

Nothingness Materialized: Existentialism in the Context of Reality as
Revealed in the Early cEuvre of Robert Rauschenberg

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The artists of the 1940's New York School, better known as the Abstract Expressionists, are the premier embodiment of today's 'artist as rebel' stereotype. Their personalities synthesized Romanticism's eccentric genius and the Kafkaesque, alienated modern man with the fresh, freethinking 'coolness' of the American Beats. They wore all black, smoked cigarettes, and drank heavily, and their work manifested itself as giant fields of pure color and battlegrounds of spontaneous and gestural drips and strokes from which leapt the cries of each artist's authentic emotions. Their radical individualism and the freedom with which they approached their work, along with their paintings' apparent lack of content, often led critics to connect this artistic movement to existential philosophy. Harold Rosenberg, a major contributor to hip, intellectual publications like *The Partisan Review*, strengthened these connections in his influential critical writings about the abstract expressionists' work. Though the work of the abstract expressionists may sometimes provide an easily accessible visual example of some superficial existential principles', it fails to show how these principles function in the context of reality. And when compared to the early *oeuvre* of Robert Rauschenberg, developed during the heyday of action-abstraction, the existential qualities of abstract expressionism are imperfect and ambiguous. While the abstract expressionists transported man to an emotional level, temporarily removing him from the world of real objects, Rauschenberg, through the resuscitation of these

1 Both the artists and critics involved in the creation and promotion (respectively) of American abstract expressionism are guilty of a selective reading of existential philosophy, recognizing its more egocentric and apathetic elements, while ignoring the more difficult tenets that speak about things beyond individual suffering and expression.

real objects and recognizable images, "plunged man back in the world."² By juxtaposing commonplace, yet disparate forms in his *combines* of the 50's and 60's, Rauschenberg presents the infinite relationships of possibilities that come with existential freedom. Nothingness, the source of freedom for the atheistic existentialists, serves as not only the inspiration for Rauschenberg's work, but also as its end. Rauschenberg achieves what the abstract expressionists unsuccessfully attempted to convey with their abstractions: a visual exemplar of consciousness's experience of being-in-the-world³, and the materialization of "the negation as being".⁴

In the American post-war period, both abstract expressionism and existentialism reached the zeniths of their respective popularity. *The Partisan Review*, a popular magazine for New York artisto-intellectual-socialites, promoted both existential thought and the work of the abstract expressionists.⁵ Sartre's most accessible work, *No Exit*, made its theatrical debut in New York in 1946, just one year before Jackson Pollock came to his characteristic, purely abstract, 'drip paintings', like 1947's *Full Fathom Five* [figure 1]. It is easy to imagine how, especially when juxtaposed as they were in some publications, this new and deeply expressive style of painting lent itself to comparisons with the philosophy of

² Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Philosophy of Jean Paul Sartre*, Robert Denoon Cumming ed. (New York: Vintage 2003) 57.

³ This is a reference to Heideggerian *Dasein*.

⁴ Sartre. *The Philosophy of Jean Paul Sartre* 115.

⁵ Nancy Jachec, "The Space between Art and Political Action: Abstract Expressionism and the Ethical Choice in Postwar America 1945-1950," *Oxford Art Journal* 14, no. 2 (1991), 18-29. This article is the best examination that I have found of the American abstract expressionist/existential relationship during the late 1940's/early 1950's.

freedom. But in his famous 1945 lecture, *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme*, Sartre talks about the imprudence with which so many attitudes and ideas were described as existential, and of the eventual misrepresentation of existentialism as a whole, lamenting, "by this time the word has been so stretched and has taken on such a broad meaning, that it no longer means anything at all." He goes on to say, "it seems that for want of an advance-guard doctrine analogous to surrealism, the kind of people who are eager for scandal and flurry turn to this philosophy which in other respects does not serve their purposes in this sphere."⁶ In many respects, existentialism does not serve the purposes of the controversy-prone abstract expressionists. So when critics like Harold Rosenberg, a friend of Sartre's, describe the plan of the "American action painters,"⁷ as a "revolution of taste,"⁸ it is important to recognize that these artists' revolutionary attitudes may have been more significant in establishing the relationship between this artistic movement and the existential school of thought than the importance of strict, philosophically rooted connections.

