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ACTING IN THE GAP BETWEEN ART AND LIFE

In 1959, Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008) declared, ‘Painting relates to both art and life. Neither can be made. (I try to act in that gap between the two.)’ In his Combines, works melding painting and sculpture, Rauschenberg brought elements of everyday life into his art through the process of collage. Developed by Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) and Georges Braque (1882–1963) and used by many members of the avant-garde that flourished between the two world wars, collage enlivened artists’ compositions by introducing extraneous materials, usually in the form of pasted papers and small objects. Rauschenberg brought a new scale and physicality to collage by integrating a staggering array of materials into his compositions, from photographs, picture postcards and T-shirts to dripping swathes of paint, Coca-Cola bottles and stuffed chickens. ‘A pair of socks,’ he insisted, ‘is no less suitable to make a painting with than wood, nails, turpentine, oil and fabric.’

Rauschenberg’s ‘gap’ became the site of more than half a century of endeavours through which he redefined not only what materials could comprise a work of art but what a work of art could be – and, by extension, what it meant to be an artist. Thanks greatly to his example, artists feel free to avail themselves of almost any medium, material or strategy without having to dedicate themselves to one in particular. His frequent collaborations with dancers, engineers and other individuals further demonstrated that an artist didn’t have to be a solitary genius isolated in the studio.

From the Combines, Rauschenberg branched out into printmaking, silkscreen paintings, performance, works involving technology and many other activities, his main criterion being that the results had to be at least as interesting as what he could see outside his window. His optimistic, egalitarian enthusiasm extended to his audience: he believed strongly in the accessibility of art. A Rauschenberg gives us the possibility of seeing anew objects and images that we tend to overlook in our daily lives.



THE EARLY YEARS – FROM TEXAS TO NEW YORK

Art played virtually no role in Rauschenberg's upbringing in Port Arthur, Texas, where he was born on 22 October 1925. He saw reproductions of paintings but didn't realize they were illustrations of unique works of art, and although he enjoyed drawing, he never connected this pastime with a particular profession. Instead, he hoped to become a preacher in the church his family attended. He soon turned away from its emphasis on sin and guilt, but his attraction to the ministry was to linger in the moral conviction he brought to his work as an artist.

In 1944, Rauschenberg was drafted into the US Navy. A pacifist, he was assigned to stateside hospital duty as a neuropsychiatric technician. Dealing with young men traumatized by combat would inform his understanding of art as a healing force and a way to improve people's lives and their relations with one another. During a leave of absence, he visited San Marino's Huntington Library, Art Collections and Botanical Gardens, where he saw his first paintings, including Thomas Gainsborough's *The Blue Boy* (c. 1770). The sight of them came as a joyous shock, for he was made aware that such images were the creations of individuals: artists. He suddenly realized that he too could become an artist.

[1]

BLACK MOUNTAIN COLLEGE

The GI Bill made it possible for Rauschenberg to pursue his dream. He attended the Kansas City Art Institute, then the Académie Julian in Paris, where his passion for art became so intense that he started painting with his hands. In Paris he met Susan Weil, a fellow student planning to go to Black Mountain College, an experimental school for the arts in North Carolina. In the autumn of 1948, they enrolled at the college.

Black Mountain College was vital for Rauschenberg's development. It provided a sense of community that remained central to his conception of art and exposed him to ideas and methods, such as collage, associated with the European avant-garde. The college's art programme was headed by Bauhaus master Josef Albers, who took a highly disciplined approach to teaching, impressing upon students the powerful, often detrimental, influence of their personal likes and dislikes. Rauschenberg's experience in Albers's classes initiated a creative give-and-take that would largely define his life as an artist, with sensual excess, exuberance and spontaneity countered by control, stillness and reduction. Furthermore, Rauschenberg's early efforts at Black Mountain College already displayed many of what would become defining characteristics of his art, such as his fascination with the effects of time's passage, embodied in *This is the First Half of a Print Designed to Exist in Passing Time*.

