

Mother of God

By [Susan Davidson](#), July 2013

Part of the [Rauschenberg Research Project](#)

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1 Over the past twenty years, scholarship on Robert Rauschenberg's early artistic development has been largely informed by the exhibition and monograph organized in 1991 by Walter Hopps for the Menil Collection in Houston. In the installation and its related catalogue, both titled *Robert Rauschenberg: The Early 1950s*, Hopps closely examined the groundbreaking experimentation undertaken by Rauschenberg between 1949 and 1954, charting the emergence of the principal themes and motifs that would come to define the sixty-year arc of the artist's career. During that seminal period, Rauschenberg established an ongoing interest in grasping the full range of art-making mediums, including printmaking, painting, photography, drawing, sculpture, and conceptual modes, often blurring categorical distinctions by using multiple techniques and materials in combination. *Mother of God* (ca. 1950), part of an informal group of artworks that was included in his first solo exhibition at Betty Parsons Gallery, New York, in 1951, is a key example of the innovations Rauschenberg achieved in those years. It is worth recounting here some of the details of the artist's early biography in order to understand the origins and implicit meanings of *Mother of God*.

2 Growing up in the Gulf Coast town of Port Arthur, Texas—once home to the world's largest concentration of oil refineries—Rauschenberg had little exposure to art despite demonstrating a proclivity toward drawing.¹ A decisive moment occurred during his service in the United States Navy (1944–45). While stationed in San Diego, he made his first trip to an art museum, visiting the Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens in San Marino, California, where he saw Thomas Gainsborough's *The Blue Boy* (ca. 1770) and Thomas Lawrence's *Pinkie* (1794). Experiencing firsthand both the grandeur of this privately created museum and the impressive scale of the life-size portraits Henry E. Huntington collected, which as a child Rauschenberg had seen reproduced on his mother's playing cards, he understood that becoming an artist could be a viable career choice.² After his discharge from the Navy in summer 1945 Rauschenberg settled briefly in Los Angeles, eventually relocating to Kansas City, Missouri, in January 1947. Later that winter, encouraged by a friend, he enrolled at the Kansas City Art Institute on the GI Bill. The following year he did the de rigueur stint in Paris, studying at the Académie Julian, where he met his future wife, fellow artist Susan Weil (b. 1930). In fall 1948, Rauschenberg and Weil returned to the United States and registered at Black Mountain College, near Asheville, North Carolina, where they anticipated that Josef Albers (a former instructor at the Bauhaus whom Rauschenberg had read about that summer in *Time* magazine) would instruct them in the unique approach to art making that the Bauhaus master termed "disciplined freedom."³ Although Rauschenberg spent a full academic year at Black Mountain studying Albers's (1888–1976) practice of working with the inherent properties of materials and their relationships to one another, little artwork is extant from this period.⁴

3 The two young artists soon grew weary of Albers's methodology and the isolation of country life at Black Mountain; after the 1949 summer session they moved to New York, finding inspiration in the city's thriving urbanity. Rauschenberg and Weil, a New York native, would live in the city for two years, during which time they married, had a son, and then divorced. Together they frequented the vanguard galleries of Charles Egan, Samuel Kootz, and Betty Parsons, viewing the first generation of American postwar art and admiring in particular the freedom of the Abstract Expressionists. Exhibitions by Willem de Kooning (1904–1997) and Franz Kline (1910–1962) at Egan and Barnett Newman (1905–1970) and Clyfford Still (1904–1980) at Parsons were especially revelatory. As Weil reminisced: "You made sure you saw *everything* and took it all in."⁵ Rauschenberg often brought along his camera, photographing the shows he visited to aid his own process of "taking it all in."⁶



1. Robert Rauschenberg, *Mother of God*, ca. 1950; oil, enamel, printed maps, newspaper, and metallic paint on Masonite, 48 x 32 1/8 in. (121.92 x 81.6 cm); Collection SFMOMA, Fractional purchase through a gift of Phyllis Wattis and promised gift of an anonymous donor; © Robert Rauschenberg Foundation / Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY; photo: Ben Blackwell

4 In search of free studio space, Rauschenberg enrolled at the Art Students League, using his GI Bill benefits to cover the tuition and provide a living stipend. For three semesters he attended morning and evening classes in both life painting and painting composition. Not especially interested in the formal teachings of the League, however, Rauschenberg used the classes to forge his own artistic identity. Over the next two years, he created a body of work grounded in his then naive understanding of what it meant to become an artist.⁷ The culmination of his labor was seen in the paintings—including *Mother of God*—that Rauschenberg presented at Betty Parsons Gallery in spring 1951. These works melded abstraction with imagist concerns, using everyday printed materials as collage elements and featuring representational components and evocative titles, characteristics that would become hallmarks of Rauschenberg’s mature production.⁸ Whether reacting to, imitating, or synthesizing the abstract trends then prevalent in American art, Rauschenberg later recognized how essential this period had been to his development: “I couldn’t really emulate something I was so in awe of. I saw Pollock and all that other work, and I said, Okay, I can’t go that way. It’s possible that I discovered my own originality through a series of self-imposed detours.”⁹

5 The genesis of the Parsons exhibition may be considered either beginner’s luck or an astute acknowledgment of Rauschenberg’s precociousness. He was just twenty-five years old and completely unknown on the New York art scene when he approached the gallerist. Weil recalled that Rauschenberg felt comfortable contacting Parsons because she herself was an artist.¹⁰ This memory dovetails with Rauschenberg’s own story that he had simply been looking for a critique of his work. Parsons later recalled her prescient impressions of that encounter: “The moment I met Bob, I could tell he was alive, perceptive and aware of everything that was going on. . . . Of course, looking at those early pictures I knew he still had a long way to go. But I sensed that spark—I knew that there was a big talent there. All that was needed was encouragement and time for that talent to develop.”¹¹ Then the grande dame of the New York gallery world centered on Fifty-Seventh Street, Parsons represented major artists such as Newman, Still, Jackson Pollock (1912–1956; fig. 2), and Mark Rothko (1903–1970), yet she unexpectedly offered Rauschenberg a show based on the works he carried into the gallery that afternoon. She selected the pictures for the exhibition, however, on a follow-up visit to Rauschenberg’s apartment/studio with Still. Perhaps the presence of such an eminent and stern Abstract Expressionist standing in his studio unnerved Rauschenberg; following the visit he repainted some of the works Parsons had selected, thereby “improving” them. It is unknown whether *Mother of God* was one of the works Rauschenberg sensed needed improvement.



