Robert Rauschenberg. Untitled. *ca. 1952.*

The Gap and the Frame*

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> *Painting relates to both art and life. Neither can be made. (I try to act in the gap between the two.)*
>
> —Robert Rauschenberg, 1959

Given the amount of critical attention focused on Robert Rauschenberg's early work, it is surprising that one of its most distinguishing features—the move from the two-dimensional realm of painting into three dimensions—has gone virtually unexamined. This is particularly remarkable for two reasons. First because, as Rauschenberg insisted, the very notion of the Combine—the term he coined for his most famous products of the 1950s—was defined by its three-dimensionality. As he explained to Richard Kostelanetz in 1968,

> I had this problem with the paintings that would be freestanding—not against the wall. I didn't think of them as sculpture. . . .
>
> I thought of them as paintings, but what to call them—painting or sculpture—got for some people to be a very interesting point, which I did not find interesting at all. Almost as a joke I thought I'd call them something, as Calder was supposed to have done with "mobiles," and it worked beautifully. Once I called them "combines," people were confronted with the work itself, not what it wasn't. Sometimes you can choke on these things [though]; people have called my drawings "combine drawings." The word really does have a use—it's a freestanding picture.[1]

* This article was given as a talk at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, in conjunction with the exhibition *Robert Rauschenberg: Combines*, on March 12, 2006. Aspects of the oral presentation have remained unchanged. It is dedicated to Sally Stein.

1. Richard Kostelanetz, "A Conversation with Robert Rauschenberg," *Partisan Review* 35, no. 1 (Winter 1968), p. 96.

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The second reason the omission of discussions of three-dimensionality in Rauschenberg's work is of interest is that notions of flatness, the shaped canvas, the transgression of the picture plane, and the move from painting into the multidimensionality of objects and environments were ideas of unparalleled importance within the polemics surrounding contemporary art in the 1950s and, particularly, the 1960s. For artists and critics across the board, and especially after the arrival of Minimalism, the relations of ideated and actual flatness and dimensionality were crucibles by which notions of quality and importance would be judged. For Clement Greenberg, the realm of the three-dimensional was where the artistic quality of painting and sculpture met the mere "presence" of avant-garde objects.[2] Similarly, for Michael Fried, it was apprehension of a canvas's literal and depicted "shape" (as in the work of Frank Stella) that was charged with defeating or suspending perception of its existence as an actual (three-dimensional) object.[3] "What is at stake in this conflict," Fried declared in "Art and Objecthood," "is whether the paintings or objects in question are experienced as paintings or as objects: and what decides their identity as *painting* is their conforming to the demand that they hold as shapes. Otherwise they are experienced as nothing more than objects."[4] Since what was at issue in what Fried called a "war" with objecthood was the very continuation of art, the stakes in such confrontations were very high indeed. But while both Greenberg and Fried explicitly dismissed Rauschenberg's production in these terms, neither ever addressed his work's intersection with these concerns in any detail.

In part, the omission of any serious discussion of Rauschenberg's work from such an angle is a result of the characteristic casualness with which he treated his artistic innovations. Describing the Combines to *Time* magazine in 1960, Rauschenberg explained merely that "It begins with a painting and then sort of moves out into the room."[5] In 1964, he explained to Calvin Tompkins: "There wasn't any special idea behind [the Combines] . . . I just liked working with these things as objects, and I liked the fact that a picture could come out into the room."[6] And again to Kostelanetz: "when the sculptural or collage elements got so three-dimensional, then the most natural thing in the world was to put wheels on it and put it out into the middle of the room."[7] (The fact that it took nearly four years for Rauschenberg to decide to do just that with *Monogram* [1955–59], however, belies any idea that the solution was ever really so easy.)

2. Clement Greenberg, "Recentness of Sculpture" (1967), in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 250–56.
3. Michael Fried, "Shape as Form: Frank Stella's Irregular Polygons" (1966), in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 77–99.
4. Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood" (1967), in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 124.
5. "The Emperor's Combine," *Time*, April 18, 1960, p. 92.
6. Calvin Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors* (New York: Penguin, 1968), pp. 217–18.
7. Kostelanetz, "A Conversation with Robert Rauschenberg," p. 96.

Another reason for the lack of discussion of the Combine's three-dimensionality results from Rauschenberg's having received relatively little sustained critical attention before his retrospective at the Jewish Museum in New York in 1963 and his triumph at the Venice Biennale in 1964, by which time his work had returned to two dimensions in the silkscreen paintings and transfer drawings. By 1965, critical attention would come to be dominated by Rauschenberg's work in performance, further deflecting retrospective considerations of his earlier work.

The sole exception to this general neglect seems to have come from Donald Judd, who took up dimensionality as a question of critical reflection in his review of Rauschenberg's Jewish Museum retrospective for *Arts* magazine. In Judd's view, Rauschenberg's production was inherently split, his work being "as much conservative as it is radical."[8] According to him, the two-dimensional "paintings," such as *Rebus* (1955), displayed Rauschenberg's most traditional side, devoted in Judd's view to outdated "European" forms of part-by-part composition and juggling, which Stella would later describe as "relational painting": "The basis of [the] whole idea is balance. You do something in one corner and you balance it with something in the other corner."[9]

When Judd did praise the Combine-paintings and Combines—which he called simply "reliefs and freestanding pieces"—it was on account of "the unrectangular and unflat format," which he would reiterate as being one of Rauschenberg's "radical aspects." These he described in glowing terms as "the strongest, newest, greatest, and the other superlatives Cassius Clay thinks he is, even the beautifullest." Referring to Combines he called simply "the goat, the eagle, and the chicken," Judd singled out for particular praise: *Monogram*, *Canyon* (1959), and *Satellite* (1955) (or, more likely, *Odalisk* (1955/58), even though the last is surmounted by a rooster rather than a chicken), along with *First Landing Jump* (1961). Judd analyzed and dismissed as "old" and "traditional" *First Landing Jump*'s plays with balance and composition: the circular metal "lampshade" offsetting the tire; the blue lightbulb matching a blue crease in the fabric, and so on. (Judd somewhat enigmatically likened the picture's overall "scheme" to Giotto's Arena Lazarus.) Nevertheless, he declared that "the tire is outside the canvas—which makes the primary shape of the composition a free silhouette—which is radical."[10] When discussing Rauschenberg's first exhibition of silkscreens at Leo Castelli Gallery that December, Judd would reiterate his preference for the Combines (in a review that concluded with the extremely backhanded compliment, "the paintings are not actually bad, being Rauschenberg's, but they are not good either").[11] Two years later, with Judd's own aesthetic more or less codified in "Specific Objects," Rauschenberg would find himself categorized as a precursor.