[2]

[5]



1
Thomas Gainsborough (1727–1788)
The Blue Boy, c. 1770
Oil on canvas
179.4 × 123.8 cm
(70 5/8 × 48 3/4 in)
The Huntington Library, Art Collections,
San Marino, CA

NEW YORK AND ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

In 1949 Rauschenberg and Weil moved to New York, where Abstract Expressionism, with its monumental canvases, boldly abstract compositions and intensely serious approach to painting, was just coming into dominance. Its key exponents, such as Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning (1904–1997) and Mark Rothko (1903–1970), had begun making art during the difficult years of the Depression and World War II. Most of them considered representation an exhausted path for the creation of radical art, and in turning to abstraction they insisted upon the importance of self-expression and defined painting as an act of absolute personal authenticity.

After working several months at the Art Students' League, Rauschenberg took a group of his paintings to the dealer Betty Parsons, whose gallery showed some of the most important Abstract Expressionists, including Pollock, Rothko, Barnett Newman (1905–1970) and Clyfford Still (1904–1980). Parsons gave Rauschenberg an exhibition in the spring of 1951, and although reviews were tepid and sales non-existent, simply being given the opportunity to exhibit was a noteworthy achievement for a young artist.

EARLY INTERESTS

Almost from the beginning, Rauschenberg worked in a variety of media. In addition to paintings, the Parsons show included a sculpture, but he was also interested in photography. He and Weil received attention, including a feature in *Life* magazine, for a collaborative series in which blueprint paper was exposed to light, leaving behind delicately haloed images of flowers, leaves and the human body.

► FOCUS 1 PHOTOGRAPHY, P.18



2
Josef Albers (1888–1976)
teaching colour theory at
Black Mountain College, c.1948

[8–10]

[4]

[3]

Contemporary viewers of Rauschenberg's early work would have noticed his predilection for black and white, which he shared with many other artists at this time. Rauschenberg had been particularly impressed with Franz Kline's boldly painted compositions, and Robert Motherwell (1915–1991), de Kooning and Pollock were using a similarly restricted palette. Black and white brought painting back to visual, expressive and communicative fundamentals, and this trend reinforced the lessons of Albers, whose insistence on each colour's unique properties momentarily intimidated Rauschenberg, making him reluctant to choose one colour over another.

3
Jackson Pollock (1912–1956)
working on *Painting Number 32*, 1950
in his studio, Springs, New York, 1950



[6]

[7]

COLLAGE

Collage was the most idiosyncratic element of Rauschenberg's early work, for his use of it suggested that individual components had meanings beyond their formal compositional roles. In *Mother of God*, a large white disc floats on a ground of road maps, the visual metaphor for a spiritual journey.

Crucifixion and Reflection shows a page from a Hebrew-language newspaper thinly veiled with white paint, lending the otherwise abstract work a faintly mysterious quality. *Should Love Come First?*, a more puzzling combination of images, including a dance diagram, a footprint and a time-zone chart, gently challenges viewers to respond to its advice-column query.

MEETING CY TWOMBLY

In the summer of 1951, Rauschenberg and Weil, who had married the year before, decided to separate. Although he never defined himself as gay, Rauschenberg would thereafter form his most significant relationships with other men. One such relationship would be crucial in the coming months: at the Art Students' League he had met a young artist named Cy Twombly (1928–2011), who became one of the first persons with whom Rauschenberg shared ideas about painting. Twombly would later become known for paintings whose skeins of scratched and scrawled lines hovered between calligraphy and graffiti, but he was then painting in thickly impastoed layers of black and white recalling Kline and Motherwell. When Twombly decided to study at Black Mountain College that summer, Rauschenberg joined him.