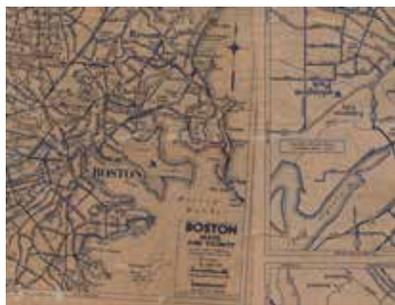
2. Installation view of Jackson Pollock, Betty Parsons Gallery, New York, November 26–December 15, 1951. Photo: Robert Rauschenberg, courtesy the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation; © Robert Rauschenberg Foundation / Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY; Pictured artworks: © The Pollock-Krasner Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



3. Detail of Robert Rauschenberg’s *Mother of God* showing a quotation from *Catholic Review*

6 *Mother of God* is composed of sections of eighteen city maps that have been cut (and in some instances torn) from Rand McNally & Company road atlases.¹² The cities and regions represented include Baltimore; Birmingham; Boston; Buffalo; Camden, New Jersey; Cleveland and other areas of northeastern Ohio; Council Bluffs, Iowa, along the Nebraska border; Dallas; Dayton, Ohio; Denver; Detroit; Fredericksburg, Virginia; portions of Glendale, Pasadena, and Whittier, California; Minneapolis–Saint Paul; Montreal, Quebec; New Orleans; Oakland, California; northwestern Oregon; western Pennsylvania;

Philadelphia; Pittsburgh; Riverside, Ottawa; Saint Louis; Salt Lake City; San Antonio; Seattle; Toledo; areas of southeastern Virginia; and Washington, D.C. Rauschenberg applied these fragments to a Masonite panel in an occasionally overlapping collage, leaving a large, open circle at the center of the work that he painted white. Covering approximately two-thirds of the painting's surface, this circular form dominates the composition, which is otherwise divided into three zones. The lower third of the painting is left unadorned by collage elements and has also been painted white. The bottom of the picture is anchored by a thin bar (1 1/8 inches at its widest) of silver paint, its once brilliant sheen now dulled. To the extreme right, floating in the painted area two inches above this metallic stripe, is a fragment (4 1/6 inches wide) from a newspaper bearing the words, "An invaluable spiritual road map . . . As simple and fundamental as life itself"—*Catholic Review*" (fig. 3). Bold vertical lines separate this tagline from a second printed fragment that reads: "anxiety over / Besides, no oth[er] / has produced / of the Repub[lic] / 'trampling.'" ¹³ Within the maps themselves, dense grids and networks of curving lines appear to form a kind of passe-partout for the central painted form. Rauschenberg used two different atlases published by Rand McNally, as evidenced by the varying typography. The majority of the maps are printed in a boldface font in dark blue ink on heavy-grade white paper, now faded yellow, whereas others are printed in a regular-weight font in light blue ink on a lighter grade paper that is less faded (fig. 4). ¹⁴ Rauschenberg has broken the printed grid of the maps by pasting the various fragments upright, upside down, and/or sideways. This random orientation lends an overall graphic quality to the painting that respects the grid pattern as an organizing device, a characteristic of much of Rauschenberg's art.



4. Detail of Robert Rauschenberg's *Mother of God* showing variations in map types



5. Detail of Robert Rauschenberg's *Mother of God* showing layering of paint and maps

- 7 The edges of the Masonite panel that supports the painting are now frayed (fig. 5), and the painted areas, executed in various shades of white, have been yellowed by time. In the early 1950s Rauschenberg used both traditional oils and house paint, which was more readily available; here this has resulted in variation between glossy and matte areas in the painted surface. Brushstrokes of different angles are visible in the circular form and the painted zone below the collage, articulating the painting's surface texture and revealing traces of the artist's hand. Similarly, in the painted section at the bottom of the panel, one sees what appear to be dark, soiled areas along both the left and right edges. Closer inspection reveals that these are palm prints, probably belonging to the artist. Visual examination also reveals that Rauschenberg applied the paint in several campaigns before and after affixing the maps; one can discern collage elements both on top of and underneath the paint layers. At the point where the painted circular form meets the corners of the printed maps, Rauschenberg has alternately revealed and hidden the contours of the paper. Along the bottom of the circle, collaged maps of Detroit and Dayton creep inward, extending approximately one inch under the paint. Immediately above, where the circular form curves right, a torn fragment of Cleveland encroaches even more deeply, stretching approximately 4 1/6 x 7 1/2 inches (at its widest) below the painted surface. Overall, Rauschenberg has pasted the maps in a careful yet not necessarily seamless manner; his sense of precision is sometimes forsaken in the interest of developing the painting's content. One can discern the possible presence of a painting underneath the maps. This is especially evident along the middle of the

left edge (below a partial map of Philadelphia) and along the bottom of the right edge (underneath fragments of Glendale, Pasadena, and Whittier), where black paint is visible below the white. *Mother of God* has not been x-rayed, nor has it been analyzed using infrared photography. The reverse of the Masonite panel provides scant evidence, but two isolated areas of green paint on the top and left edges suggest the presence of a second painting beneath the visible work. It is in keeping with what is known about other Parsons-era Rauschenberg paintings to assume that this picture may have been painted on top of an existing image or on the reverse of another work.¹⁵

