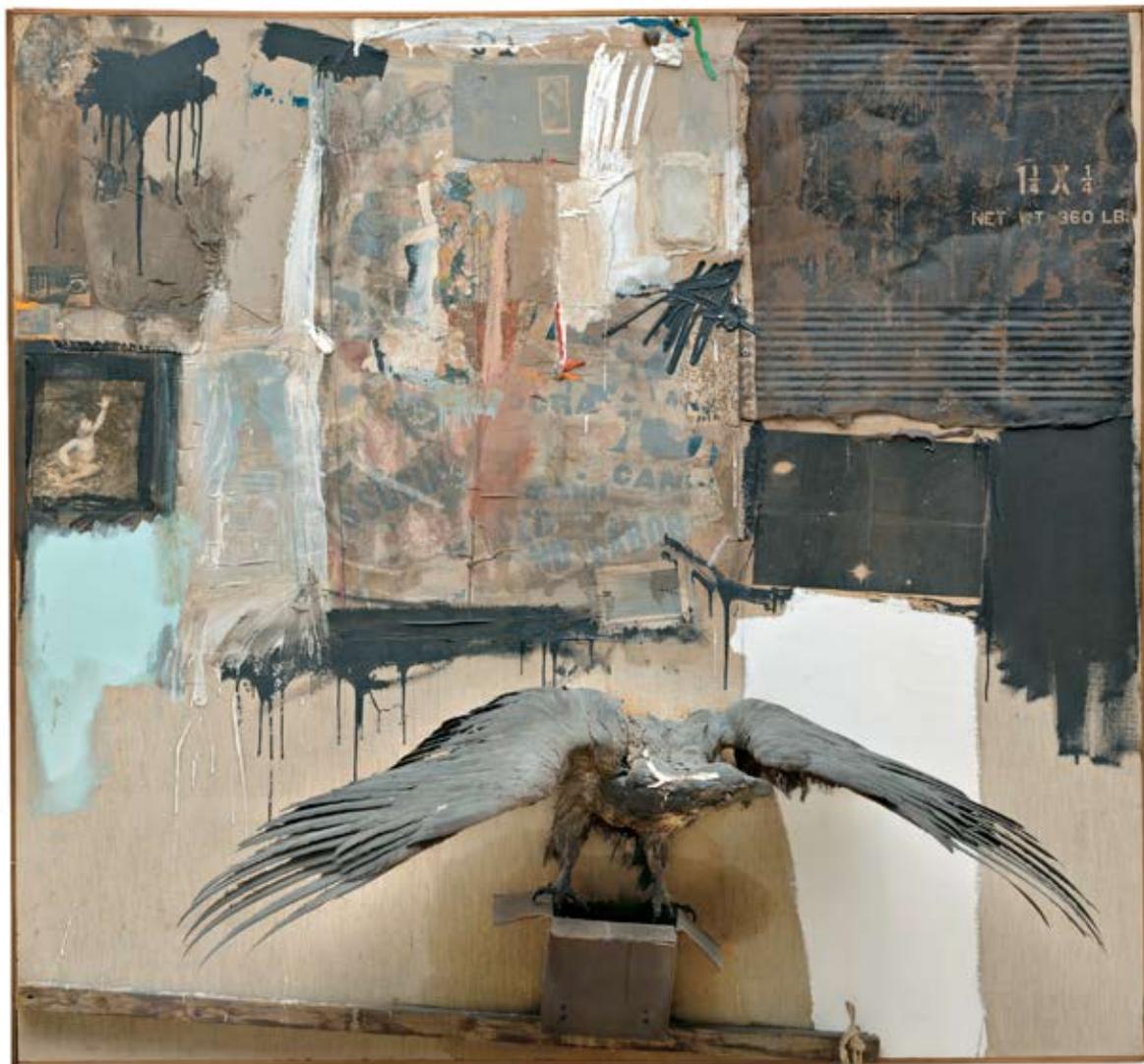


# RAUSCHENBERG CANYON



**RAUSCHENBERG**  
**CANYON**

**LEAH DICKERMAN**

**THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK**



**IN 1959 ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG RECEIVED A TELEPHONE CALL FROM A FRIEND,** the artist Sari Dienes. Dienes lived in the Carnegie Studios—working and living spaces allotted to artists above New York’s celebrated concert hall. As Rauschenberg told the story, Dienes’s neighbor there was one of the last of Teddy Roosevelt’s Rough Riders. When he died, the janitors pushed his belongings out into the common hallway. In the junk heap, Dienes spied a taxidermied bald eagle with wings outstretched and contacted Rauschenberg to ask if he wanted it.<sup>1</sup> This kind of question was not unusual for Rauschenberg to receive. He had lately become famous for incorporating all kinds of found objects into his art work, and he was often offered things, odds and ends that his friends ran across, but they usually got it a bit wrong, and he would end up turning them down.<sup>2</sup> In this case, however, he said yes at once.<sup>3</sup>

Bringing the stuffed eagle back to his studio loft on Pearl Street in lower Manhattan, he attached it to a canvas on a stretcher—the traditional support for ambitious fine art painting—cutting off the bird’s tail to fit it closely against the fabric surface, so that it appeared to emerge directly out of it. Below, as if clutched in the raptor’s sharp talons, he affixed an open cardboard box, painted black. From the lower end of a wooden beam he suspended a small pillow, covered with messy daubs of white paint. On the canvas behind the eagle/box/beam/pillow combination, amid strokes and patches of paint, Rauschenberg applied a seemingly incongruous variety of things, including a photograph of his son Christopher as an infant; a postcard of the Statue of Liberty; a man’s white shirt, cut and opened up; a crumpled tube of paint; fragments of printed words; and an industrial metal drum. When he first showed the finished work in 1960, he called it *Canyon*, perhaps riffing on the word fragment “CAN” that appears near the center of the work.

Robert Rauschenberg (American, 1925–2008). *Canyon*. 1959. Oil, pencil, paper, metal, photograph, fabric, wood, canvas, buttons, mirror, taxidermied eagle, cardboard, pillow, paint tube, and other materials, 81¾ x 70 x 24" (207.6 x 177.8 x 61 cm). THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK. GIFT OF THE FAMILY OF ILEANA SONNABEND