8. Donald Judd, "In the Galleries: Robert Rauschenberg," *Arts* 37 (May/June 1963), pp. 103–4.
9. Bruce Glaser, "Questions to Stella and Judd," in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, p. 149.
10. Judd, "In the Galleries: Robert Rauschenberg," p. 104.
11. Donald Judd, "In the Galleries: Robert Rauschenberg," *Arts* 38 (December 1963), p. 60.

The Combines, along with the constructions of Jasper Johns and the reliefs of George Ortman, were now described as "preliminaries" or "beginnings" within the evolution of "the new three-dimensional work."[12]

Given the hybridity of the Minimalist aesthetic Judd was himself developing at this time—one that, in his words, "obviously resembles sculpture more than it does painting, but . . . is nearer to painting"[13]—it is perhaps surprising that he would characterize Rauschenberg's work in terms of such a stark, binary opposition: traditional European painting on the one hand and radical shape and dimensionality on the other. Nevertheless, Judd proved unconcerned with the Combines's intermedia status—the fact that they too resembled both painting and sculpture, but were nearer to painting. He presented Rauschenberg as caught at a crossroads between the radical path of three-dimensionality and the "rationalistic" one of two-dimensional painting and collage. Judd much preferred Lee Bontecou's wire-and-canvas reliefs, works that, to his mind, integrated rather than disbursed their elements for a more convincing objectlike thrust out from the wall. Rauschenberg's apparent inability or unwillingness to follow what Judd clearly forecast as the logical path opened up by the Combines (from multiplicity to objecthood) reads as a resistance, rejection, or refusal. For Judd, the Combines were merely transitional objects within advanced contemporary art—and for Minimalism, evolutionary dead ends.

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Rauschenberg was much closer, of course, to the competing artistic tendency of Environments and Happenings, whose most articulate spokesperson was Allan Kaprow. However, that discourse also positioned the Combines in much the same manner as predecessors or precursors. As early as October 1958, when Kaprow published "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock," the heterogeneity and transgressions of Rauschenberg's aesthetic were claimed for these newfound genres. In a passage partially inspired by a visit to Rauschenberg's studio, Kaprow proclaimed that "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."[14] Kaprow's earliest constructions were clearly beholden to Rauschenberg's, transforming the latter's multipanel Combines such as *Collection* or *Charlene* (both 1954) into freestanding, articulated screens. Seven months prior to the publication of Kaprow's article, *Newsweek* had already made the connection, assimilating Rauschenberg's

12. Donald Judd, "Specific Objects," *Arts Yearbook* 8 (1965), pp. 74, 77.
13. Judd, "Specific Objects," p. 77.
14. Allan Kaprow, "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock" (1958), in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. Jeff Kelley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 7–8.

Combines, particularly *Bed* (1955), to the discourse surrounding the environment Kaprow constructed at the Hansa Gallery.[15] Two years later, Rauschenberg would once again be included within this tendency, appearing alongside Kaprow in the Martha Jackson Gallery's first *New Forms—New Media* show. As recognized by Irving Sandler, Rauschenberg's Combines were subsumed into an artistic trajectory, the telos or endpoint of which would be somewhere between Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau* and Kaprow's Happenings.[16]

By 1966, when the polemics between Fried and the Minimalists were in full swing, Kaprow would locate the crux of Rauschenberg's legacy not in an unmade choice between traditional and radical mediums or genres (which is where Judd had left it), but in the initiation of a general breakdown in all distinctions between the arts. In the article "Experimental Art," after describing Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* and black paintings as resulting from an almost blind, existential act of avant-garde creation (an update of sorts of Harold Rosenberg's famous discussion of action painting), Kaprow explained:

> It is no accident that the lines dividing the arts are rapidly falling out of place and everything is becoming confused. There are no clear distinctions between drawing and painting, painting and collage, collage and Assemblage, Assemblage and sculpture, sculpture and environmental sculpture; between environmental sculpture, displays and stage sets; between them and Environments; between Environments, architectural design and architecture per se; between the fine and commercial arts, and finally, between art of any kind (Happenings) and life. This is the way the world goes because, apparently, it wants to go. . . . Conventional distinctions are not merely inadequate; they are tiring and fatigue sits well with no artist.[17]

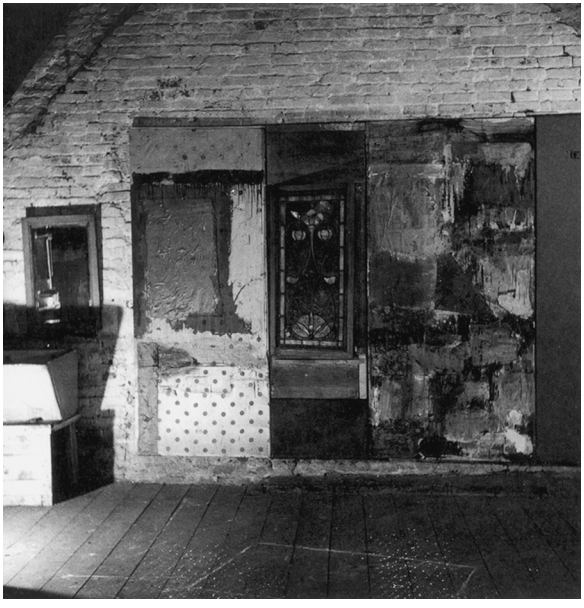
The next year, Fried's "Art and Objecthood" would condemn Rauschenberg for instigating precisely the same corrosive dissolution of artistic conventions—for contributing to "the illusion that the barriers between the arts are in the process of crumbling . . . and that the arts themselves are at last sliding toward some kind of final, implosive, highly desirable synthesis."[18] Kaprow's position, on the other hand, seems to have been that Rauschenberg had not gone far enough. He concluded "Experimental Art" with an enigmatic, allegorical tale of a suicidal artist who makes his apartment into an environment by lining the walls with all-black