- 8 *Mother of God*, like a number of the paintings included in Rauschenberg's premiere exhibition at Betty Parsons Gallery, contains clear references to Christianity. Yet it also embraces more broadly the notion of a spiritual journey. Rauschenberg's associative mind construed urbanity as part of nature rather than a realm apart from it; here the twisting and winding lines of city streets represented in the maps seem to articulate an organic pattern. The proliferation of road maps surveying urban landscapes foreshadowed a project Rauschenberg conceptualized at Black Mountain in which he envisioned photographing the United States "inch by inch" on a journey across the country.¹⁶ This type of progressive mapping finds a parallel in Rauschenberg's noted engagement with seriality, a theme to which he would return repeatedly.¹⁷ For Hopps, the notion of traveling "resonated synchronistically with the Beat generation's mix of seriousness and wildness, spirituality and play, as well as their explicitly American wanderlust."¹⁸ Other art historians may read the "traveling" theme as a coded homosexual trope for "coming out."¹⁹ While it is true that Rauschenberg's personal life was undergoing significant and life-altering changes at the time *Mother of God* was created (i.e., meeting and partnering with Cy Twombly (1928–2011); the birth of Rauschenberg's son Christopher; and the subsequent dissolution of his marriage to Weil), this author cautions against a queer studies interpretation. More likely, the artist was of a mind to celebrate birth and rebirth—thus the centrality of a circular form alluding to pregnancy. Furthermore, Rauschenberg frequently employed circular forms as compositional elements in the Parsons-era paintings and continued to utilize them in his later works. Throughout his oeuvre, motifs such as open umbrellas, bicycle wheels, tires, and clocks—whether in photographs and paintings or as actual objects—are familiar features.²⁰ Iconographically speaking, the circular form in *Mother of God* may just as aptly be understood as a brightly shining sun or a planet or moon hovering above a horizon. Such otherworldly symbolism, paired with the anchoring effects of the collaged urban grid, amplifies the religious overtones suggested by the *Catholic Review* epigraph. A strictly terrestrial—yet equally plausible—interpretation might be that the maps were intended to allude to life's journey or, in a more personal reading, to represent Rauschenberg's dreams of a well-traveled life for his newborn son.
- 9 Just as the collage elements build up the painting's surface, multiple layers of allusion may be identified in *Mother of God*. A fundamental dichotomy exists between a visual reading that is based in the tensions between nature and the urban landscape and the title's unvarnished religious reference to Mary, Mother of God. Further substantiation for reading the circular orb as fecund may be found in the prayer for the intercession of the Virgin Mary: "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb." Yet a secular reading of the title is also at play. When one encounters an unbelievable event, an exclamation of either surprise or astonishment, particularly in the American South, is "Sweet Jesus, mother of God!" These kinds of vernacular references have always been central to Rauschenberg's thinking. As Hopps once noted, making his own religious pun: "Look at where he does have titles, where words are used . . . take them as concretely as images. Word play and the nature of language and words are very important to him. Wherever there are titles, they are not incidental. They're christenings."²¹
- 10 Rauschenberg's family belonged to the Church of Christ, and his mother, Dora, in particular, was deeply religious. He spent every Sunday in church and Sunday school and attended Bible study classes each summer. When Rauschenberg was thirteen he believed he would become a preacher, but he decided against it when he realized

that his family's fundamentalist denomination forbade dancing, one of his personal passions. Nonetheless, he did not entirely renounce his religious upbringing or his sense of duty to the church.²² Returning from Paris in early fall 1948, Rauschenberg visited his family in Lafayette, Louisiana, before enrolling at Black Mountain, and offered to paint a scene for the baptistery at the newly constructed Oaklawn Church of Christ. During his early years in New York, he continued to attend services of different religions.²³ Although Rauschenberg ultimately replaced his adherence to organized religion with a broader belief in the potential of humankind, during this formative period in New York he—perhaps naively, perhaps earnestly—allowed the religious convictions embedded from his childhood to dominate the subject matter of his work. He later characterized the Parsons-era paintings as the products of a “short lived religious period” in which color (“yellow was life”) assumed symbolic proportions.²⁴ Indeed, many of the works in the Parsons exhibition were composed of passages of white, black, yellow, and silver. In Christian iconography, white can symbolize the Creator; black, righteous judgment; yellow, the glory of God; and silver, the price paid for redemption. The question of whether Rauschenberg was well versed in biblical symbolism remains unanswered; perhaps he was equally influenced by popular associations made with these colors, linking white with purity, black with strength, yellow with happiness, and silver with persistence. Such a framework positions the palette of these works as a far more optimistic reflection of the artist's changing life. In a 1985 article on the Parsons-era paintings, Roni Feinstein offers yet another reading of this color scheme, writing of *Mother of God* (which was then untitled) in particular: “Rauschenberg's painting may nevertheless be seen as his personal interpretation of ideas expressed in the spiritually oriented work of Rothko, Newman, and other Color-Field painters. Once again, he transformed the principles involved in their art into something very literal. Rather than presenting a 'mythic orb' floating against the 'universal void,' he offered a flatly painted circle set against a grid of roadmaps. The specificity of place asserted by the roadmaps cancels the effect of infinity and the sense of boundlessness sought by his elders. . . . Whatever the artist's original intentions might have been, Rauschenberg's untitled painting is revealing in a number of ways. It demonstrates, once again, his literal-mindedness, his interest in locating his work—in both its subject matter and materials—in the real world (and, as is significant to his later art, in America), and his empathic non-illusionism.”²⁵

- 11 Rauschenberg returned to Black Mountain in late summer 1951. His *Night Blooming* series (fig. 6), the first paintings he made after reenrolling, featured richly worked surfaces he created by covering his canvases with black paint and tar and laying them facedown on the ground while wet to attract dirt, gravel, and other debris.²⁶ This series quickly gave way to a group of entirely different pictures, which, while wholly abstract, extended his interest in spiritual themes and references. The importance that these works, known as the *White Paintings* (1951), held for Rauschenberg is clearly evidenced in an impassioned letter he wrote to Parsons, pleading with her to exhibit them as soon as possible. His description of the paintings is especially illuminating: “They are large white (1 white as 1 God) canvases organized and selected with the experience of time and presented with the innocence of a Virgin.”²⁷ Rauschenberg's creative development often built from one series of works to the next, making it plausible to accept *Mother of God* as prefiguring the more radical *White Paintings*. Branden W. Joseph has observed that “by keeping collage from the center of the painting [in *Mother of God*], Rauschenberg . . . signified that the white was at once in the world and to be understood as somehow separate from it. The white would thereby seem to be symbolic of the divine, with Rauschenberg presenting painting as the result of a sort of incarnation. Like the body of the Virgin Mary, Rauschenberg's *Mother of God* serves as a material or bodily vessel for the manifestation of the divine. Rauschenberg's collaging of a newspaper clipping from the Catholic Review to the bottom right corner only reinforced the connection.”²⁸ The direct association between God and the color white made by Rauschenberg in the aforementioned letter to Parsons furthers such an interpretation, and, however ironically given that the artist was focused on charting a new course in his personal life at the time the work was created, his use of map fragments as a “spiritual roadmap” is unaffected.²⁹



6. Robert Rauschenberg, *Untitled (Night Blooming)*, ca. 1951. Oil, asphaltum, and gravel on canvas, 82 1/2 x 38 3/8 in. (209.6 x 97.5 cm). Robert Rauschenberg Foundation; © Robert Rauschenberg Foundation / Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