**FIG. 1.** Willem de Kooning (American, born the Netherlands, 1904–1997). *Painting*. 1948. Enamel and oil on canvas, 42 $\frac{5}{8}$  x 56 $\frac{1}{8}$ " (108.3 x 142.5 cm). THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK. PURCHASE

In the years since World War II, contemporary American art had become recognized for the large-scale gestural abstraction, often accompanied by lofty existential rhetoric, that was seen in the work of Abstract Expressionists such as Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning [SEE FIG. 1], Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, and Clyfford Still. Rauschenberg, in seeming defiance of this quintessential American style, plucked things directly from the world around him—including the Carnegie Studios junk heap—and put them into his artwork. *Canyon* has become one of Rauschenberg's best-known Combines, the word he used to describe the works he made that mixed painting and other art materials with things found in daily life. With an eagle thrusting forth from its center, it is still one of his most startling and enigmatic pieces.

Rauschenberg had worked with found materials well before he began making Combines in 1954. In the middle of the fall term in 1948, he joined his soon-to-be wife, Susan Weil, at Black Mountain College, situated in a serene mountain valley near Asheville, North Carolina [FIG. 2]. It was a very different place from the Kansas City Art Institute, where Rauschenberg had first studied art. Founded in 1933 by John Andrew Rice, a classics professor, Black Mountain was unusual for an American college at that time in putting the arts at the center of its curriculum. For Rauschenberg, as for many others who attended, the school's experimental approach to art and life and the mix of creative people there had an impact on his development. "I'm not sure I didn't learn more just from being there," recalled Rauschenberg, "than any particular class."<sup>4</sup> Because the school was always short on financial resources, as well as committed to communitarian principles, every student had to perform some sort of community labor. Rauschenberg and Weil volunteered for garbage collection: "I would go through everybody's garbage and take out the things that we would like to have."<sup>5</sup> Many of these abandoned treasures ended up being repurposed in Rauschenberg's artworks and in the outlandish costumes he and Weil made for performances at the school.