15. "Trend to the 'Anti-Art,'" *Newsweek*, March 31, 1958, pp. 94, 96.
16. Irving Hershel Sandler, "Ash Can Revisited, a New York Letter," *Art International* 4, no. 8 (October 25, 1960), pp. 28–30. That the environment was the logical outcome of assemblage would also have been posited, again in relation to the *Merzbau*, in the Museum of Modern Art's *Art of Assemblage* exhibition of 1961. See William C. Seitz, *The Art of Assemblage*, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1961).
17. Allan Kaprow, "Experimental Art" (1966), in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, p. 73.
18. Fried, "Art and Objecthood," p. 164.

and then all-white paintings. Kaprow's artist "starts in the bedroom and ends in the kitchen (which lets out to the hallway)," painting large white panels that he places over the black paintings, covering all four walls of each room until the last. "There," Kaprow recounts, the artist "paints the same four white panels but doesn't leave. He builds a series of such cubicles, each within the other, each smaller. He is found dead, sitting in the innermost one."[19] Like this apocryphal painter, Kaprow implies, Rauschenberg's position was "tragic" on account of the fact that he "could not forget art."[20]

Many of Rauschenberg's works, from the *Red Paintings* to the Combines, do court a relationship to their environment. Early pieces—such as, especially, a destroyed example from Rauschenberg's 1954 exhibition at the Egan Gallery, but also an untitled work with a light box of 1954, *Charlene*, and *Red Interior* (1954)—appear as architectural fragments, transforming the overriding metaphor of painting from an ideated window to a physical wall, complete with windows, lights, or, in the case of *Pink Door* (1954) and *Interview* (1955), doors. Yet as Rauschenberg's work developed into the form that gave the Combines their name, his "walls" did not evolve into environments, displays, or architectural design, as would Kaprow's. Instead, they folded back upon themselves in a status somewhat more akin to furniture—"cabinet forms" insisting on their hybrid existence between (or as both) painting and sculpture, 2- and 3-D.[21]

19. Kaprow, "Experimental Art," p. 79.
20. Ibid.
21. Walter Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg: The Early 1950s* (Houston, Menil Collection, 1991), p. 70.



Robert Rauschenberg. Untitled. *ca. 1954. Combine painting. No longer extant.*

Rauschenberg. Untitled. *ca. 1954.*

Thus, in Kaprow's narrative of neo-avant-garde development, much as in Judd's, the Combines figured as transitional objects, and Rauschenberg's unwillingness to follow through to their "logical" conclusion reads as a refusal. At least this was how a colleague of both Rauschenberg's and Kaprow's, the composer John Cage, would characterize it some years later. "I think there's a slight difference between Rauschenberg and me," Cage noted in 1972. "I have the desire to just erase the difference between art and life, whereas Rauschenberg made that famous statement about working in the gap between the two. Which is a little Roman Catholic, from my point of view."[22]

22. John Cage, *Conversing with Cage*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Limelight Editions, 1994), p. 181.

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In "Reflections on the State of Criticism," published that same year, Leo Steinberg similarly noted the manner in which Rauschenberg's work separated itself from its environment. For Steinberg, however, this separation was evaluated positively. Although Rauschenberg's most significant invention, according to Steinberg, was "a pictorial surface that let the world in again," this surface—which he famously termed Rauschenberg's "flatbed picture plane"—was not simply or seamlessly continuous with the world. According to Steinberg, however, the distinction was not to be found in either a turn toward objecthood or toward environments (for all the significance of his analysis, Steinberg also does not broach the question of the Combine's dimensionality), but rather through an attribute of rotation. "The old clock in Rauschenberg's 1961 *Third Time Painting*," Steinberg noted, "lies with the number 12 on the left, because the clock face properly uprighted would have illusioned the whole system into a real vertical plane—like the wall of a room, part of the given world."[23] Thus, while Rauschenberg's work acts as "a running transformer of the external world," it also insists upon a slight disjunction from it, insists, that is, on precisely that gap between art and life that Cage and Kaprow had wanted to eliminate.

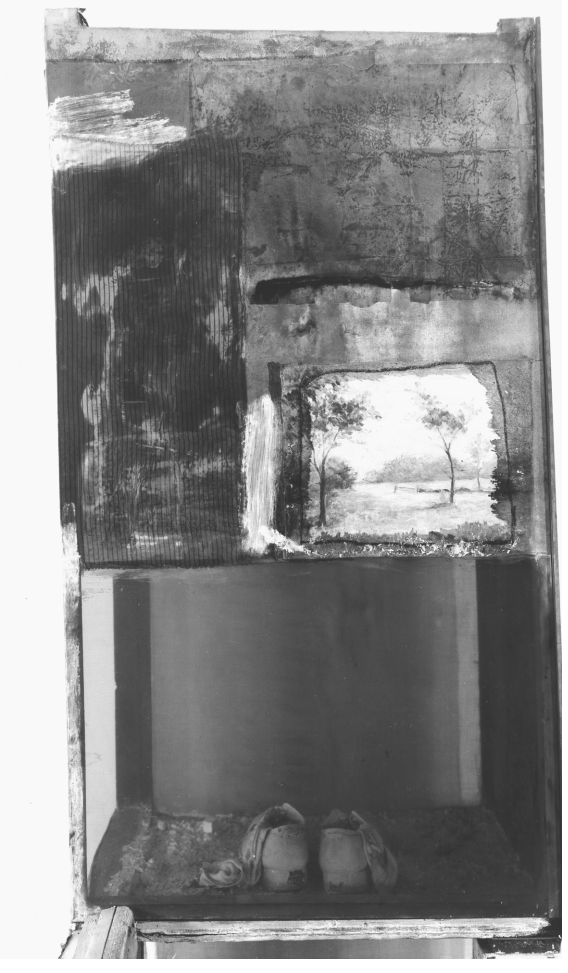
As characterized by Steinberg and, in a much lesser-known article, Toby Mussman, Rauschenberg's form of flatness did not justify, acknowledge, or inflect itself as had that defended by Greenberg. Rauschenberg's picture plane was simply and literally a flat surface onto which any number of heterogeneous elements could be applied, like "a disordered desk or an unswept floor."[24] Yet it is not entirely true that, as Mussman stated, "readings of spatial depth are never in essence at issue in [Rauschenberg's] work."[25] Like the Cubists before him, Rauschenberg played with flatness as an effect, frequently using extremely perspectival photographic images to "hole through" the canvas as a sort of counterpoint to its otherwise obdurately solid planarity. This is the case, for example, with the line of marching police (or soldiers) and horses in an untitled work of 1956; with the group portrait of a dinner gala at the bottom right of *Hazard* (1957); with the satellite dish and parachutist in *Dam* (1959); with the bridge near the top of *Backwash* (1959); with the image of scaffolding in *Bypass* (1959); and so on.