- 12 Although *Mother of God* may be rooted in a kind of personal expressionism that Rauschenberg interpreted abstractly, the imagist attributes of the collage elements were an equally strong force in shaping the work's composition and subject matter. Collage—whether it involved pasting, assemblage, or transferring—would become one of Rauschenberg's most important artistic tools, one he would employ consistently throughout his career. His image bank was impressively large and encompassed art historical imagery, popular culture, and items from everyday life that he captured with his camera and paired in unexpected juxtapositions. The materiality of the image (and, particularly in later works, the object) was paramount to his artistic process. Joseph has observed that in *Mother of God*, “emphasizing materiality through collage was one means of opposing the transcendent status of the image.”³⁰ Over the years much has been made of the relationship between Rauschenberg's work and cubist collage practices. Rosalind Krauss put forth that the artist heroically transformed the Cubist model, establishing “a form of collage that was largely reinvented, such that in Rauschenberg's hands the meaning and function of the collage elements bore little relation to their earlier use in the work of [either] Schwitters or the Cubists.”³¹ Feinstein quite rightly noted that “Cubist collage provided Rauschenberg with both his form and his means. For him, Cubism was a ‘given’ to be used and manipulated at will. He exploited Cubism's gridded and rectangular structure, its fragmentary nature, and the fact that collage was a decision-making process. He used collage as a vehicle for content and as a metaphor for consciousness.”³² Rauschenberg, however, has downplayed the impact that formal aspects of Cubist collage had on his work.³³ Instead, he has traced his use of the technique to his childhood, when his mother modeled a variety of collage processes through her work with scraps of fabric. Known as an especially frugal seamstress, Dora was the talk of Port Arthur for her ability to arrange her patterns so tightly that she used every inch of cloth.³⁴ Rauschenberg recalled witnessing the creation of his mother's patchwork quilts as a child. “That's where I learned collage,” he once remarked, and knowing his background, it is not difficult to accept her example as his primary source.³⁵ Indeed, the inherent and intuitive have always taken precedence over the formal and the learned in Rauschenberg's art.
- 13 Rauschenberg's exhibition at Betty Parsons Gallery opened on May 14, 1951, and, as was standard for the time, remained on view for just three short weeks.³⁶ The presentation consisted of thirteen easel-size oils in the smaller gallery while the larger main room featured works by Walter Tandy Murch, an artist known for his realistic depictions of mechanical objects and illustrations for such magazines as *Forbes* and *Scientific American*. “He was in the A string gallery and I was in the B string gallery,” Rauschenberg recalled, humorously acknowledging the art world's hierarchy.³⁷ The titles of many of Rauschenberg's paintings followed the abstract expressionist convention of numbering (i.e., No. 1, No. 2, and so on, up to No. 5), while others included poetic phrasing, such as *22 the Lily White* (ca. 1950) and *Should Love Come First?* (ca. 1951). Several others incorporated religious references, including *Crucifixion and Reflection* (ca. 1950), *Mother of God, Trinity, The Man with Two Souls* (1950), and *Eden* (ca. 1950). Many of the exhibited works had not been made at the Art Students League but rather in Rauschenberg's apartment/studio, where they were created, as Weil relates, “right in the apartment. Started and finished there.”³⁸ Four paintings (*No. 6, 1951; No. 7, 1951; Stone, Stone, Stone* [ca. 1951]; and *Should Love Come First?*) appear as handwritten additions to the printed checklist, indicating that they were available for sale but possibly had not been installed on the gallery's walls. The listings for another three works (*No. 8, 1951; No. 9, 1951; and No. 10, 1951*) in a recently located Parsons ledger book suggest that they were delivered to the gallery for consignment after the exhibition opened. Thus, there may have been as many as twenty paintings in the gallery at one time. Their prices ranged from \$150 to \$750, with most works priced in the \$400 to \$500 range.³⁹
- 14 Four days after the exhibition closed, Parsons submitted her expenses for the advertising, announcements, and postage (for a total of \$121.10) to Rauschenberg, noting that there had been no sales. She spent \$71 to advertise the show in two dailies (the *New York Times* and *Herald Tribune*) and one monthly magazine (*ARTnews*), an investment that generated three short reviews.⁴⁰ Two of the reviews were matter-of-fact, preferring to describe the works rather than comment on their execution or effectiveness. Dorothy

Gees Seckler acknowledged the youthful nature of the work, characterizing it as “naively inscribed with a wavering and whimsical geometry.”⁴¹ Stuart Preston, in keeping with his usual curmudgeonly manner, was more pointed. While conceding that the paintings were visually compelling, “stylish doodles in black and white and liberal helpings of silver paint,” he nonetheless believed them to be ill conceived, concluding that they were a “spawning ground for ideas rather than finished conceptions.”⁴²

- 15 Today it is difficult to imagine what some of the Parsons-era paintings may have looked like; the reviews offer scant evidence, no installation photography has been located, and the artist kept no records from that time. Photographs by Aaron Siskind (1903–1991) document four works (*Eden*; *Trinity*; *Stone, Stone, Stone*; and *Should Love Come First?*) that have since been either painted over, lost, or destroyed.⁴³ When the exhibition closed, Rauschenberg was faced with the problem of storage. Only those works that he could fit into his car were saved; he divided them between friends, including artists Sari Dienes (1898–1992) and Knox Martin (b. 1923), and stored others at his in-laws’ summer home on Outer Island, Connecticut (the works kept there were lost the next summer in a fire). The remaining paintings were broken up and left with the trash in the basement of the gallery. Of the twenty works exhibited or offered for sale in connection with the show, only five are extant today: *Crucifixion and Reflection*, *Mother of God*, *22 the Lily White*, *The Man with Two Souls*,⁴⁴ and *Untitled* [with collage and mirror] (ca. 1951).⁴⁵ Three others—*No. 1, 1951*; *Should Love Come First?*; and *No. 10, 1951*—were later repainted black.⁴⁶ The Parsons ledger book indicates that three pieces were left on consignment longer than previously known: *Pharaoh* and *No. 6, 1951* remained at the gallery until September 13, 1951, and *No. 8, 1951* (the highest priced picture at \$750) was returned to the artist on December 12, 1951.
- 16 Reflecting on the Parsons exhibition, Rauschenberg was unusually self-critical, admitting “how completely indulgent” he had been when he started painting.⁴⁷ He acknowledged that the works were youthful attempts at producing “allegorical cartoons, using abstract forms.” Painted mostly in “black, white and yellow [and silver] . . . they were very simple-minded paintings.”⁴⁸ However, his sense of experimentation was evident from the outset: “The first one that I used mirrors in was in the Betty Parsons show . . . so that the room would become part of the painting. I didn’t even know what I was doing. Now I can rationalize it. . . . I did crazy things in those early Betty Parsons days—like cutting off my hair and putting it behind plastic and gluing it in.”⁴⁹
- 17 Although none of the paintings sold (perhaps not surprisingly given that they were created by a novice and Parsons generally did not have a great track record for sales), Rauschenberg’s work registered with fellow artists, and the show led to several important friendships. The exhibition also prompted Jack Tworikov and Leo Castelli to ask Rauschenberg to participate in their exhibition *Today’s Self-Styled School of New York*, commonly known as the “Ninth Street Show” in reference to its venue, the first floor and basement of a building on East Ninth Street that was slated for demolition. *22 the Lily White* was removed early from the Parsons exhibition for inclusion, a fact that surely accounts for its consistent presence in Rauschenberg’s exhibition history. Most significantly, John Cage (1912–1992) visited the Parsons exhibition and, intrigued by the works, somehow finagled *No. 1, 1951* as a gift, conveniently announcing, “the price doesn’t matter since I have no money.”⁵⁰ At the end of 1951, Rauschenberg was invited to join the Artists’ Club established in 1949 by the so-called Downtown Group of artists then working in Lower Manhattan. Despite the fact that this honor was bestowed on him ahead of other artists of his generation, such as Alfred Leslie (b. 1927) and Larry Rivers (1923–2002), Rauschenberg was never interested in becoming a member.
- 18 When Rauschenberg returned to Black Mountain in 1951, he left *Mother of God* and several other works with his friend Knox Martin for safekeeping. It is unknown when or under what circumstances Rauschenberg reacquired the painting. Martin maintains that he held on to the work for several decades before selling it to Castelli.⁵¹ By 1980, the first year for which records exist in the artist’s archives, *Mother of God* is noted as belonging to the artist and being stored in New York. The first published reference to the picture appears in Seckler’s review of the Parsons show, which notes that in some of the works “collage is introduced, either to provide textual effects—as in the picture whose background is

