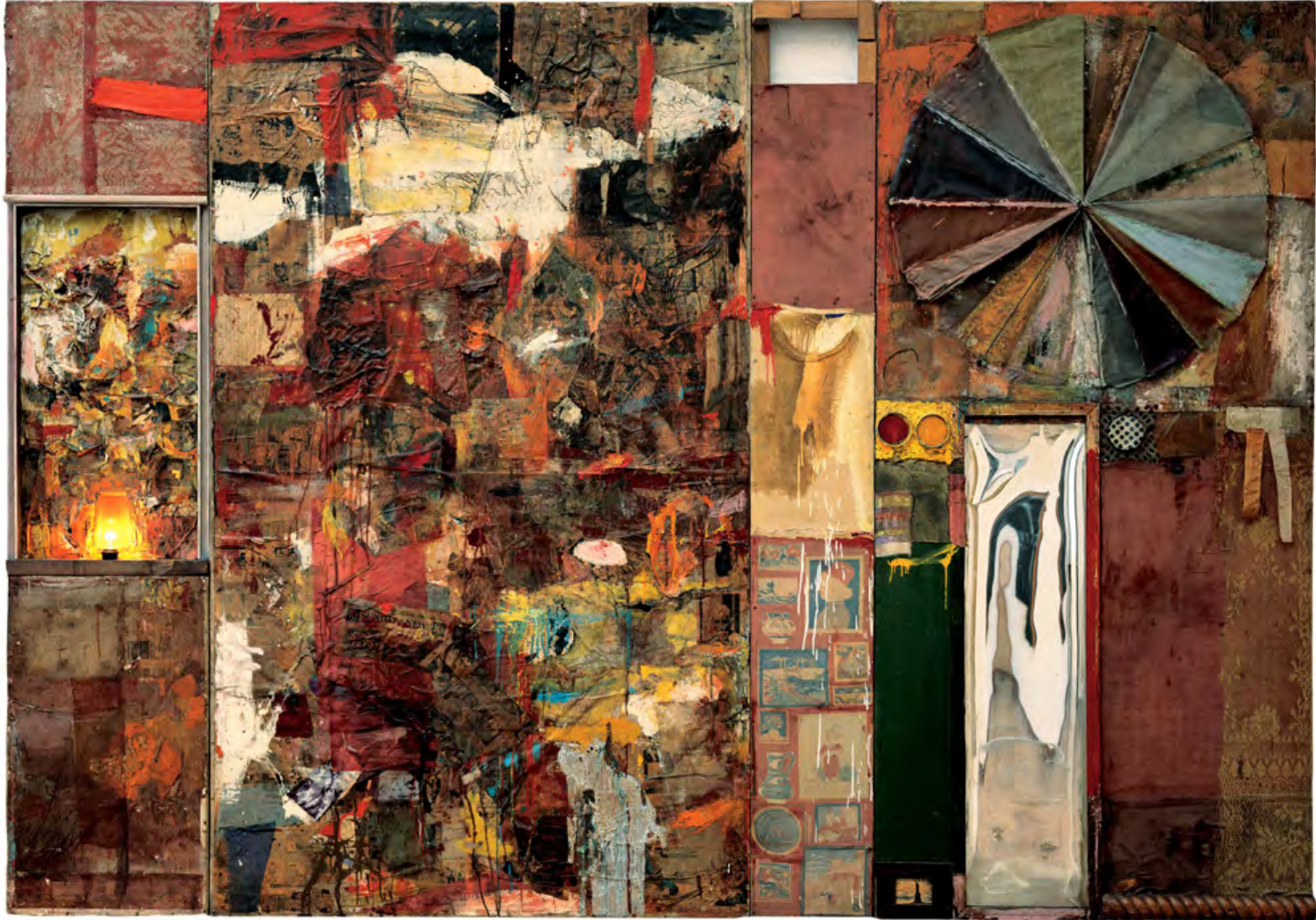


fig. 4.41: Rauschenberg, *Charlene* (1954)



fig. 4.42: Rauschenberg, *Odalisk* (1955/ 58)



fig. 4.43: Rauschenberg, Untitled (Man with White Shoes) (1954)





fig. 4.44: Rauschenberg, *Red Interior* (1954)