Undoubtedly, connections are present, and thanks to the support of Rosenberg and many of his contemporaries, abstract expressionism and existentialism enjoyed a cohesive, cooperative, near-perfect companionship. But just as abstract expressionism was really beginning to take hold, a young,

⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme*, published as *Existentialism*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Philosophical Library, 1947) 15. It is interesting that Sartre references surrealism here, as the adjective 'surreal' has fallen victim to the same obfuscation *a cause de* overuse.

⁷ Pollock, Lee Krasner, Robert Motherwell, Fritz Kline, and Willem de Kooning

⁸ Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," *Art News* 51 (December 1952): 48.

philosophically indifferent artist from Texas named Robert Rauschenberg, began working and responding to abstract expressionism with work that embodied a more complete and coherent existentialism. Along with Rauschenberg's painterly, expressionistic scrawls, the recognizable is resurrected, providing the real context that had been missing in the abstract emotion-scapes of the abstract expressionists. In his famous *combines*, Rauschenberg creates paint-sculpture assemblages that utilize real, commonplace objects and silkscreen images from commercial and popular culture. His work is more intimate, but less personal. His images, though unmistakably new, are surprisingly ordinary and comfortable. They rely not on grandeur of scale or some intellectualized action-emotion imposed on their viewers. Instead, they are immediate, they are real, and they ask the viewer to simply let his perception dance across the compositions and feel "the experience of assimilation *without* analysis."⁹ And although the abstract expressionists tried to use abstraction as a means for presenting some immediate, emotional, primitive subjectivity, their canvases remain too imbued with the artists' unique emotions for that subjectivity to be absolutely understood and experienced.¹⁰

Rauschenberg spent his formative artistic years working during abstract expressionism's heyday and its influence on his work is evident in his paintings and prints from 1949-51. His 1949 print series, *This is the First Half of a Print Designed to Exist in Passing Time [figure 2]*, is able to present temporality using pure

⁹ Jonathan Fineberg, "Robert Rauschenberg's *Reservoir*," *American Art* 12 (1998): 86.

¹⁰ For more on the failures of expressionism, see Hal Foster's "The Expressive Fallacy" in *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics*. (New York: The New Press 1999). 59-73.

abstraction. While the only passage of time offered by the action painters came with the act, Rauschenberg, as his title suggests, created prints in which real time could be felt and experienced whenever the series was viewed. Instead of transporting his viewers to another realm, he places them in within the world, first with passing time, later with their shadows, and eventually with a return to figuration.

Paintings like 1950's *Untitled (with dark forms)* [figure 3] utilize the active, sloppy brushwork of abstract expressionism, but also contain an empirical geometry and sense of setting. Scrapes and scrawls create a horizon that cuts through the bottom of the dominating blackness. Above the abstract scraper-vista, float two round, dark voids. Read exactly as they appear, as "black holes," they suggest the ubiquitous presence of nothingness. Positioned in the sky, they act as empty deities, able neither to give answers, nor to offer consolation to those who roam below.

Another piece from around 1950, *Mother of God* [figure 41], presents this same positing of a void in a type of real space. Here, setting is established by the rectangular arrangement of road maps of American cities. But again, the piece is dominated by a looming void in the center of this map-mass. A clipping isolated at the bottom of the composition reads: " 'An invaluable spiritual road map... As simple and fundamental as life itself.' --- *Catholic Review*." This time, Rauschenberg attributes more blatant spiritual significance to this emptiness, establishing with his title the existential principle that God too is born from nothingness. Man constantly looks outside of himself to find answers or gain direction. Finding only nothingness,

man feels anguish, and God was constructed out of the desire to relieve man 'of this anguish and help him gain a sense of guidance. Rauschenberg, like the existentialists, accepts nothingness, as it provides the foundation for man's freedom. Juxtaposing the void against the maps and the quotation shows not only the presence of nothingness in life, but also suggests that nothingness can give guidance to man, in that it allows everything.

Rosenberg says that in order for the abstract expressionist "to maintain the force to refrain from settling anything, he must exercise in himself a constant No."¹¹ But in comparison to the nihilating response, the "No," exclaimed by Rauschenberg, especially in *Erased de Kooning Drawing [figure 5]*, the abstract expressionists' response as negation is timid and impotent. The act of erasing a de Kooning¹² offers not only a neo-dada gesture with Oedipal and commercially critical unriArtnnAR:¹³ it also is nihilatinn in practice. "Every question slippnRs that we realize a nihilating withdrawal [*recut*] in relation to the given, which becomes a simple *presentation*, fluctuating between being and nothingness.' What once was, the drawing by established artist Willem de Kooning, is destroyed by the hands of another, and then presented anew as nothingness materialized.¹⁵ Rauschenberg,

¹¹ Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," 48.