made entirely of road maps—or to suggest a very tenuous associational content.”⁵² The work was known simply as *Untitled* until the title *Mother of God* was (re)attached to it by Hopps, who in the course of his research for *Robert Rauschenberg: The Early 1950s* showed the artist images of his work and asked him to match them to the Parsons checklist. When Hopps read the title *Mother of God*, Rauschenberg replied in no uncertain terms: “Had to be a circle. For some strange reason, I think that it could be that one,” and pointed to a photograph of the painting, which was then known as *Untitled [Road Maps]*.⁵³

- 19 Forty years passed between the first presentation of *Mother of God* at Betty Parsons Gallery in 1951 and its next public showing, in Hopps’s 1991 exhibition, which opened at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. The painting appeared publicly three more times in the 1990s. It was next included in the exhibition *Beat Culture and the New America: 1950–1965*, which was organized by the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York and traveled to Minneapolis and San Francisco between 1995 and 1996. The following year, it was included in the artist’s third retrospective, which toured four museums in America and Europe from 1997 to 1999. As the decade closed, *Mother of God* entered the collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art as part of an unprecedented acquisition that also included fifteen works (one of them a promised gift), all purchased directly from the artist. The painting was first shown at the museum in 1999 in an exhibition highlighting these acquisitions. It was next exhibited in *Treasures of Modern Art: The Legacy of Phyllis Wattis at SFMOMA* in 2003, and then in a permanent collection presentation from 2006 to 2007. Most recently it was included in the celebratory exhibition *75 Years of Looking Forward: The Anniversary Show* in 2009–10; Feinstein contributed a general text on all of the museum’s Rauschenberg acquisitions to the accompanying catalogue.⁵⁴
- 20 As noted at the opening of this essay, in heralding Rauschenberg’s work from the early 1950s as a demonstration of the artist’s precocious inventiveness, Hopps’s 1991 exhibition contributed greatly to establishing the significance of the years 1949 to 1954 to the artist’s future artwork. The show’s impact was underscored by the reactions of art critics. In response to the exhibition’s debut in Washington, D.C., one reviewer associated *Mother of God* in particular with the work of artists, poets, and musicians of the Beat generation, of which Rauschenberg had not been an active member: “The gentle irony here gives an inkling of the Beat sensibility. Kerouac’s *On the Road* wasn’t published until 1957, most of it was written between 1948 and 1951, and Rauschenberg’s *Mother of God* is its visual equivalent.”⁵⁵ In a joint review of the Hopps exhibition and a concurrent presentation staged at the National Gallery of Art as the finale for his ROCI (Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange) project, *New York Times* art critic Roberta Smith drew parallels between the artist’s early use of photographs, newsprint, and other printed paper and the treatment of these materials in his later, large-scale works. Referring to *Mother of God*, she wrote: “One of the most arresting works in this first gallery is a crude white sphere painted on a background made of cheap blue-and-white city maps. . . . Titled *Mother of God*, this painting exudes an antique, pre-cartographic charm and a non-Western mysticism, but it also hints at global ambition.”⁵⁶
- 21 Indeed, as his art and career developed, Rauschenberg took full measure of the world, incorporating images—mostly his own photographs—from around the globe into his expanding repertoire. Both as an artist and as a person, he knew few boundaries, and his artistic vision invariably evinced optimism, hope, and humor, while at the same time sustaining serious insight into the human condition. When the Hopps exhibition traveled to Chicago in 1992, one reviewer noted these qualities in *Mother of God*, writing: “It is a measure of this work’s complexity that the [*Catholic Review*] quote seems to function simultaneously as an ironic joke and as an utterly sincere message. On the one hand, it’s hard to see what sense even the least demanding and least literal traveler might make of this collision of map fragments, to say nothing of the empty circle that aggressively cuts off each map and dominates the viewer’s attention. And yet in his juxtaposition of maps and circle Rauschenberg appears to be making a pretty clear statement—to be drawing, particularly in light of his later work, his own ‘spiritual road map.’”⁵⁷ The road map the artist followed while executing *Mother of God* certainly served him well, charting an approach to art making that in its spirit of invention clearly distinguished him among his peers.