As Steinberg noted, such images were often touched or bordered by a casual smear "to recall its irreducible flatness" as an actual two-dimensional photograph. A similar outcome was achieved, as Rosalind Krauss has observed, by Rauschenberg's application of gauze or other translucent cloth, which counters the photograph's illusory depth and transparency, thereby rendering it equivalent to the other items

23. Leo Steinberg, "Reflections on the State of Criticism," in *Robert Rauschenberg*, ed. Branden W. Joseph (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), p. 32.
24. Ibid.
25. Toby Mussman, "Literalness and the Infinite" (1968), in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, p. 247.

on the canvas.[26] Unnoted, however, is the manner in which Rauschenberg used translucent cloth to achieve similar effects in his Combines's actual three-dimensional spaces and openings. In the untitled piece colloquially known as "The Man with White Shoes" (ca. 1954), likely Rauschenberg's earliest freestanding Combine, this occurs on two sides. From the left of what is normally regarded as the front, the two white shoes (with socks) visible through the scrim at the bottom of the panel are visually flattened into projections of a sort; the actual three-dimensional space they inhabit is made commensurate, in a way, with the perspectival space of the reproduced landscape painting above them. A similar effect can be seen from

26. Rosalind E. Krauss, "Rauschenberg and the Materialized Image" (1974), in *Robert Rauschenberg*, pp. 39–55.



Rauschenberg. Untitled *(detail). ca. 1954.*

Rauschenberg. Untitled *(detail). ca. 1954.*

the right, where the fabric visually flattens not only the shoes but also the Plymouth Rock hen at the bottom, now seemingly no more dimensional than her photographed cousin, a rooster caught nervously floating on a body of water in the front panel above her. A related, though inverse, type of spatial play takes place in the mirror at the foot of the white-clad man, which not only allows one to see the collage-covered bottom of the surface above the chicken but also flattens the Combine's actual three-dimensionality into a planar image.[27]

In *Red Interior*, *Pink Door*, *Odalisk*, and *Minutiae* (1954), a similar effect is made to occur with the gallery wall. In these cases, the opening does not just incorporate the wall (as Rauschenberg would do without the scrim in several other pieces), but also frames and flattens it, capturing the wall for the work and separating it, ever so slightly, from the surrounding environment. In *Odalisk*, a light bulb in the Combine's boxlike center alternates on and off. In the 1963 photo essay "Random Order," Rauschenberg noted that "A light bulb in the dark

27. In discussing the origin of the Combines with Kostelanetz, Rauschenberg noted: "I think I've been very practical. Sometimes the underneath surface is also a painting surface, because that would be viewed. In that one there is a mirror on the side so that you can see what is underneath there without bending down, or you're invited to" (Kostelanetz, "A Conversation with Robert Rauschenberg," p. 96).

can not show its self without showing you something else too."[28] In this case, what the bulb shows is the play of two and three dimensions, as attention is alternately called to the wall, illusorily incorporated into the center (when the light flashes off) and (when the light is on) to the work itself in its own three-dimensionality.

In "Random Order," Rauschenberg also discussed the type of spatial impression produced by a translucent but not transparent opening, writing that "A dirty or foggy window makes what is outside appear to be projected on to the window plane." (Note Rauschenberg's conflation here of picture *plane* and window *pane*. Such spellings are often attributed to the artist's dyslexia, but in this case it is, if not intentional, entirely apt.) This effect, he illustrated twice: in the photograph of the half-opened window just to the right of the quotation and in the somewhat more oblique view of the closed window, whose caption reads "View from the artist's studio," with which the essay concluded. Although primarily intended to demonstrate the concerns of Rauschenberg's more recent silkscreen paintings—such as the spatial play of the flat white square and the apparently three-dimensional Necker cube in the adjacent reproduction of *Renascence* (1962)—the photographs in "Random Order" were not mere illustrations. From *Charleston Window* of 1952 to *Bathroom Window* of 1961, images of translucency were a recurring interest of Rauschenberg's photography.

A not dissimilar effect is achieved in photos of a wall of Teatro Circo Alegria and other posters taken in Italy in 1952–53. The seemingly diaphanous quality of

28. Rauschenberg, "Random Order," *Location* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1963), pp. 27–31.

Rauschenberg. Untitled. *ca. 1952.*

Rauschenberg. Top: Untitled. *ca. 1952. Bottom:* Untitled. *ca. 1952.*

Rauschenberg. Untitled. *ca. 1953. Combine painting.*

the posters, which appear to overlap and show through one another, has much the same feel as a veil or dirty window, causing the photograph to hover somewhat unstably between a shallow, depicted space and an apparent projection onto the photographic "window plane." Indeed, Rauschenberg's early negatives, many of which remain unpublished, form a catalogue of means to produce similarly compressed three-dimensional spaces: reflections and double exposures (which the photos of Italian posters resemble as well); images of internal frames and of paintings, signs, and art reproductions; and depictions of large empty expanses of sky or, more often, ground that—in a formal inversion of the flatbed picture plane—visually upright themselves into the vertical plane of the photo.