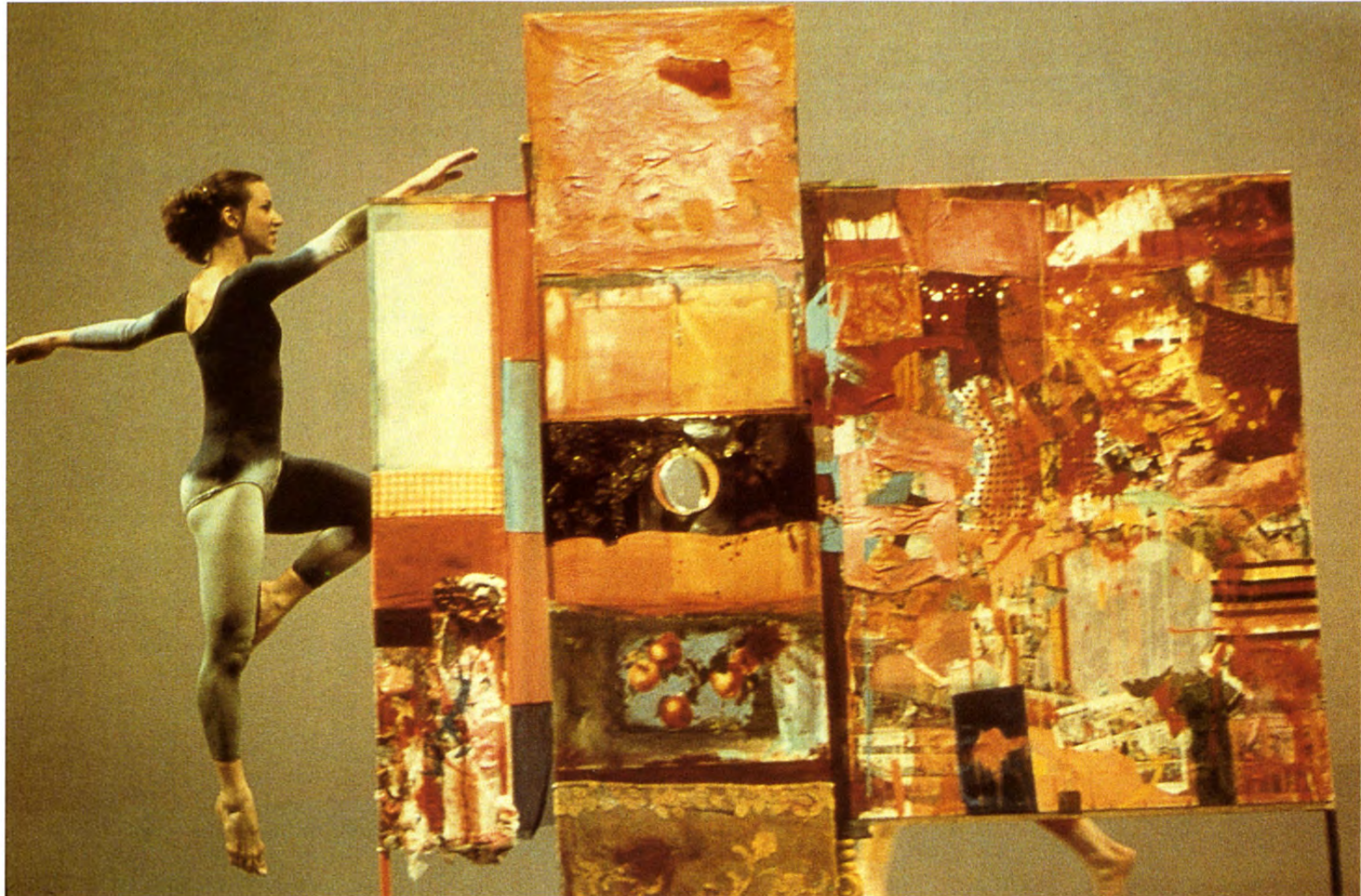


fig. 4.45: Rauschenberg, *Minutiae* (1954), in performance



fig. 4.46: Rauschenberg, *Kickback* (1959)



fig. 4.47: Rauschenberg, *Dam* (1959)



fig. 4.48: Rauschenberg, *Wager* (1957-59),  
detail of left and center panel



fig. 4.49: Rauschenberg, *Factum I*



*Factum II* (1957)



fig. 4.50: Rauschenberg, *Rebus* (1955) and Hesse, *Ennead* (1966) in Victor Ganz's dining room





fig. 4.51: Rauschenberg, *Rebus* (1955)



fig. 5.1: Allan Kaprow, *Apple Shrine* (November 1960)  
Judson Gallery, New York