¹² Willem de Kooning, one of the most famous and successful abstract expressionists, agreed to give Rauschenberg one of his drawings for this project.

¹³ Leo Steinberg, "Encounters with Rauschenberg," lecture at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (October 21, 1997) and, with revisions, for the Menil Collection, Houston (May 7, 1998), published as Encounters with Rauschenberg. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) 16.

¹⁴ Sartre, The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre, 114.

¹⁵ The creation of new things as a result of destruction is a principle central to Nietzschean philosophy.

with his focus on duality, is able to see being and nothingness as existing simultaneously and cooperatively. Similarly, in his *White Paintings* from 1951, Rauschenberg presents this same fluctuation. For a painter, no physical representation is so perfect an analogue for nothingness (and the infinite possibilities it presents) as an expanse of whiteness. But because the paintings are made complete when the shadow of the viewer is thrown into the work, they represent not only non-being, but also a consciousness's existence (a being) within the non-being (nothingness).

Though all of these works have strong existential qualities, they do not possess the profound implications to experiential and perceptual reality of his later *combines* [figures 6-7]. As Rauschenberg moved away from abstraction, he started to create compositions that teem with "stuff." Rauschenberg combined characteristically expressionistic strokes with the matter of reality. Sometimes they enter the picture plane as actual objects: tires, birds, radios, and clocks jammed into the picture plane; other times they are presented as images, printed or found, of monumental persons and places, of other art, of almost anything. Even though Rauschenberg's visual vocabulary is unrestricted, his approach to arrangement is not. With every step of the creative process, Rauschenberg is involved in the act of choosing; he, unlike the abstract expressionists, leaves nothing to chance. He can "envisage a number of possibilities, and when [he] choose[s] one, [he] realize[s] that it has value only because it is chosen."¹⁶ Individually, these images and objects are

¹⁶ Sartre, L'Existentialisme est un humanisme, 25.

straightforward and recognizable: the president, a street sign, a produce stand, a jellyfish, each possessing its own unique characteristics and carrying its own connotations. But once carefully arranged, they share no congruent symbolism nor do they possess specific relationships. John Cage, Robert Rauschenberg's friend, teacher, and colleague, says of Rauschenberg, "were he saying something in particular, he would have to focus the painting; as it is he simply focuses himself and everything, *a pair of socks*, is appropriate, appropriate to poetry, a poetry of *infinite possibilities*." Rauschenberg affirms, "when an object you're using does not stand out but yields its presence to what you're doing, it collaborates... it implies a kind of harmony." This harmony in Rauschenberg's *combines* becomes especially evident when they are approached with Kantian disinterestedness. When one is not looking for something specific, he finds no one thing takes precedence over another. Sartre states:

"It is obvious that non-being always appears within the limits of a human expectation. It is because I expect to find fifteen hundred francs that I find *only* thirteen hundred. It is because a physicist *expects* a certain verification of his hypothesis that nature can tell him no. It would be in vain to deny that negation appears on the original basis of a relation of man to the world. The world does not disclose its non-beings to one who has not first posited them as possibilities."

Obviously, Rauschenberg's work shows not only the acknowledgment, but also the embrace, of the possibility of non-being. Expectations of symbolism or

¹⁷ John Cage, "On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and his Work," in Art in Theory: 1900-2000, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, (Malden: Blackwell, 2003) 736.

¹⁸ G.R. Swenson, "Rauschenberg Paints a Picture," Art News 62 (1963): 46.

¹⁹ Sartre, The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre, 112.

iconographic meaning, of morals or of justifications in Rauschenberg's *combines* are destined to be unfulfilled. Instead Rauschenberg presents "all the figures which appear and are swallowed up in the total neutrality of a *ground*."²⁰ He presents appearances, which constitute the fabric of existential reality, in the exact way that they enter consciousness. His objects and images represent the visual stimuli that permeate the psyche in discernable form, while his painterly strokes depict everything in between, all that is taken for granted, that is seen, but that merely brushes consciousness.