Notes

1. Rauschenberg's art practice was more intuitive than studied. Although he may have filled his childhood notebooks with drawings and was known to sketch portraits of his fellow enlisted men while in the Navy, his mature artistic activity included very little line drawing per se. He rarely drew (with the exception of body tracings, as in *Lawn Combed* [ca. 1954] or *Wager* [1957–59]; or to work out the assemblage of some of his more complicated Combines, such as *Monogram* [1955–59]; or for works that include technological and/or mechanical elements, such as *Oracle* [1962–65]). Leo Steinberg, discussing *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953), has stated that "even in 1953, [Rauschenberg] sensed where he was heading—toward a visual art that had no further use for the genius of drawing." See Leo Steinberg, *Encounters with Rauschenberg: A Lavishly Illustrated Lecture* (Houston: Menil Foundation, 2000), 20.
2. The biographical details in this essay are drawn from research conducted for the exhibition *Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective* and the accompanying catalogue, which contains an extensive chronology. See Joan Young with Susan Davidson, "Chronology," in *Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective*, ed. Walter Hopps and Susan Davidson (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1997), 550–87.
3. For more on Albers's teaching methods and Rauschenberg's response to them, see Martin Duberman, *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993), 55–56 and 459–60n51.
4. The three extant works executed at Black Mountain during the 1948–49 academic year are the woodcut *This Is the First Half of a Print Designed to Exist in Passing Time* (ca. 1949) and two photographs, *Untitled (Interior of an Old Carriage)* (1949) and *Quiet House—Black Mountain* (1949).
5. Weil had a physical reaction: "So we walked in [Egan Gallery], and Franz Kline was on the wall, and I remember putting on the light, and you just felt like you'd been HIT in the stomach by these paintings." See Susan Weil, unpublished interview with Walter Hopps, January 15, 1991, New York. Kline had two exhibitions at Egan Gallery (October 16–November 4, 1950, and November–December 15, 1951). Rauschenberg, on the other hand, had a cerebral reaction: "But I was in awe of the painters; I mean I was new in New York, and I thought the painting that was going on here was just unbelievable. . . . I was busy trying to find ways where the imagery and the material and the meanings of the painting would be not an illustration of my will. . . . There was a whole language that I could never make function for myself in relationship to painting and that was attitudes like tortured, struggle, pain . . . but I never could see those qualities in paint." See Robert Rauschenberg, Oral History Interview conducted by Dorothy Gees Seckler, December 21, 1965, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Accessed June 23, 2013. <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-robert-rauschenberg-12870#transcript>.
6. For example, Rauschenberg took photographs of Pollock's last exhibition at Betty Parsons Gallery (November 26–December 15, 1951) in addition to photographing various exhibitions at the Stable Gallery, including his own (September 15–October 3, 1953), the *Annals* (1953–55), *Alberto Burri* (November 23–December 12, 1953), and one as yet unidentified show. I am grateful to Megan Fontanella, associate curator, Collections and Provenance, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, for her confirmation of the 1953 Burri exhibition. Contact proof sheets in the archives of the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation document the artist's early photography. See also Nicholas Cullinan, *Robert Rauschenberg: Photographs 1949–1962*, ed. Susan Davidson and David White (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 2011).
7. Susan Weil has remarked on Rauschenberg's lack of sophistication at this date, stating recently that ". . . when Bob came to Black Mountain, he hardly knew what a painting was. . . . I mean, he had been to school in Kansas City, and he knew a little bit then, but he was very naive about art . . ." See Susan Weil, Oral History Interview conducted by Karen Thomas, January 5, 2011; copy in the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation archives.
8. Imagism as evidenced in Rauschenberg's work is defined by Hopps as a "mode of art-making where specific representations and iconographically recognizable images are employed as disparate elements within the art. These disparate elements may appear as rendered images or be included as collage or assembled additions of 'found objects.'" See Walter Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg: The Early 1950s* (Houston: Menil Foundation and Houston Fine Art Press, 1991), 12.
9. Robert Rauschenberg quoted in Calvin Tomkins, *Off the Wall: A Portrait of Robert Rauschenberg* (New York: Picador, 2005), 58.
10. Weil, unpublished interview with Hopps, January 15, 1991.
11. Betty Parsons quoted in John Gruen, "Robert Rauschenberg: An Audience of One," *ARTnews* 76, no. 2 (February 1977): 47.
12. The atlases can definitively be identified as Rand McNally & Company publications by the copyright statement that appears beneath each city name: "Copyright by Rand McNally & Company/Printed in Chicago, Ill. Lithographed in the U.S.A." Although it has not been possible to determine their exact publication dates, the Newberry Library, which holds the Rand McNally & Company papers, confirms that the maps used in *Mother of God* are from atlases published between 1949 and 1956. The lettering used to label Logan Airport as it appears in the collage began with the 1949 edition, and 1956 was the last edition in which city maps were printed only in blue; after 1956 Rand McNally began using more colors. Correspondence with Daniel Fink, stacks coordinator, Roger and Julie Baskes Department of Special Collections, Newberry Library, Chicago, email to SFMOMA Publications Department, February 27, 2013. The painting is dated ca. 1950 because it was shown at Betty Parsons Gallery, New York, in May 1951, and therefore must have been completed sometime between 1949 and early 1951.
13. This second and fragmentary text has received little acknowledgment in the literature. Although the text is incomplete, it is interesting to note that these random words capture much of the anxiety and political pathos then in evidence among abstract expressionist artists. It has not been possible to identify the source of the clipping or to learn precise details about the *Catholic Review* publication.
14. The maps printed on lighter-grade paper are located along the work's bottom as complete map sections. At the far right edge and moving upward is another area of lighter-grade paper. This section is more torn and fragmented than those on the heavier-grade paper, and it makes up the most complex areas of layering.