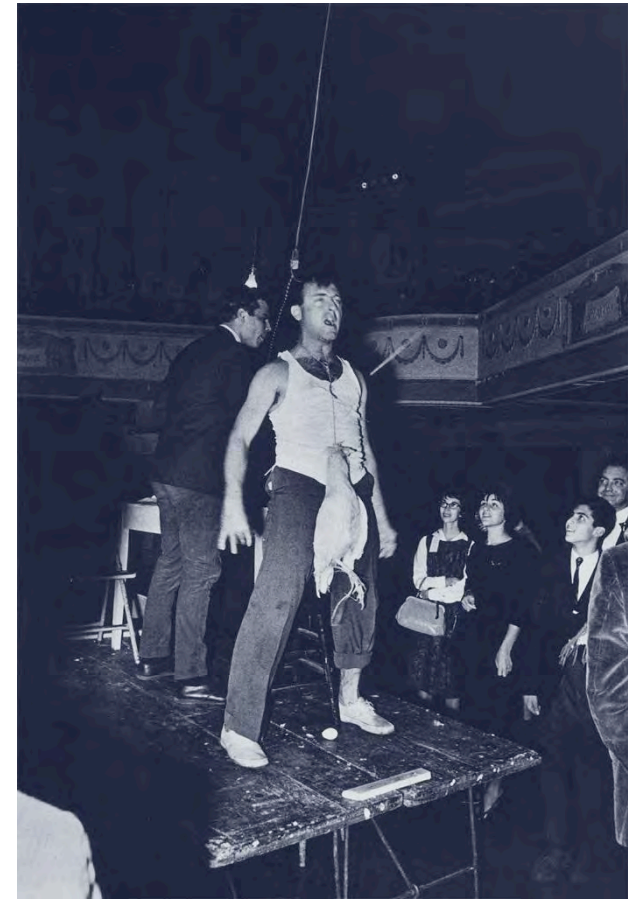
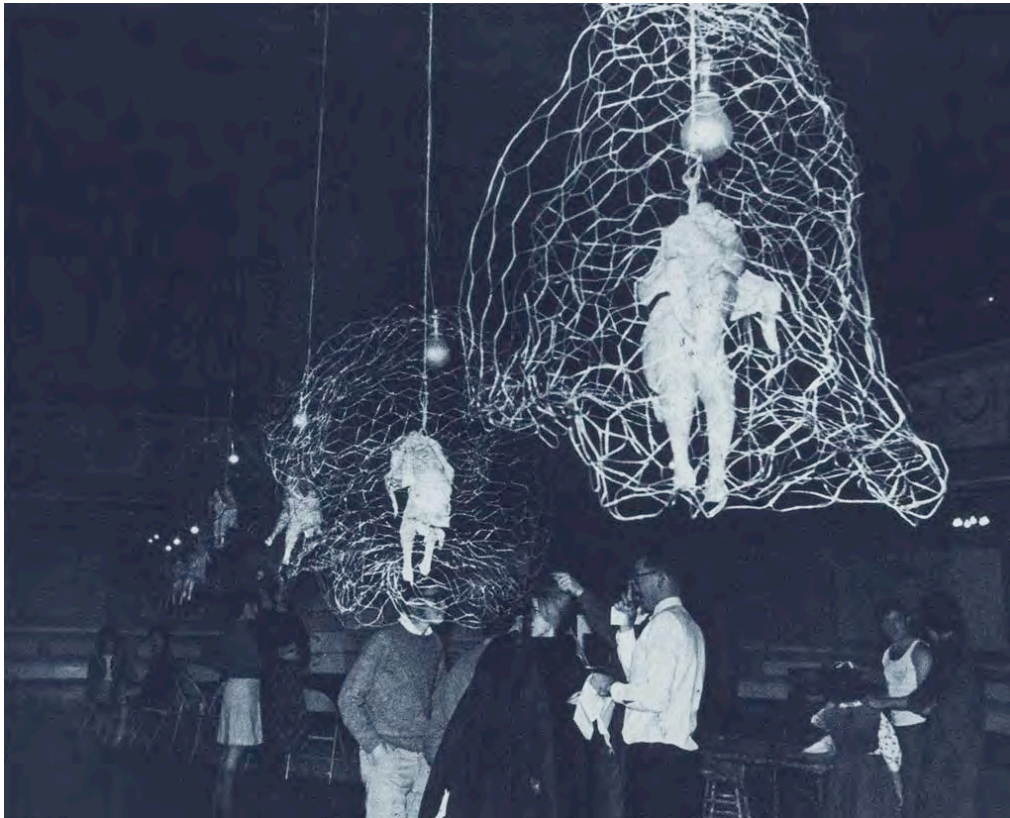


fig. 5.2: Allan Kaprow, *Chicken* (November 1962)  
Philadelphia Arts Council, YM/YWHA, Philadelphia





fig. 5.4: installation view of Robert Morris exhibition, Green Gallery, New York (1964)