Sartre says there is "something *overflowing* about the world of `things.'"²¹ This *overflow* overwhelmed the abstract expressionists, and they responded by turning their backs on the familiar and the representational. Their work depicts their *flight*²² from objective reality. Rauschenberg, on the other hand, is not overwhelmed. He embraces the world of objects, as it presents to him a means for exploring infinite possibilities. Flight is never considered as he understands that "the question of existence never gets straightened out except through existing itself."²³ The totality of existence, not just the individual elements that make it up, is his subject. His early "voids" act not as vacuums, but as plenums, setting the stage for his matter filled combines. Though Rauschenberg's *combines* are especially accessible to the current postmodern culture of apathy and attention deficit

²⁰ Ibid., 113.

²¹ Ibid., 78.

²² For Sartre, *flight* was one of the most common practices of *bad faith* (*mauvaise foi*) that man uses to escape from the anguish that comes with his freedom.

²³ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1962) 33.

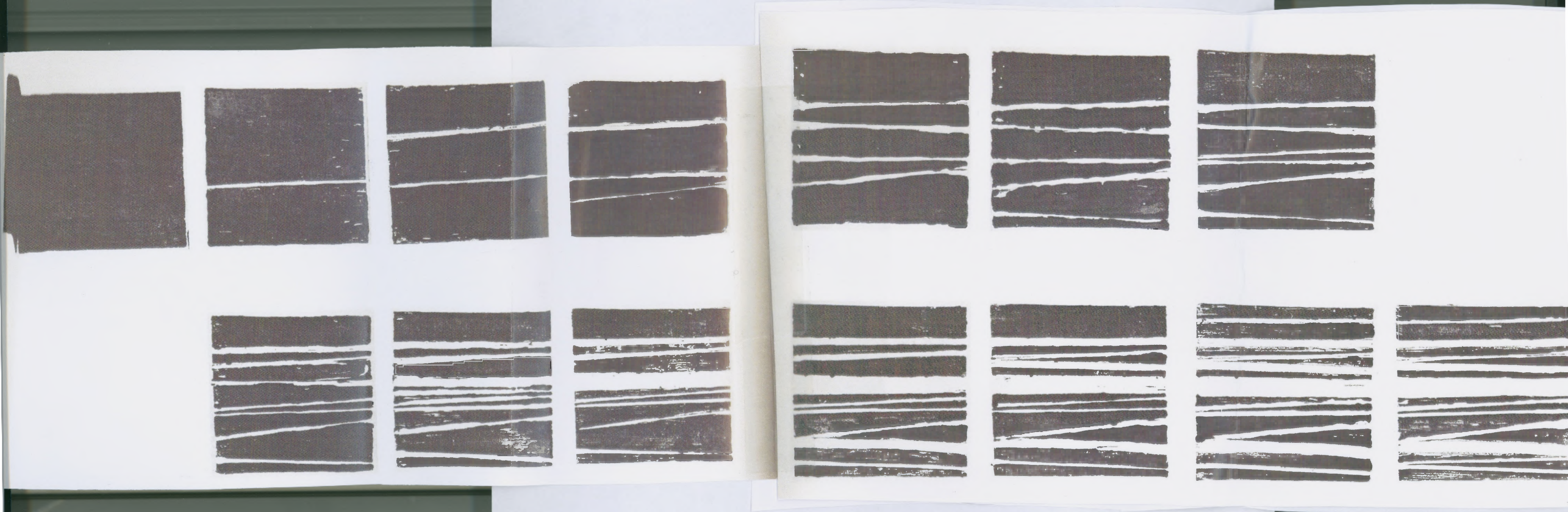
disorders, his work will always be representative how visual experience is perceived in consciousness. He depicts a reality in which "we see nothingness making the world iridescent, casting a shimmer over things,"²⁴ a reality of objects open to subjective interpretation. It is a world, our world, of ultimate freedom and possibilities that relies on the omnipresence of nothingness.

²⁴ Sartre, The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre, 115.

Figure 1: Jackson Pollock, Full Fathom Five, 1947. Oil on canvas with nails, tacks, buttons, keys, coins, cigarettes, matches, etc. Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Figure 2: Robert Rauschenberg, This is the First Half of A Print Designed to Exist in Passing Time, c. 1949. Individual prints in succession.