Given this photographic interest in spatial compression, it is perhaps not surprising to find a relation between the actual space in the Combines and the depicted space of photography made explicit in a small work that Cy Twombly referred to as Rauschenberg's "first Combine": a small collage-encrusted board adorned with the bellows from a four-by-five-inch box camera.[29] The bellows, which frames part of the collage background, can expand outward to form a cube, physically protruding into real space, or be pressed up against the backing to form a square. Draped with a swath of lacy white cloth, this aperture visually compresses the space behind it, once again aligning the play of two and three dimensions with the apparatus of photography and somewhat inflecting Steinberg's assessment of the radical distinction between Rauschenberg's flatbed picture and traditional painting's "transparent projection plane."[30]

29. Twombly's characterization of this work, dated ca. 1953, as the "first Combine" is noted in Rauschenberg's curatorial records.
30. Steinberg, "Reflections on the State of Criticism," p. 30.

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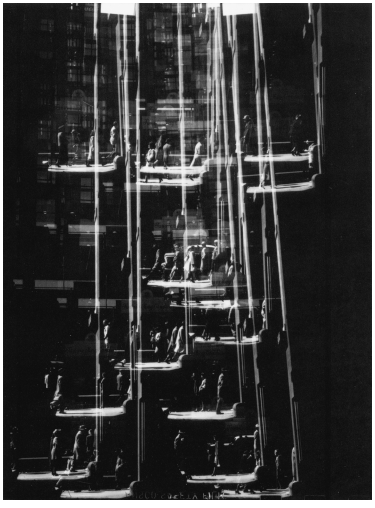
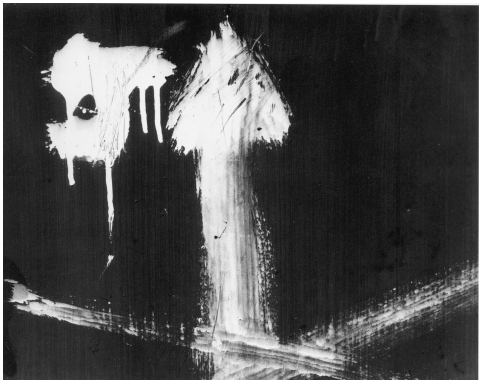
Like Rauschenberg's relationship to shape and three-dimensionality, the relation of Rauschenberg's work to photography has been surprisingly little investigated. When it is mentioned, it is almost invariably related to his use of appropriation, whether in the collage of actual photographic reproductions into the Combines or in the photographic transfer of imagery into his silkscreens and drawings. Yet the relationship of Rauschenberg's Combines to his photographs is perhaps more profound, encompassing more than the types of spatial play already mentioned.

Rauschenberg's photographic aesthetic developed in the context of Black Mountain College, where Harry Callahan and Aaron Siskind visited as faculty members in the summer of 1951. With Callahan, Rauschenberg would have shared an interest in in-camera double exposures, which he used most famously in *Cy & Bob, Venice* of 1952, as well as in an early, previously unpublished self-portrait of himself on a chair. A more intense and inspiring colleague, however, would likely have been Siskind, whose mature aesthetic was coming into its own around this time. Siskind's photography, which emphasized formal relations in a flat, unperspectival space, was indebted to contemporary New York School painters, particularly Franz Kline, who was also in residence at Black Mountain College that summer. So closely related was Siskind to the world of New York painting that Harold Rosenberg, Elaine de Kooning, and Thomas Hess all struggled with how to evaluate and discuss autonomous, "abstract" work that was so manifestly connected to the exterior world. De Kooning emphasized Siskind's rejection of the





Left: Harry Callahan. Chicago. *1948.*
Right: Aaron Siskind. Kentucky 12. *1951.*

camera's capacity for realistic depiction to pursue a more personal vision of "brushstrokes" and "drawing."[31] Rosenberg found Siskind's work equivalent to Abstract Expressionist paintings as experienced in reproduction, perhaps even superior, since his photographs were "reproductions that had no originals" and thus suffered no loss on the printed page.[32] Hess would go so far as to argue that Siskind was the first photographer to have discovered "the picture plane."[33]

Although Siskind's indebtedness to Kline is evident and much noted, Kline's interaction with reproductive technologies was more complex than generally acknowledged. As recounted by Elaine de Kooning, Kline did not find his style until he used a Bell-Opticon device to project one of his smaller sketches onto the wall at the size of a monumental canvas. It was this enlarged, projected brushstroke that would become Kline's signature style, making Kline's paintings, in a

31. Elaine de Kooning, "The Photographs of Aaron Siskind" (1951), in *Aaron Siskind: Toward a Personal Vision, 1935–1955*, ed. Deborah Martin Kao and Charles A. Meyer (Chestnut Hill, Mass.: Boston College Museum of Art, 1994), p. 59.
32. Harold Rosenberg, "Evidences," in *Aaron Siskind Photographs* (New York: Horizon Press, 1959), n.p.
33. Thomas B. Hess, "Aesthetic in Camera," in *Aaron Siskind: Photographer* (Rochester, N.Y.: George Eastman House, 1965), p. 12.

Rauschenberg. Untitled. *ca. 1951–52.*

sense, handmade photographs.[34] It is tempting to see the work of Kline and Siskind as in a mutually inflecting dialogue, one that informed the development of Rauschenberg and Twombly at Black Mountain. The texture of Rauschenberg's *Night Blooming* and black paintings, begun that summer, for example, resemble certain of Siskind's walls, as do aspects of Twombly's graffiti-like canvases. Siskind, in turn, photographed some of Twombly's paintings (at least one of which strongly resembled the bifurcated structure of Siskind's "elements") and subsequently extended his interest in marked and textured surfaces in ways not dissimilar to the younger artists' work. In any case, Siskind admired Rauschenberg and Twombly enough to take a collection of their paintings back with him to Chicago to help arrange an exhibition.