**FIG. 2.** View of Black Mountain College on Lake Eden in Asheville, North Carolina, c. 1940



FIG. 3. Josef Albers with students at Black Mountain College, early 1940s

Key for Rauschenberg was the teaching of Josef Albers. Albers had been a student, then a teacher at the Bauhaus, the influential German school of art and design that operated from 1919 to 1933. His wife, Anni Albers, a weaver and a fellow teacher at the Bauhaus, was Jewish, and the Bauhaus, now based in Berlin, had just closed rather than accept Nazi-appointed faculty; an invitation by telegram to join a start-up school in a place the couple had never heard of provided an option preferable to staying in Germany. In the move, Albers brought certain defining tenets of the Bauhaus's innovative pedagogy with him. He was a formidable and atypical presence at Black Mountain—stiff in appearance, authoritarian in demeanor, and speaking rudimentary English in a way that put off some students.<sup>6</sup> Rauschenberg, however, had decided to come to Black Mountain after reading in *Time* magazine that Albers was “the greatest disciplinarian in the United States.”<sup>7</sup>



FIG. 4. Material-study exercise with cement, driftwood, and paper from Josef Albers's class at Black Mountain College, early 1940s

Perhaps in part reflecting his background as the son of a craftsman, Albers disdained emotional excess in discussions of art, and his classes, at both the Bauhaus and Black Mountain, were focused on exploring the properties of materials. Students transformed them through a variety of simple operations (cutting, bending, folding) to fulfill a given task (“Can you fold a piece of paper so that it will twist?” for example) and explored the possibilities in discussion [FIG. 3], with Albers all the while warning them away from the dangers of “self-expression.” Assignments often focused on examining how different juxtapositions of things—colors, surfaces—changed one’s perception of them. The word “combination” became a virtual mantra at Black Mountain.<sup>8</sup> Albers maintained an egalitarian approach to materials—everything was admitted. Students worked with a wide range of “non-art” elements, such as automobile parts, thread waste, broken glass, cardboard, cigarette butts, scraps of tin, bark, lichen, and autumn leaves [FIG. 4].<sup>9</sup> Albers, however, did little to encourage Rauschenberg: “I represented everything he hated most. . . . I was Albers’s dunce, the outstanding example of what he was *not* talking about.”<sup>10</sup> Something about the younger artist seems to have defied Albers’s sense of order.<sup>11</sup> (“Albers’s rule is to make order,” Rauschenberg once reflected. “As for me, I consider myself successful only when I do something that resembles the lack of order I sense.”<sup>12</sup>) But Rauschenberg always spoke about Albers as his most important teacher. Years later he insisted, “I’m still learning what he taught me.”<sup>13</sup>

Rauschenberg's interest in found objects emerged again in the work that he made during a six-month trip to Italy, Morocco, and Spain with the artist Cy Twombly. Twombly had met Rauschenberg and Weil at the Art Students League in New York, where they were all taking classes. In the summer of 1951, after the birth of their son, Christopher, Rauschenberg and Weil returned to Black Mountain, where Twombly was now enrolled. It was an emotionally stormy season at the school, marked by a series of events that made Rauschenberg's homosexuality apparent to those most concerned and led to the breakup of his marriage.<sup>14</sup> Rauschenberg wanted to get away, and he and Twombly began to make plans to travel to Italy together. Twombly applied for a fellowship from the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts that they intended to share, and the two departed in August 1952.