*Figure 3: Robert Rauschenberg, **Untitled [with dark forms]**, 1950. Oil and enamel on masonite. Hirschhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D. C.*

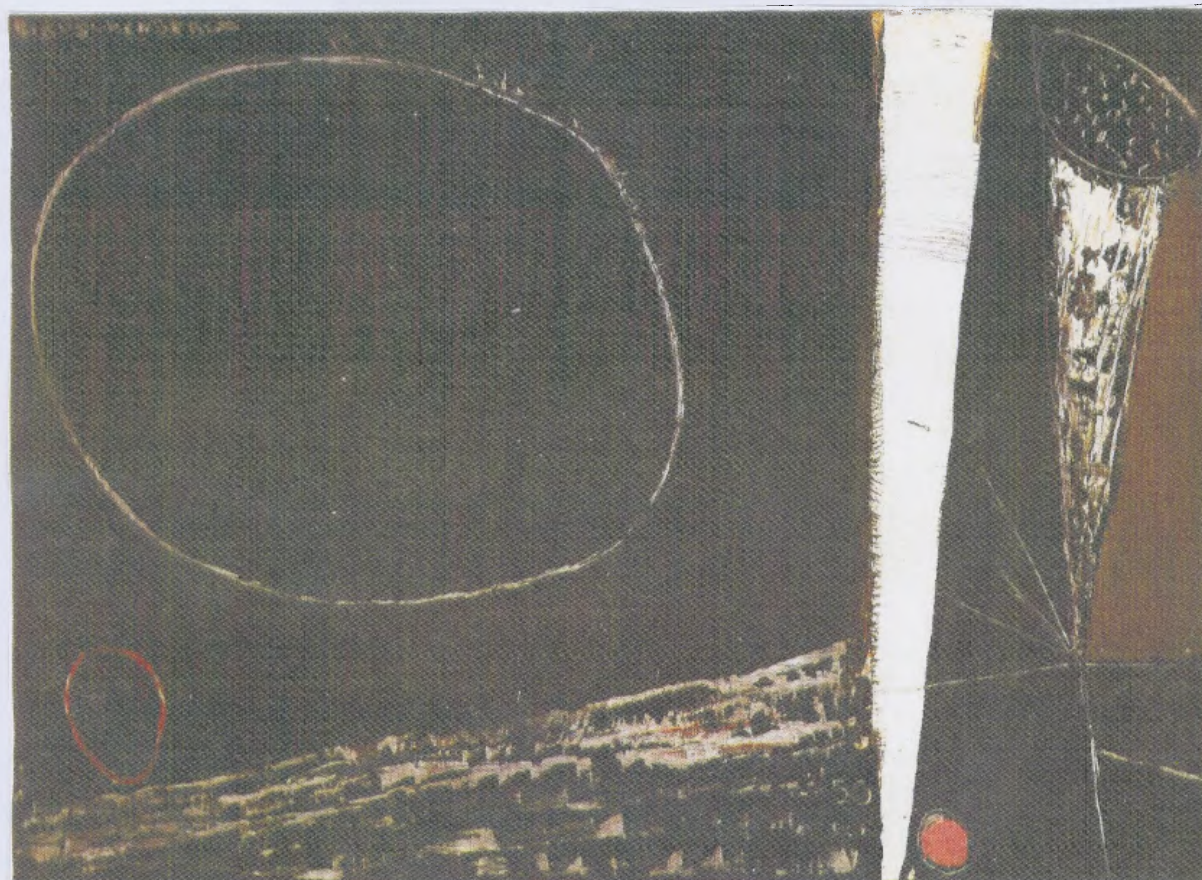


Figure 4: Robert Rauschenberg, Mother of God, c. 1950. Oil, enamel, printed paper, newspaper, and copper and metallic paints on masonite. Collection of the artist, New York.



Figure 5: Robert Rauschenberg, Erased de Kooning Drawing, 1953. Traces of ink and crayon on paper, with mat and label hand-lettered in ink, in gold-leafed frame. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.



Figure 6: Robert Rauschenberg, Windward, 1963. Combine Painting. Foundation Beyeler, Reichen/Basel.



Figure 7: Robert Rauschenberg, *Trophy I (For Merce Cunningham)*, 1959. Combine Painting. Private Collection.



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