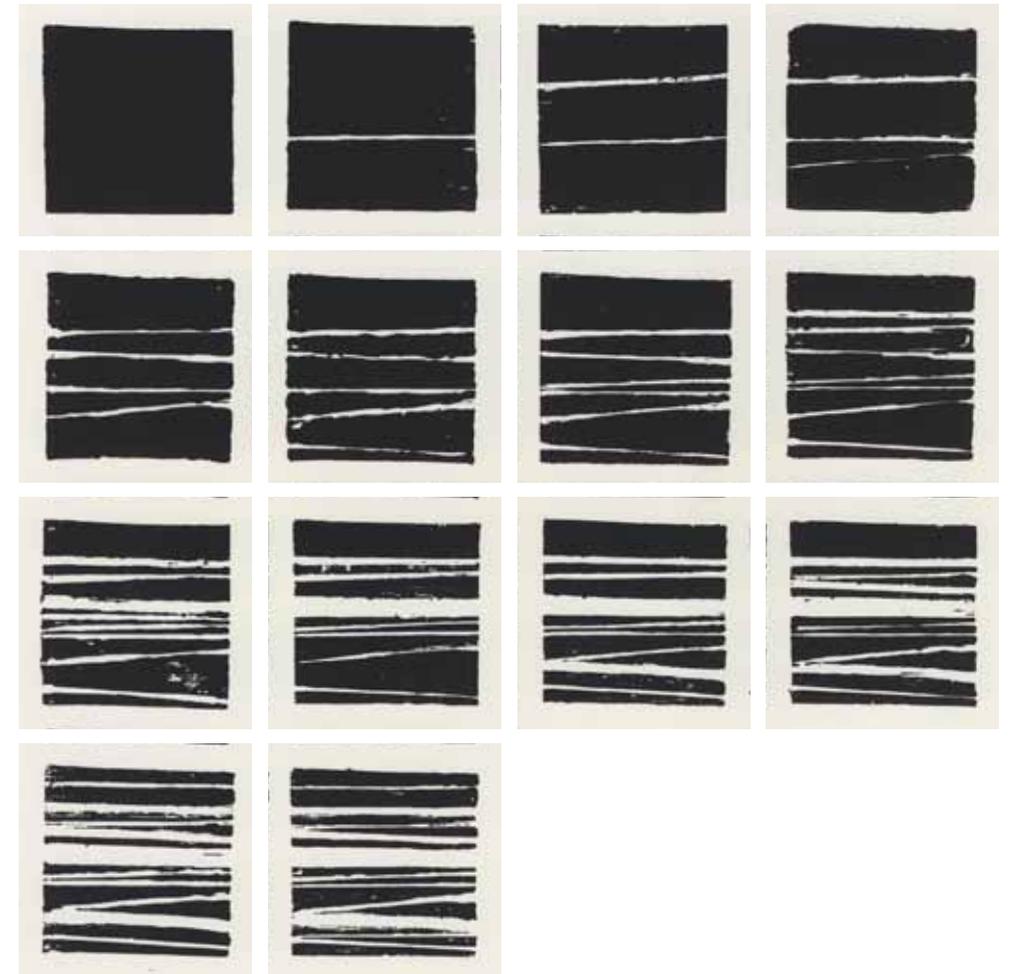


4
Franz Kline (1910–1962)
Nijinsky, 1950
Enamel on canvas
115.6 × 88.6 cm (45 1/2 × 34 7/8 in)
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

[9]

[10]

[11]



5
This is the First Half of a Print Designed to Exist in Passing Time, 1948
Pencil on tracing paper, and fourteen woodcuts on paper, bound with twine and stapled
30.8 × 22.5 cm (12 1/8 × 8 7/8 in)
The Robert Rauschenberg Foundation