Siskind's photographic vision was decidedly modernist, emphasizing a formal autonomy in line with his New York School cohort. As he declared in "Credo," read at the Museum of Modern Art's "What Is Modern Photography?" symposium of 1950 (where he was the only nonrepresentational photographer), "When I make a photograph I want it to be an altogether new object, complete and self-contained, whose basic condition is order—(unlike the world of events and actions whose permanent condition is change and disorder)."[35] In photography, the agent of such order is almost exclusively the frame. As Rosalind Krauss has argued, it is a certain pressure put on the framing edge, one that the framing edge returns in the form of visual mastery, that defines photographic modernism, uniting it across seemingly disparate, even incommensurable, movements and styles. She describes the camera frame "as that which masters or dominates the subject . . . camera-seeing essentialized as a superior power of focus and selection from within the inchoate sprawl of the real."[36] As Siskind contended as early as 1945, "The four edges of the rectangle are absolute bounds."[37]

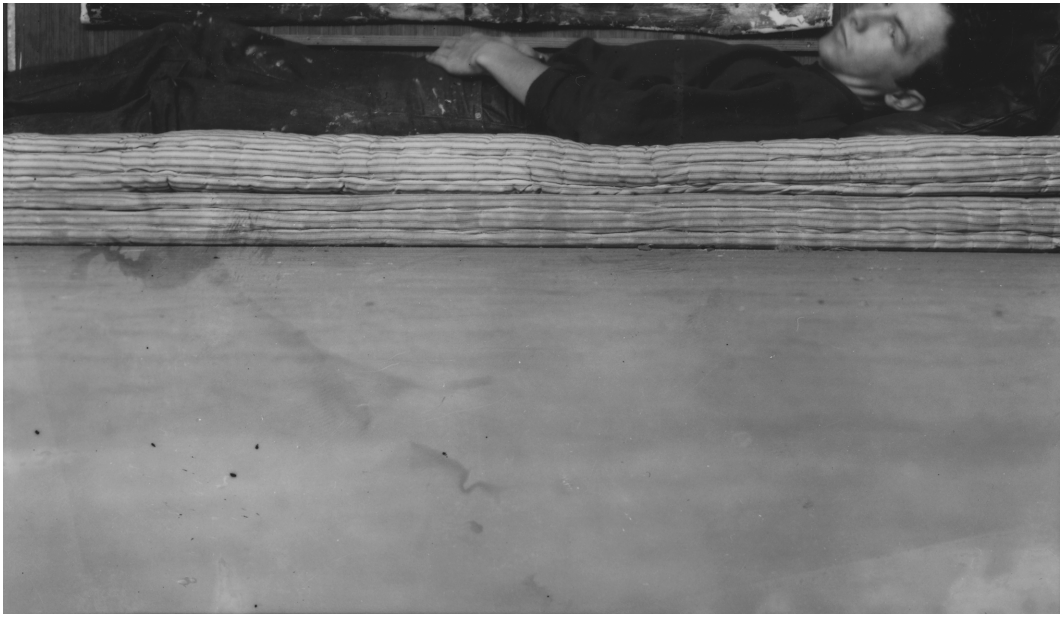
Rauschenberg was not unaware of this function of the framing edge, as he demonstrated in one of the self-portraits he produced at Black Mountain. Laid out parallel to the picture's surface, Rauschenberg's body (which had just been positioned, judging from the slight blur of his head) is caught, frozen, as though wedged into the thin space between the mattress and the top edge of the photograph's frame. This framing edge is further emphasized by the lower portion of a black painting just caught and cut off by it, metonymically aligning the photograph's edge with that of painting and pressing down on Rauschenberg's pinned body as well. Space here is in all ways dominated and determined by the camera,

34. Elaine de Kooning, "Franz Kline: Painter of His Own Life," *Art News* 61, no. 7 (November 1962), pp. 67–68, as cited and discussed in David Deitcher, "Unsentimental Education: The Professionalization of the American Artist," in *Hand-Painted Pop: American Art in Transition, 1955–62,* ed. Russell Ferguson (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1993), p. 106.

35. Siskind, quoted in Carl Chiarenza, *Aaron Siskind: Pleasures and Terrors* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1982), p. 88.

36. Rosalind E. Krauss, "The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985), p. 118.

37. Siskind, "The Drama of Objects" (1945), quoted in Chiarenza, *Aaron Siskind*, p. 65.



Rauschenberg. Untitled [self-portrait, Black Mountain]. *ca. 1952.*

subsumed within its planar dictates, flattened into planes parallel to its surface (especially in the case of the ground) and made to resemble the striations of sedimentary rock.

Something similar is at play in those other images in which the solid expanse of ground or sky makes the framing edges read as shape, an effect heightened by the square negative made by his Rolleicord twin-lens reflex camera. Yet the overall feel of Rauschenberg's photographs is not one of mastery and domination. The Theatro Circo Alegria posters, for example, despite their visual flattening, seem to continue laterally past the edge of the frame in either direction. Taken in a sequence of at least nine frames, these images recall the five-part *Cy and Roman Steps* (1952), which shows Twombly advancing, in Muybridge-like fashion, toward the camera, into the frame of which he never fully enters, his head continuing past the edge in every shot. As Twombly transgresses the limits of the frame, he challenges its mastery, neutralizing it in a manner that points to another facet of photographic modernity—the reproduction of movement as equidistant, almost mechanical "any-instant-whatevers" that dehierarchicize and deny the synthetic representations of traditional painting or artistic photography.[38] This aspect of the photograph was also explored by Rauschenberg at Black Mountain, most notably in his abandoned (and unrealizable) plan to "walk across the United States and photograph it foot by foot in actual size," a project which, if followed, would produce neither a privileged instant nor a dominating edge.[39] (Rauschenberg has always maintained the seriousness of his proposal, as well as the fact that it was the impossibility of accomplishing it that led him to subordinate photography in favor of painting.[40] Perhaps it was merely sublimated.)

If Rauschenberg's self-portrait on a mattress emblematized the framing edge's disjunctive, and therefore confining, dimension, another (heretofore unpublished) image from the same time seems just as programmatically to foreground the frame's contingency. Shot in the same rectangular format as the mattress photo, it shows a marshy lakeside edge, with one spindly reed shooting up its length parallel to the lateral framing edges. Far from being contained, all aspects of the inchoate landscape—the water, the wet grasses, and the horizontal line of trees with their reflections in the background—seem to flow off amorphously on all sides. While the edge in every photograph, of course, enacts a dialectic of continuity and separation, the emphasis that Rauschenberg put on the two aspects of its function makes the viewer more than normally cognizant of

38. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), pp. 3–8.

39. Barbara Rose, *An Interview with Robert Rauschenberg* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987), p. 75. It is tempting to see in this project another connection to the work of Harry Callahan, particularly his series of photographs of the ground documented inch by inch taken in Chicago (ca. 1946–50). See Katherine Ware, *Elemental Landscapes: Photographs by Harry Callahan* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2001), pp. 12–13.