Once in Rome, Rauschenberg took scores of photographs on the streets and at the flea market (Twombly was an avid antiquer). Rauschenberg had studied photography at Black Mountain with Hazel Larsen [FIG. 5], attended lectures on the history of the medium given by Beaumont Newhall there, and had seriously considered pursuing photography, rather than painting, as a primary medium.<sup>15</sup> In Italy he seems to have tested this possibility, and his lens captured in found juxtaposition the sorts of quotidian objects that would later enter his Combines: shoes, wheels, posters on the street, automobile and bicycle parts, fabrics, with a clear penchant for the well worn, broken down, and outmoded [FIG. 6].<sup>16</sup>



FIG. 5. Hazel Larsen (American, 1921–2001). *Robert Rauschenberg and Elizabeth Schmitt Jennerjahn*. Gelatin silver print, 6¼ x 9⅞" (15.9 x 23.3 cm). ESTATE OF HAZEL LARSEN ARCHER

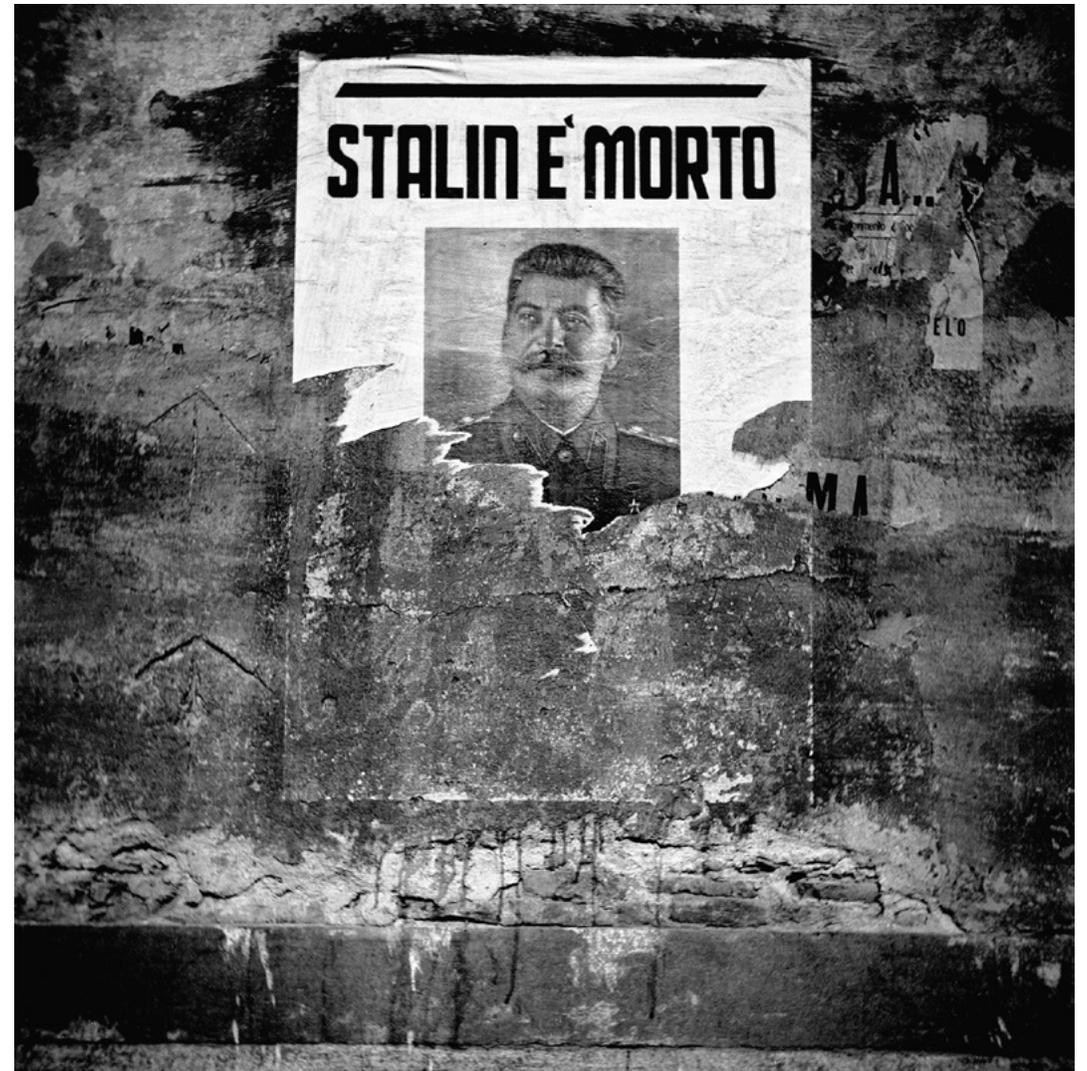
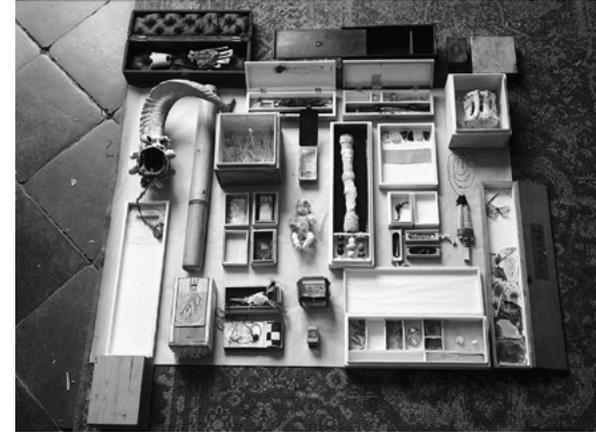