15. For example, *Crucifixion and Reflection* (ca. 1950) is painted on the reverse of a signboard depicting circus horses, and *Untitled* [with collage and mirror] (ca. 1951) may have been painted on top of one of Weil's unfinished canvases. See Robert Rauschenberg, unpublished interview with Walter Hopps, et al., December 1985, the Menil Collection, Houston; transcript in the Menil Collection's Conservation files. X-radiography recently conducted on *No. 10, 1951* (now known as *Untitled* [Night Blooming series], ca. 1951) revealed an unidentified underlying image, executed primarily in yellows and whites. Brad Epley, email to the author, June 19, 2013. See also notes 26 and 46.
16. The project was never realized. See Robert Rauschenberg quoted in Alain Sayag, "Interview with Robert Rauschenberg," in *Robert Rauschenberg Photographs* (New York: Pantheon, 1981), n.p.
17. The first serial work Rauschenberg made was *This Is the First Half of a Print Designed to Exist in Passing Time* (ca. 1949). Other examples include *Cy + Roman Steps (I-V)* (1952), *Automobile Tire Print* (1953), *Currents* (1970), *Hiccups* (1978), *The 1/4 Mile or 2 Furlong Piece* (1981–98), and *Synopsis Shuffle* (1999). In addition, the imagery that populates Rauschenberg's thirty-two-foot-long black-and-white silkscreen painting *Barge* (1962–63) also suggests, by its scroll-like format, that its imagery be read serially.
18. Hopps, *The Early 1950s*, 30.
19. Rauschenberg steadfastly maintained that his sexual orientation was not the cornerstone upon which his art was made. Nevertheless, numerous scholars have approached his work from this angle. See, for example, Jonathan D. Katz, "The Art of Code: Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg," in *Significant Others: Creativity and Intimate Partnership*, ed. Whitney Chadwick and Isabelle de Courtivron (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 189–207; Kenneth E. Silver, "Modes of Disclosure: The Construction of Gay Identity and the Rise of Pop Art," in *Hand-Painted Pop: American Art in Transition, 1955–61* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1993), 179–203; Lisa Wainwright, "Reading Junk: Thematic Imagery in the Art of Robert Rauschenberg from 1952 to 1964" (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1993); Laura Auricchio, "Lifting the Veil: Robert Rauschenberg's Thirty-four Drawings for *Dante's Inferno* and the Commercial Homoerotic Imagery of 1950s America," in "The Gay '90s: Disciplinary and Interdisciplinary Formation in Queer Studies," ed. Thomas Foster, Carol Siegel, and Ellen E. Berry, special issue, *Genders* 26 (New York: New York University Press, 1997): 119–54; and Tom Folland, "Robert Rauschenberg's Queer Modernism: The Early Combines and Decoration," *Art Bulletin* 92, no. 4 (December 2010): 348–65.
20. Circles and mirrors appear, for example, in *Trinity* (ca. 1949), *Stone, Stone, Stone* (ca. 1951), and *Untitled* [with collage and mirror] (ca. 1951). Notably, *Stone, Stone, Stone* also has a fragment of what appears to be a road map, possibly similar to those used in *Mother of God*, collaged along its left side. In addition to these Parsons-era paintings, circles are much in evidence in a number of works executed upon Rauschenberg's return to Black Mountain in 1951. See, for example, the *Night Blooming* paintings (1951), the untitled sculpture fashioned from a Coke crate (1952), and a previously unknown painting whose composition is divided into eight vertical sections in which drawn circles populate all but the seventh section. (This work, a gift from Rauschenberg to Ben Shahm when they were both at Black Mountain in 1951, is now held by the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation.)
21. Walter Hopps, unpublished interview with Lisa Wainwright, February 1992, Chicago.
22. For an in-depth discussion of religious themes in Rauschenberg's early works, see Wainwright, "Resurrecting the Christian Rauschenberg," in "Reading Junk," 58–88, and Elizabeth Richards, "Rauschenberg's Religion: Autobiography and Spiritual Reference in Rauschenberg's Use of Textiles," *Southeastern College Art Conference Review* 16, no. 1 (2011): 39–48. Rose has stated that Rauschenberg's use of Christian themes during this period occurred because "he was worried about salvation. And indeed he always would be." See Barbara Rose, "Seeing Rauschenberg Seeing," *Artforum* 47, no. 1 (September 2008): 434. Wainwright has identified religious references (either through the inclusion of printed texts or as compositional arrangements) on a number of Rauschenberg artworks, for example, *Untitled* [Christian symbol] (ca. 1952), *Co-existence* (1961), *Aenfloga* (1961), and *Franciscan II (Venetian)* (1972). See Lisa Wainwright, "Rauschenberg's American Voodoo," *New Art Examiner* (May 1998): 28–33. Rauschenberg would occasionally return to bestowing suggestive religious titles on his artworks, for example, *Soles* (1953), *Hymnal* (1955), and *Altar Peace Chile/ROCI Chile* (1985), to name just a few. Robert S. Mattison has identified religious elements in two Combines: *Odalisk* (1955/1958), which includes a church envelope for donations and a printed reproduction of Christ as *Noli me tangere*; and *Co-existence* (1961), which includes a saint's tooth reliquary. See Robert Saltonstall Mattison, *Robert Rauschenberg: Breaking Boundaries* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 62, 256. Ironically, Rauschenberg was commissioned by the Vatican in 1996 to paint an Apocalypse scene for the Aula liturgica di Padre Pio, a pilgrimage church designed by Renzo Piano in the southern Italian town of San Giovanni Rotondo. Rauschenberg chose to depict God as a satellite dish, all knowing and all seeing; this deeply offended the Vatican, which ultimately rejected the work. In 2005 *The Happy Apocalypse* was donated by the artist to the Menil Collection, a fitting home given Dominique de Menil's commitment to sacred art in mostly secular environments. See Kate Bellin, "'What Were Halos?' The Dispute over Robert Rauschenberg's *The Happy Apocalypse*" (master's thesis, Christie's Education, New York, 2009).
23. See Mary Lynn Kotz, *Rauschenberg, Art and Life* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990), 70.
24. Robert Rauschenberg, unpublished interview with Walter Hopps, January 18–20, 1991.
25. Roni Feinstein, "The Unknown Early Robert Rauschenberg: The Betty Parsons Exhibition of 1951," *Arts Magazine* 59, no. 5 (January 1985): 127.
26. For two accounts of how Rauschenberg created this series, see Fielding Dawson quoted in *Black Mountain College: Experiment in Art*, ed. Vincent Katz (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 156, 158; and Hopps, *The Early 1950s*, 64. A Betty Parsons Gallery label on the reverse of one of the three extant *Night Blooming* paintings confirms that *No. 10, 1951* (a painting brought into the gallery for consignment, but not part of the exhibition) was painted over. The repainted *Night Blooming* painting now belongs to the Menil Collection, Houston. See note 46 below.
27. A facsimile of the handwritten letter, postmarked October 18, 1951, is reproduced in Hopps, *The Early 1950s*, 230.
28. Branden W. Joseph, *Random Order: Robert Rauschenberg and the Neo-Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 26. Joseph first explored this topic in his article "White on White," *Critical Inquiry* 27, no. 1 (Autumn 2000): 90–121.