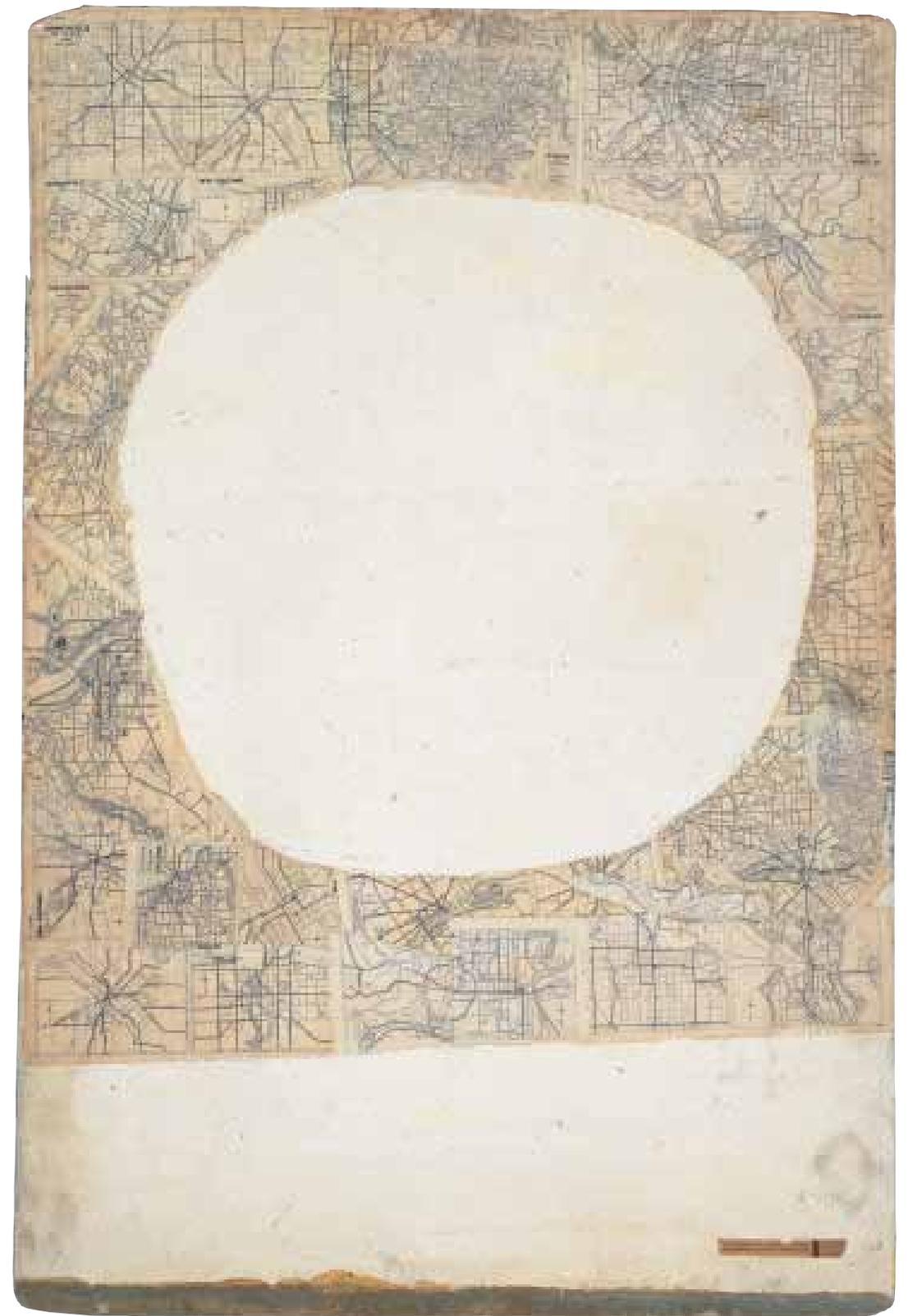
6
Rauschenberg exposing blueprint paper
to light source with a model,
New York, 1951

7 ▶
Rauschenberg and Susan Weil (b.1930)
Female Figure, c.1950
Monoprint, exposed blueprint paper
266.7 × 91.4 cm (105 × 36 in)
The Robert Rauschenberg Foundation