40. See, for instance, Alain Sayag, "Interview with Robert Rauschenberg: 1981 January 9 at Captiva Island, Florida," in *Robert Rauschenberg: Photographs* (New York: Pantheon, 1981), n.p.

this fact and implies that it was of more than passing concern.[41] Though it may seem occasional in this one photograph, the compositional device of bringing a vertical element into the center of the picture, thereby creating a type of internal framing "edge" visually more powerful than the actual framing edges on either side, was a recurrent strategy and is found throughout Rauschenberg's early negatives. Whether a column, a doorway, a hat stand, or a telephone pole, including such a central vertical element has the effect of opening up the sides of the image to an implied continuity.

This aspect of Rauschenberg's work may be understood in dialogue with the work of another, much lesser-known photographer, Hazel Larsen (later Hazel Larsen Archer), Black Mountain College's first full-time photography instructor and the woman who invited Callahan and Siskind to the college in the summer of 1951. Although the literature on Rauschenberg and Black Mountain College

41. Rauschenberg's image of the lakeside marsh is quite possibly in dialogue with Callahan's 1941 images of a marsh in Detroit, which Callahan considered his first mature photos and of which he remained immensely proud and probably showed at Black Mountain in 1951.

Rauschenberg. Untitled. *ca. 1951–52.*

Hazel Larsen Archer. Left: Merce Cunningham. *ca. 1948. Below:* Elizabeth Schmitt Jennerjahn and Robert Rauschenberg. *ca. 1951–52. Courtesy of the Estate of Hazel Larsen Archer and the Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center.*

always stresses his studies with Joseph Albers, Larsen was actually the faculty member with whom Rauschenberg was closest. And with her, as opposed to Albers, Rauschenberg enjoyed a relationship that was more nurturing than antagonistic. Larsen, whom polio had confined to a wheelchair, was particularly interested in capturing motion, producing several photographic series focusing on dancers, most notably Merce Cunningham, but also a young Rauschenberg with Cunningham's one-time student and Black Mountain College dance instructor, Betty (Elizabeth Schmitt) Jennerjahn. In them, Archer achieved an effect of silhouetted design and spatial flattening through rather severe in-camera cropping. Larsen would write "Do not crop" on the back of her photographs to emphasize her intentions and similarly urged her students to print their negatives to the edge, composing only through the lens.[42] Aside from flattening and design, the effect of her cropping was an implied continuity of space and contiguity of action, making her sequences read almost like frames taken from a motion picture camera[43]—effects Rauschenberg's *Cy and Roman Steps* adopted and systematized. Rauschenberg can be seen experimenting with Larsen's methods in his own unpublished photograph of Cunningham, which similarly severs the dancer's head with the picture's edge.

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It was Walter Hopps who first noted the manner in which Rauschenberg's photographs of the early 1950s prefigured certain compositional attributes of the Combines.[44] This sometimes occurs quite directly, as in the veiling effect already discussed in the posters for the Italian circus; or the juxtaposition of a textured wall, paintings, frames, and a spoked wheel echoed in *Charlene* [see frontispiece]; or in the juxtaposition of black painting and open doorway that anticipates the structure of *Pink Door*. That such direct relations between Rauschenberg's photographs and his other work are not out of the question can be demonstrated by a correspondence Hopps apparently did not see: between Rauschenberg's early (now lost or destroyed) painting *Untitled* [dot and double arrow] of circa 1951 and his photograph *Interior of an Old Carriage* from 1949, whose format and structure it reproduces, abstracting (whether consciously or not) the circular window at the back of the photograph and the black horizontal rectangle from the footboard. (The painting hinges on the manner in which the photograph reproduces the two shapes on the same plane, while perhaps playing with the possibilities of color [the remaining photo is black and white] to push and pull the forms forward or backward.)

42. David Vaughan, "Motion Studies: Hazel Larsen Archer at Black Mountain College," *Aperture* 179 (Summer 2005), p. 25.
43. Ibid.
44. See Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg: The Early 1950s*.

Beyond such morphological similarities, however, what perhaps most profoundly relates Rauschenberg's photographs and Combines is a framing edge that implies both separation and continuity, both a seamless relation to the world outside itself and a cut, break, gap, or bifurcation from it, what might be called a contingent framing edge as opposed to a formalist one. More than simply echoing the allover compositions of Abstract Expressionism, Rauschenberg's canvases can seem almost centrifugal, their collage elements flung out toward all four sides of the canvas.[45] This seems particularly true of those Combine paintings that share the square format of his photographs: works such as *Painting with Red Letter S* (1957), with its desultory green brushstroke in the center and titular letter, blocks of color, and other brushstrokes flung to the outside; *K24976S* (1956), made out of the canvases of Rauschenberg's original four-panel *White Painting* (1951), the center of which is the nearly empty point where they meet, the wooden sign in the bottom corner attracting the eye and seemingly cut off by the bottom edge; or *Gloria* (1956), in which an actual opening, a void, occupies the middle of the work and nearly all color occurs at the edges. As Rauschenberg recounted in 1966,

> One of my painter friends once said that I'm awfully good at the edges. This was intended as a joke but I think it may be true: there's been a conscious attempt to avoid giving a dramatic preference to any area whether dead center or at a point where I have only half an inch before I hit the wall. I have ignored simple-minded ideas of formal composition by just putting something of no importance at dead center.[46]

Rauschenberg's Combines imply extension beyond the canvas via other devices as well: by cropping letters or pieces of clothing at the edge—as in the green C or G at the bottom left of *Curfew* (1958), or the shirt sleeves, one black and one white, at the top of *Migration* (1959). Or in sequences where sheets of paper seem to march off the sides, as in the bottom left-hand corner of *Wager* (1957–59) or at the top of *Hazard* (where the "ORD" additionally implies the presence of a consonant such as "W" off to the left side). While certain elements acknowledge the edge—in, for example, the long horizontal brushstrokes that stop at the border of the canvas but nevertheless visually seem to careen beyond it in *Wager* or *K24976S*—they imply that the edge is more an occasional than a necessary fact.