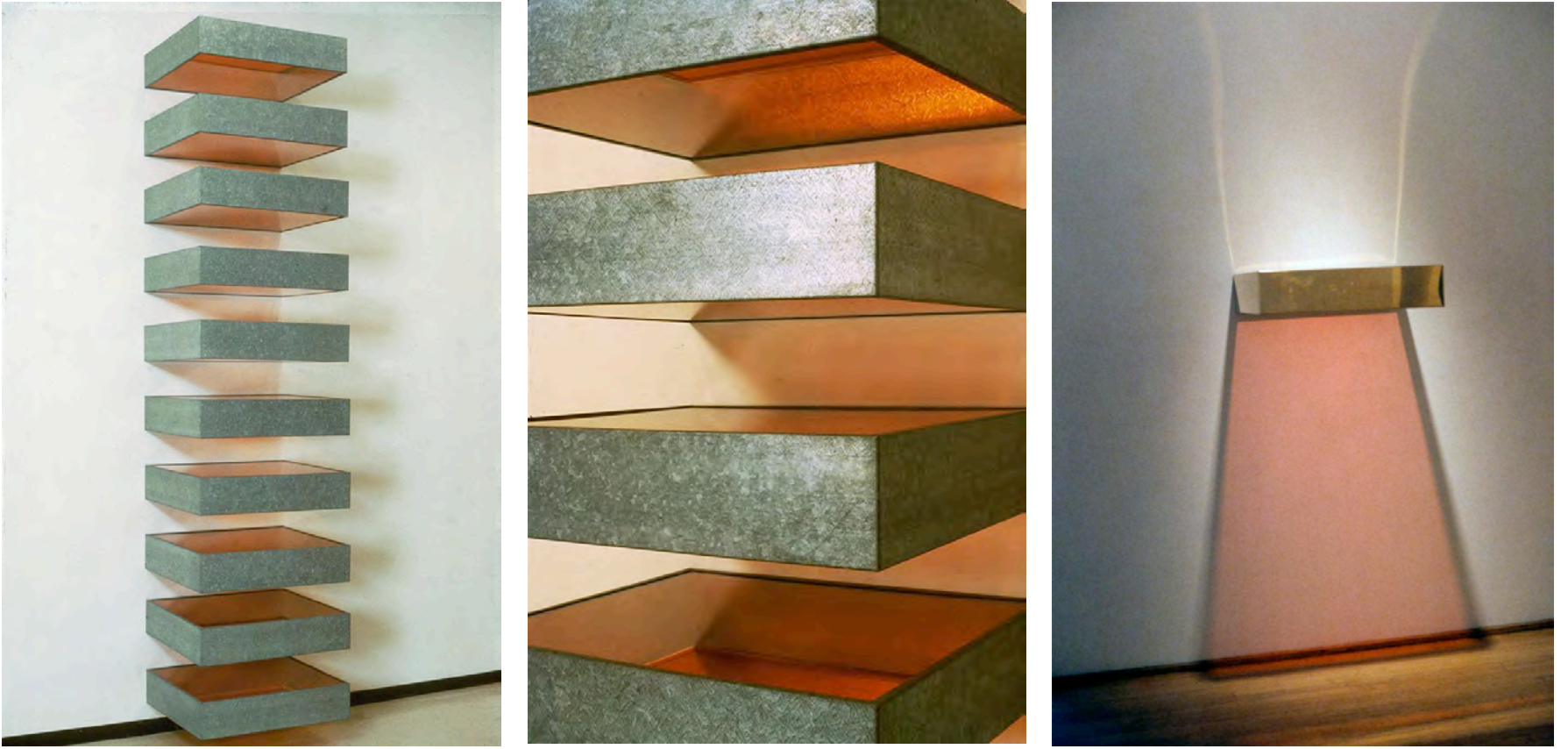


fig. 5.5: Donald Judd, from left: Untitled (1969) and detail; Untitled (1969)

## Appendix



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Phthalocyanine Blue	.65
Phthalocyanine Green	.75
Phthalo Tint-Cerulean Hue	.65
Prussian Blue	.50
Raw Siena	.40
Raw Umber	.40
Rose Madder	.65
Strontium (Lemon) Yellow	.75
Ultramarine Blue Deep	.50
Ultramarine Red	.65
Ultramarine Violet	.65
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