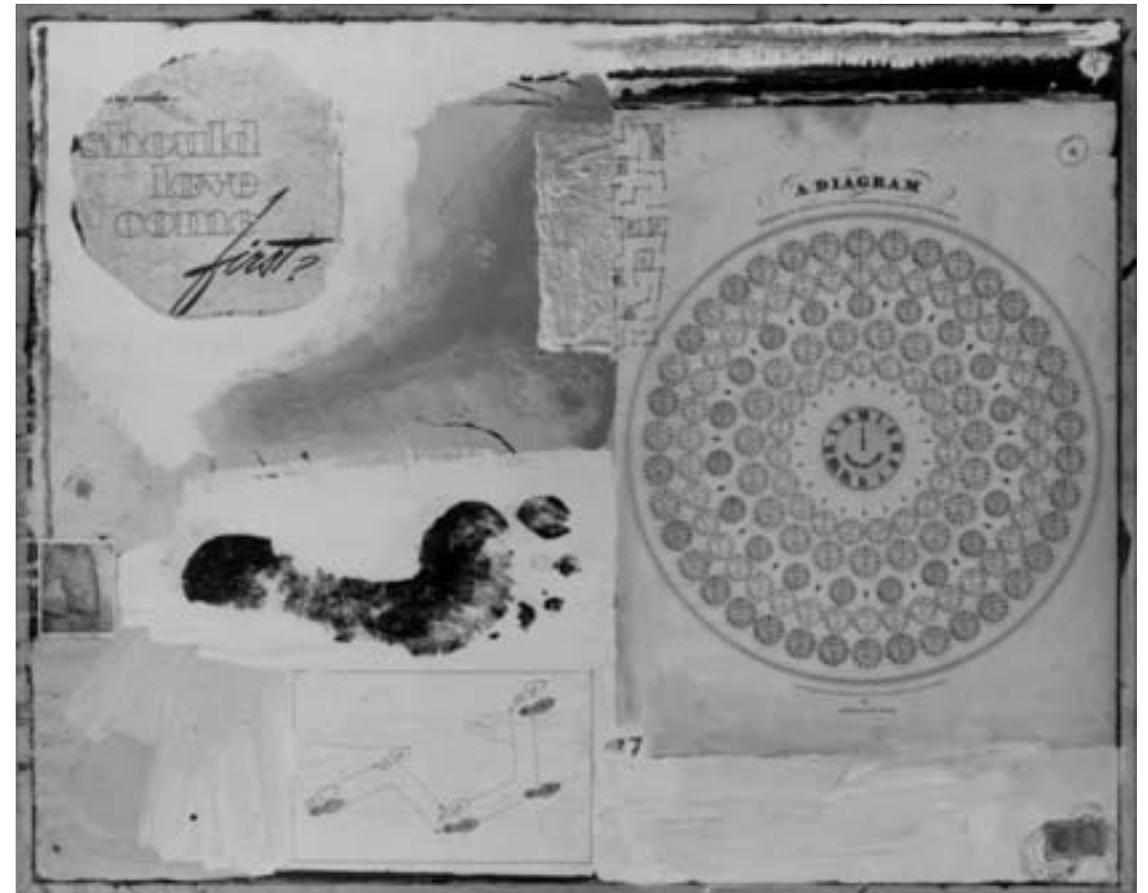
8
 22 *The Lily White*, c. 1950
 Oil and pencil on canvas
 100.3 × 60.3 cm (39 1/2 × 23 3/4 in)
 Collection Nancy Ganz Wright



9 ▶
Mother of God, c. 1950
 Oil, enamel, printed maps, newspaper, and
 copper and metallic paints on Masonite
 121.9 × 81.6 cm (48 × 32 1/8 in)
 San Francisco Museum of Modern Art



10
Crucifixion and Reflection, c.1950
 Oil, enamel, water-based paint and
 newspaper on paperboard attached
 to wood support
 121.3 × 129.9 cm (47 ¾ × 51 ⅞ in)
 The Menil Collection, Houston