Such compositional devices recall the work of Siskind, in particular certain photos of weather-beaten signage taken in North Carolina and Kentucky in the summer of 1951. In them, Siskind photographically cut sections from out of larger wholes to create fragmentary juxtapositions, what Carl Chiarenza called "collage-

45. Hopps similarly noted the manner in which Rauschenberg's glossy black paintings implied a continuity beyond their framing edge (ibid., p. 67).

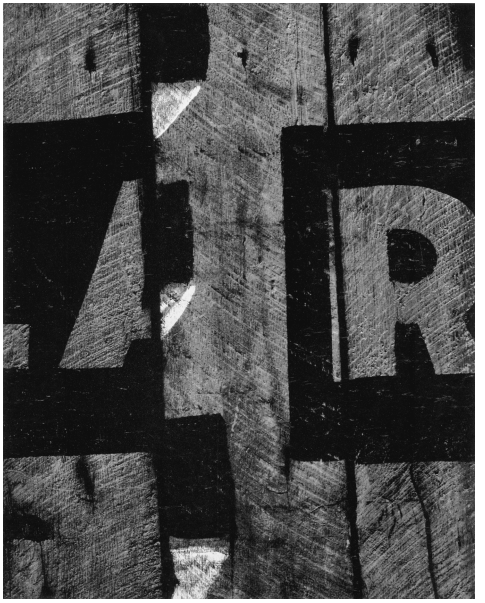
46. Dorothy Gees Seckler, "The Artist Speaks: Robert Rauschenberg," *Art in America* 54, no. 3 (May–June 1966), p. 81.

Rauschenberg. Gloria. *1956. Combine painting.*

like scrambling[s] of letters in one-time posters or signs."[47] Siskind's photographs enact a dialectic between the pull of disorder and decomposition in the subject matter and the ordering function of the frame, which, as he stated in "Credo," makes the view into a new object, copied but separate from the world. While Rauschenberg's Combines, I would contend, achieve much the same effect, the valence is somewhat different. For, in comparison with what he called "simple-minded ideas of formal composition," Rauschenberg's controlled multiplicity implies a continuity with the inchoate chaos and sprawl of the surrounding world.

This effect is evident not only in those large, entropic Combines such as *Painting with Red Letter S*, but also in much smaller, seemingly more occasional ones. In the small Combine-painting *Will* (ca. 1954), for example, the top of the sports page headline (announcing baseball player Ted Williams's signing with the Red Sox), the brushstrokes at the left and bottom center, and the block of paint at the right all seem abruptly cropped, as though framed photographically from out of a larger, extended field. Which was, in fact, the case. For Rauschenberg created this piece by physically cutting it from a larger work that he deemed unsuccessful. As he noted, he obtained "fourteen or fifteen successful small paintings" in this

47. Chiarenza, *Aaron Siskind*, p. 91.



Top: Siskind. Kentucky 4. *1951.*
Bottom: Rauschenberg. Will. *ca. 1954. Combine painting.*

manner.[48] Although Rauschenberg did not identify the other works from this particular batch, it is not difficult to tell which ones might have been created by similar means. Numerous small, often untitled pieces, approximately the size of printed photographs (8 by 10 to 11 by 15 inches) appear throughout Rauschenberg's production of the 1950s, with edges, sometimes jagged, that crop brushstrokes and elements of collage. It may be the case for an untitled piece of 1954 with cupids and an abruptly cropped headline that reads "$100,000" in the collection of Susan Weil. It is probably the case with the aptly titled *Opportunity* #7 of 1956, one of at least nine smaller works of that title for which no other images are known. In *Opportunity* #7, which is in the collection of artist Robert Whitman, closely cropped fragments from the baseball section of newspaper's sports pages appear at the bottom and, especially, the top; drips seem to come from out of the picture's expanse; and the word "Nip" is fortuitously caught or framed in the top right corner. See also a more abstract untitled piece from 1956, with paint drips at the bottom that run off the lower edge. Or the untitled collage with airmail stamp of 1957, with a paintstroke jaggedly sliced off the left-hand edge. It may also be the case with the untitled collage with cuff of 1957, which seems excised from a larger whole on all four sides. And there are many others.

The earliest known example of Rauschenberg's cutting a smaller piece from a larger Combine is found in an untitled work from 1954, with a cut-off swath of cloth at the top, a line of green paint running off the right-hand side, and a white, Twombly-esque scrawl near the bottom. This piece, one of potentially two, was cut out of the untitled, wall-like Combine-painting with a stained-glass window shown at the Egan gallery. The fate of this Combine serves to help understand the nature of Rauschenberg's celebrated gap between art and life, between a Combine and

48. This statement is recorded in Rauschenberg's curatorial files.

Rauschenberg. Opportunity #7. *1956. Combine painting.*

an environment, which separates his aesthetic from that of Kaprow or Cage. For Rauschenberg, it seems, a work should court a certain mimetic relationship to its environment, emulating both its architectural aspects and the inchoate disorder of the real. Hence, such declarations as "I think a picture is more like the real world when it's made out of the real world" and—in an almost exact inverse of Siskind's "Credo"—"I consider myself successful only when I do something that resembles the lack of order I sense."[49] Yet, an unsuccessful picture, it would seem, is one in which the work, made out of the real and emulating its disorder, simply becomes that disorder, too closely assimilating itself to the sprawl of the environment, simply "erasing," as Cage had put it, the distinction between art and life. Thomas Hess, in his attempt to understand Siskind's photography, stated something that, while enigmatic in relation to the photographer, seems apposite here: "The reason he is so good," Hess wrote, "is that he is constantly aware of how inevitable failure is. And here is the final paradox. As they fail as Art, the pictures that Siskind allows to come to completion rejoin life as new bits and pieces of reality."[50] When such a thing happened to Rauschenberg, when he "failed" and lost the distinction between art and life within a large Combine, he found he could make several smaller, "successful" works out of it in precisely the manner of Siskind's photography. By framing out sections of the work that had now become the real, by, that is, an effect of cropping, Rauschenberg could enact the frame that would restore the gap.

49. Rauschenberg, quoted in Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors*, pp. 193–94, 199.
50. Hess, "Aesthetic in Camera," p. 13.

Rauschenberg. Untitled (Red Painting). *ca. 1954.*