FIG. 6. Robert Rauschenberg. *Rome Wall (III)*. 1953. Gelatin silver print, 15 x 15" (38.1 x 38.1 cm). ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG FOUNDATION



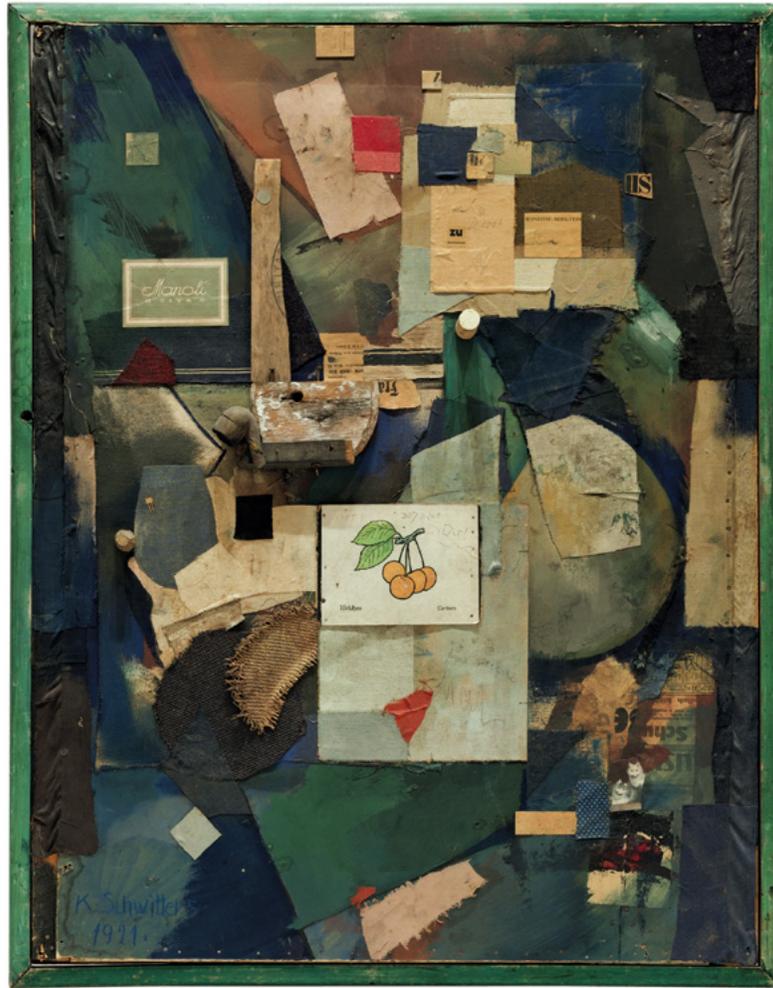
**FIG. 7.** Robert Rauschenberg. Untitled (*feticcio personale*, Rome). 1953. Gelatin silver print, 15 x 15" (38.1 x 38.1 cm). ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG FOUNDATION