11
Should Love Come First?, c.1951
 Oil, printed paper and pencil on canvas
 61 × 76.2 cm (24 × 30 in)
 No longer extant, was collaged over
 and painted black, becoming
Untitled [Black Painting], 1953
 Kunstmuseum, Basel

This early collage anticipates the rich play of imagery associated with the later emergence of the Combines. The question in the work's title suggests the growing importance of Cy Twombly in Rauschenberg's life, but the footprint, Monet sticker and other elements also allude to Rauschenberg's impending fatherhood as well as his own first steps as a mature artist.

FOCUS ①

PHOTOGRAPHY

Rauschenberg's interest in photography took root at Black Mountain College, where several prominent figures in the field, including Aaron Siskind and Harry Callahan (1912–1999), taught during his time there. He took classes with Hazel Larsen Archer (1921–2001) and developed such an enthusiasm for the process that for a time it rivaled painting as his primary pursuit. In 1952, The Museum of Modern Art, New York would acquire two of his photographs, his first works to enter a public collection.

The humble subjects and quiet mood of Rauschenberg's early photographs have affinities with those by Siskind and Walker Evans (1903–1975), but important differences also quickly emerged. Rauschenberg rarely ventured into the abstraction of Siskind's weathered surfaces [13], and his attention to the everyday quality of such objects as stop signs was also unusual. Richly modulated in tones of black and white that paralleled his inclinations in painting, Rauschenberg's photographs also betrayed a fascination with symmetry that would soon become pronounced in the White Paintings and the Black Paintings.

Photography came to play multiple roles in Rauschenberg's practice. Although he learned darkroom procedure, he was uninterested in fine print quality, and he used the same camera, a twin-lens reflex Rolleicord, for both his fine art and his documentary photography. Appropriately, the distinctions between these two categories were not always clear. Rauschenberg's fine art photographs showed motifs that would soon become elements in his art, such as the wooden chairs in *Quiet House* [12] or the titular element in *Ceiling + Light Bulb* [14]. Complicating matters was the inclusion of portraits among Rauschenberg's fine art photographs; such

works usually featured family members, friends and lovers and were thus also personal mementoes. In turn, some of these individuals were artists as well, and a sizeable portion of Rauschenberg's documentary photographs included shots of his and others' art, including paintings by Cy Twombly, Willem de Kooning and Jasper Johns [16]. Over the years, many of Rauschenberg's works would be lost or destroyed, but he seems to have been careful to preserve his negatives, which often provide the only record of such works.

The process of taking a photograph by lining up a particular scene in the camera's viewfinder became an important strategy for helping Rauschenberg determine the relation of his art to the world (he did not crop his photographs). Many of his documentary photographs of artworks include ladders, door frames and windows that provide a sense not only of scale but of context [15]. In these carefully composed photographs, the planar shapes of paintings and adjacent architectural elements suggest a work of art that continues beyond the print's edges, existing in the harmonious relationships framed – and so created – by the artist's camera. It might be said that photography came to function for Rauschenberg as much as drawing did for other artists: a way of recording impressions but also a means of structuring reality that would provide a foundation for his audacious conception of art.



12
Quiet House – Black Mountain, 1949
Gelatin silver print
37.5 × 37.5 cm (14 3/4 × 14 3/4 in)

13
Aaron Siskind
(1903–1991)
Jerome, Arizona, 1949
Gelatin silver print
34.3 × 25 cm
(13 1/2 × 9 7/8 in)
The J. Paul Getty Museum,
Los Angeles





14
Ceiling + Light Bulb, 1950
Gelatin silver print
38.1 × 38.1 cm (15 × 15 in)



15
Untitled [two black paintings], 1952
Gelatin silver print



16
Jasper – Studio N.Y.C., 1958
Gelatin silver print
38.1 × 38.3 cm (15 × 15 1/16 in)