**FIG. 8.** Robert Rauschenberg. Untitled (*scatole personali and feticci personali*). 1953. Gelatin silver print, 2¼ x 2¼" (5.7 x 5.7 cm). ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG FOUNDATION

Money soon ran out—Rauschenberg claimed that Twombly had bought one too many antiques—and Rauschenberg headed for Casablanca to get work for a couple of months, with Twombly joining him there.<sup>17</sup> In Morocco and then on their return to Rome, Rauschenberg began making small-scale assemblages, often with materials he had gathered in North Africa. In some, which he called *feticci personali* (personal fetishes; **FIG. 7**), materials—sticks, beads, mirrors, fur—were tied together with string and sometimes suspended (another strategy that would reemerge on a larger scale with the Combines). Others, *scatole personali* (personal boxes), were boxes with found objects placed loosely inside; some were left open so other things might be added [**FIG. 8**]. The statement Rauschenberg wrote for the exhibition of these works in a two-man show with Twombly at the Galleria dell'Obelisco in Rome in 1953, arranged by the Italian artist Alberto Burri, gives a sense of his attraction to certain components: “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, watch parts, bugs, fringe, pearls, glass, and shells. . . . You may develop your own ritual about the objects.”<sup>18</sup>

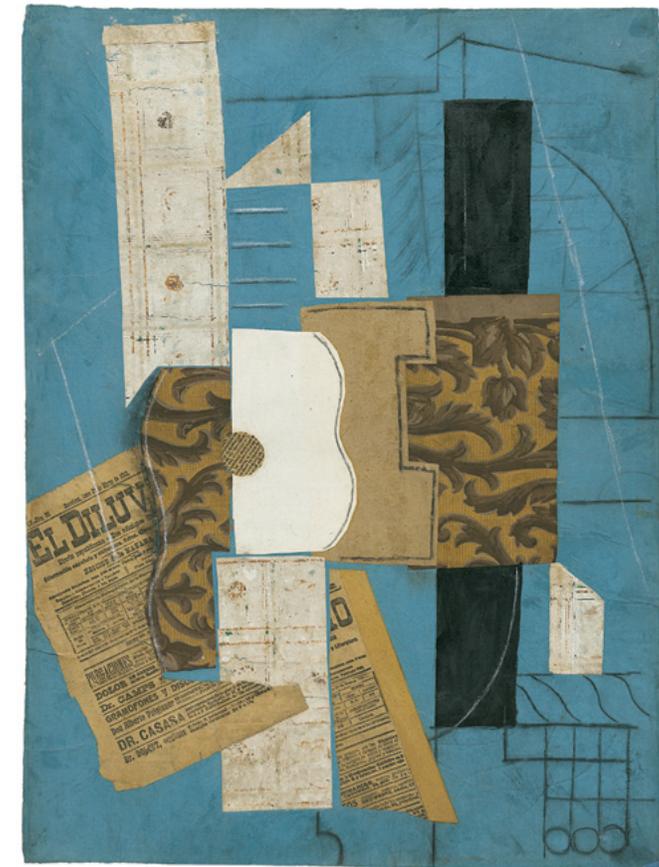
The things Rauschenberg chose for these early assemblages either suggested an embedded sense of time, the quality of a relic, or were particularly materially and sensorially rich. These criteria for selection continued in his later Combines.



**FIG. 9.** Kurt Schwitters (German, 1887–1948). *Merzbild 32 A. Das Kirschbild* (Merz picture 32 A. The cherry picture). 1921. Cut-and-pasted colored and printed paper, cloth, wood, metal, cork, oil, pencil, and ink on paperboard, 36 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 27 $\frac{3}{4}$ " (91.8 x 70.5 cm). THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK. MR. AND MRS. A. ATWATER KENT, JR. FUND

The ritualistic quality of the *feticci e scatole personali* that Rauschenberg stresses may have been prompted by artifacts he had seen in North Africa and at the ethnographic museum in Rome. For an artist who had a full-blood Native American grandmother, as Rauschenberg did, it is perhaps also significant that when questioned by a customs officer about some of these works he was bringing back to the United States, he said on the spot “that they were ceremonial objects made by American Indians, and added the information that he had been lecturing in Europe on the culture of the American Indian.”<sup>19</sup>

Having just arrived back in New York, Rauschenberg visited an exhibition of Dada work organized by the artist Marcel Duchamp in 1953 at the Sidney Janis



**FIG. 10.** Pablo Picasso (Spanish, 1881–1973). *Guitar*. Spring 1913. Charcoal, wax, crayon, ink, and pasted paper, 26 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 19 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (66.4 x 49.6 cm). THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK. NELSON A. ROCKEFELLER BEQUEST

Gallery, where he saw collages and assemblages by the German artist Kurt Schwitters [FIG. 9]. Rauschenberg later recalled that he felt as if the display of Schwitters’s work “had been made just for him.”<sup>20</sup> The works by Schwitters were not only composed from fragments of paper and printed matter, bits of newspapers and advertising, as earlier collage makers like Pablo Picasso had done [FIG. 10], but also incorporated refuse of other kinds—twine, broken china, and fabric—things that did not assimilate themselves as easily to the two-dimensional surface of traditional painting and drawing. “I called my new manner of working from the principle of using any material MERZ,”<sup>21</sup> Schwitters had declared, coining a neologism from the torn fragment of an ad for the

## NOTES

1. Barbara Rose, *Rauschenberg: An Interview with Robert Rauschenberg* (New York: Vintage, 1987), p. 61.
2. As reported by John Cage in John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), p. 100.
3. Rose, *Rauschenberg: An Interview*, p. 61.
4. Calvin Tomkins, *Off the Wall: Robert Rauschenberg and the Art World of Our Time* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1980), p. 33.
5. Rauschenberg, quoted in Rose, *Rauschenberg: An Interview*, p. 34.
6. Martin Duberman, *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1972), p. 42.
7. Cited in Calvin Tomkins, "Moving Out," *The New Yorker*, February 29, 1964, p. 48; and in Rose, *Rauschenberg: An Interview*, p. 23.
8. Duberman, *Black Mountain*, p. 56. See also Frederick A. Horowitz and Brenda Danilowitz, *Josef Albers: To Open Eyes: The Bauhaus, Black Mountain College, and Yale* (London and New York: Phaidon Press, 2006), p. 125.
9. Horowitz and Danilowitz, *Josef Albers*, pp. 125–32, including photos of student exercises.
10. Rauschenberg, quoted in Tomkins, *Off the Wall*, p. 28.
11. Rose, *Rauschenberg: An Interview*, pp. 22–25.
12. Rauschenberg, quoted in Tomkins, "Moving Out," p. 48.
13. Ibid.
14. Weil stayed only briefly at Black Mountain this time, until she and Rauschenberg decided to separate. See Joan Young with Susan Davidson, "Chronology," in Walter Hopps et al., *Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1997), pp. 550–51; Walter Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg: The Early 1950s* (Houston: Menil Collection; Houston Fine Art Press, 1991), p. 62; and Tomkins, *Off the Wall*, p. 77.
15. Rose, *Rauschenberg: An Interview*, p. 75.
16. Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg: The Early 1950s*, p. 109.
17. For the timing of their trip to North Africa, see Nicholas Cullinan, "Double Exposure: Robert Rauschenberg's and Cy Twombly's Roman Holiday," *Burlington Magazine* 150 (July 2008): 465.
18. Rauschenberg, statement in Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg: The Early 1950s*, p. 232.
19. Tomkins, *Off the Wall*, p. 82.
20. Rauschenberg, quoted in D. G. Seckler, "The Artist Speaks: Robert Rauschenberg," *Art in America* 54 (May–June 1966): 74.
21. Schwitters, quoted in John Elderfield, *Kurt Schwitters* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1985), p. 13.
22. Leo Steinberg makes this argument in relation to Rauschenberg in the title essay of his book *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972). On Rauschenberg and Schwitters, see Leah Dickerman, "Schwitters fec.," in Isabel Schulz, ed., *Kurt Schwitters: Color and Collage* (Houston: Menil Foundation, 2010), pp. 87–97.
23. Paul Schimmel, "Autobiography and Self-Portraiture in Rauschenberg's Combines," in Paul Schimmel et al., *Robert Rauschenberg: Combines* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2005), pp. 218, 221. The date of the work is that proposed in Hopps et al., *Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective*, p. 554.
24. Schimmel, "Autobiography and Self-Portraiture in Robert Rauschenberg's Combines," p. 221.
25. Rauschenberg, statement from 1956, reprinted in Catherine Craft, "In Need of Repair: The Early Exhibition History of Robert Rauschenberg's Combines," *Burlington Magazine* 154 (March 2012): 197.
26. Rauschenberg, quoted in Roberta J. M. Olson, "Rauschenberg, the Extraordinary Ragpicker," *SoHo Weekly News*, March 31, 1977, p. 23.
27. Rachel Rosenthal, quoted in Annie Cohen-Solal, *Leo and His Circle: The Life of Leo Castelli* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), p. 241. Cohen-Solal mistakenly identifies Rachel Rosenthal as Rachel Rosenblum.
28. Rauschenberg, quoted in Tomkins, *Off the Wall*, p. 118.
29. Rauschenberg, quoted in Paul Taylor, "Robert Rauschenberg," *Interview* 20 (December 1990): 146.
30. Steinberg, *Other Criteria*, p. 90.
31. Rauschenberg, quoted in Seckler, "The Artist Speaks," p. 81.
32. Tomkins, *Off the Wall*, p. 134.
33. Rauschenberg, quoted in Rose, *Rauschenberg: An Interview*, p. 58.
34. Kenneth Bendiner, "Robert Rauschenberg's Canyon," *Arts Magazine* 56 (June 1982): 57–59.
35. Ibid., p. 59. Jonathan Katz, "The Art of Code: Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg," in *Significant Others: Creativity and Intimate Partnership*, ed. Whitney Chadwick and Isabelle de Courtivron (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1993).
36. "The convinced iconographer," writes Rosalind Krauss, "is almost impossible to dissuade." See Rosalind Krauss, "Perpetual Inventory," *October* 88 (Spring 1999): 86–116, especially n.59.
37. Rauschenberg, quoted in Philip Smith, "To and about Robert Rauschenberg," *Arts Magazine* 51 (March 1977): 121.
38. Cage, *Silence*, pp. 101–2.
39. Rauschenberg, quoted in Seckler, "The Artist Speaks," p. 76.
40. Variations on this idea appear in several places. See Rauschenberg, quoted in Rose, *Rauschenberg: An Interview*, pp. 57 and 102, and Cage's characterization of Rauschenberg's work as "not ideas but facts." Cage, *Silence*, p. 108.
41. For more on themes of gravity and flight, see Thomas Crow, "Rise and Fall: Theme and Idea in the Combines of Robert Rauschenberg," in Schimmel et al., *Robert Rauschenberg: Combines*, pp. 231–55.
42. Ibid., p. 236.
43. Rauschenberg, quoted in William S. Lieberman, "Rauschenberg's 'Inferno' Drawings," *MoMA*, no. 6 (Winter 1975–76): 3.
44. Rauschenberg, quoted in Seckler, "The Artist Speaks," p. 84.
45. Rauschenberg, quoted in James Schuyler, "Is Today's Artist with or against the Past?" *Art News* 57 (Summer 1958): 56.
46. "Perpetual Inventory" is the title of an essay by Rosalind Krauss in which she argues for the open-ended, archival quality of Rauschenberg's work. Rosalind Krauss, "Perpetual Inventory," in Hopps et al., *Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective*, pp. 206–23.
47. Robert Rauschenberg, "Art of Assemblage Symposium," *MoMA*, October 19, 1961, p. 24. Typescript in The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.
48. Rauschenberg, quoted in Richard Kostelanetz, "A Conversation with Robert Rauschenberg," *Partisan Review* 35 (Winter 1968): 96.
49. Rauschenberg, statement in Dorothy C. Miller, ed., *Sixteen Americans* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1959), p. 58.
50. Michael Sonnabend, quoted in Cohen-Solal, *Leo and His Circle*, p. 152.

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