29. Feinstein has linked this idea to “represent[ing] a conjoining of the banal (cartoons and roadmaps) with the elevated and sublime (allegory and spirituality), providing yet another note of irony.” See Feinstein, “The Unknown Early Robert Rauschenberg,” *Arts Magazine*, 127.
30. Joseph, *Random Order*, 315n14. In his text Joseph states: “There, Rauschenberg used a field of city maps to depict the earthly realm, employing collage as a means of directly incorporating elements of the outside world into the work and emphasizing their (and its) materiality.” See Joseph, *Random Order*, 26.
31. Rosalind Krauss, “Rauschenberg and the Materialized Image,” in *Robert Rauschenberg*, ed. Branden W. Joseph (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 40.
32. Roni Feinstein, “Random Order: The First Fifteen Years of Robert Rauschenberg’s Art, 1949–1964” (PhD diss., New York University, 1990), 9.
33. Among numerous references Rauschenberg made to this topic throughout his career, he said in 1966: “I didn’t see Schwitters or Picasso until I had actually started working the way I did.” See Jeanne Siegal, *Artwords: Discourse on the 60s and 70s* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1985), 155.
34. Kotz, *Rauschenberg, Art and Life*, 49. Rauschenberg must have also learned to sew from his mother. He first studied fashion design at the Art Institute of Kansas. During his marriage he made all of Weil’s clothes, and a wedding dress he made for Ingeborg Lauterstein in 1950 was recently exhibited at Loretta Howard Gallery, New York, in *Black Mountain College and Its Legacy* (September 15–October 29, 2011). Rauschenberg would go on to design costumes for the Paul Taylor Dance Company, the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, and later Judson Dance Theater and the Trisha Brown Company, among others. When Rauschenberg was first living in New York, collage was much in evidence. Before going to Black Mountain, he may have visited the Museum of Modern Art’s watershed exhibition *Collage* (September 21–December 5, 1948), which featured examples by Schwitters as well as several Dada-period artworks by Max Ernst (1891–1976). The significance this exhibition may have had on Rauschenberg has been overlooked in the literature. During his brief marriage to Weil, Rauschenberg became familiar with the work of Joseph Cornell (1903–1972) through his in-laws’ art collection and visiting Cornell exhibitions at Egan Gallery. Alan Solomon was the first to mention the importance of Schwitters in the catalogue accompanying Rauschenberg’s first retrospective at the Jewish Museum in 1963, and Hopps has traced the importance of Schwitters, Cornell, and the Italian Alberto Burri on Rauschenberg’s work in his *Early 1950s* catalogue.
35. Robert Rauschenberg quoted in Sam Hunter, *Robert Rauschenberg: Works, Writings and Interviews* (Barcelona: Ediciones Polígrafa, 2006), 24. For an investigation of Rauschenberg’s use of fabric as collage, see Wainwright, “Reading Junk” and Lisa Wainwright, “Robert Rauschenberg’s Fabrics: Reconstructing Domestic Space” in *Not at Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture*, ed. Christopher Reed (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996): 193–205. Folland also quotes Rauschenberg’s statement: “I’m an old collage man.” See Folland, “Robert Rauschenberg’s Queer Modernism,” 356, 364n42. Rereading the proceedings of *The Art of Assemblage*, the 1961 symposium featuring Rauschenberg, Marcel Duchamp, Lawrence Alloway, Roger Shattuck, and Richard Huelsenbeck where that remark was made, it is clear Rauschenberg was simply referring to the fact that he had written notes for his talk on various scraps of paper, and was making a humorous quip, as was his manner. The temptation to elevate its importance, however, is understandable. See Folland, “Robert Rauschenberg’s Queer Modernism,” 348–65.
36. The exhibition dates were May 14–June 2, 1951.
37. Robert Rauschenberg, telephone interview with Walter Hopps, August 1, 1991.
38. She continued: “Awful to work at the League; couldn’t store anything and we were always hauling things back and forth. Bob hated leaving things around the League.” See Weil, unpublished interview with Hopps, January 15, 1991. In the [spiral text](#) of his 1968 print *Autobiography*, Rauschenberg wrote: “Best work made at home.”
39. The checklist (with handwritten notations), the expenses, reviews, and the ledger book are in the Betty Parsons Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
40. Mary Coles, “Bob Rauschenberg,” *Art Digest* 25, no. 17 (June 1951), 18; Stuart Preston, “Varied Art Shown in Galleries Here,” *New York Times*, May 18, 1951; and Dorothy Seckler, “Reviews and Previews: Robert Rauschenberg,” *ARTnews* 50, no. 3 (May 1951): 59.
41. Seckler, “Reviews and Previews,” 59.
42. Preston, “Varied Art Shown in Galleries Here.” In the [spiral text](#) of his 1968 print *Autobiography*, Rauschenberg wrote of the Parsons exhibition: “First one man show Betty Parsons: paintings mostly silver & wht. with cinematic composition. All paintings destroyed in two accidental fires. . . .” Rauschenberg and Weil painted one wall of their apartment/studio in silver. As Weil recalled: “we painted a wall . . . with silver paint. . . . [W]e liked having that as a . . . kind of intensive neutral [ground] to work on.” See Weil, unpublished interview with Hopps, January 15, 1991. For Rauschenberg’s account of the silver wall, see Rose, “Seeing Rauschenberg Seeing,” 45.
43. It is not known where Siskind shot these photographs. Because the artworks appear to rest on a viewing ledge not unlike those found in galleries, one can assume the location to be Betty Parsons Gallery. These photographs were first published in Feinstein, “The Unknown Early Robert Rauschenberg.” Correspondence in the Betty Parsons Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., indicates that Siskind reprinted the photos for the gallery in the early 1980s and that the gallery supplied copies to the artist.
44. Contemporary reviews of the Parsons exhibition say that it consisted of “13 oils” (confirmed by the printed checklist); there is no mention of sculptural work. Hopps may have “pushed” the artist to associate this title with this sculpture, as witnessed by the author. This possibly hasty association should therefore be reconsidered in light of the fact that both Rauschenberg and Weil separately referenced Rauschenberg’s experiments with glass sculpture on Outer Island as well as his casting of sculptures in sand at Jones Beach for an Art Students League assignment. *Man with Two Souls* (perhaps made on this later occasion) has more in common with *Greenhouse* (ca. 1950)—another sculpture that contains various glass elements—than previously acknowledged in the literature. For more on Rauschenberg’s early work in glass, see Susan Weil, Oral History Interview with Karen Thomas, January 21, 2011. It is interesting to note that Rauschenberg returned to working in glass late in his

career. In 1997–98, he cast numerous glass sculptures based on objects that he had frequently employed in his work, such as the pillow and the automobile tire.

45. This painting has yet to be directly associated with any of the twenty works known to be in the gallery, and thus bears a descriptive title. Its inclusion in the Parsons exhibition therefore has not been confirmed, although stylistically it is consistent with the works shown.
46. Labels and/or markings on the reverse of all three works have clearly identified their original states: *No. 1, 1951* (now known as *Untitled* [small black painting], 1953) was given to John Cage at the time of the exhibition and is now in a private collection in Europe; *Should Love Come First?* (now known as *Untitled* [small black painting], 1953) is in the collection of the Kunstmuseum Basel; and *No. 10, 1951* (now known as *Untitled* [Night Blooming series], ca. 1951) is in the Menil Collection, Houston. The identity of this last work is noted here for the first time. Until now, it has been accepted that Rauschenberg repainted these Parsons works after his return from Europe in spring 1953 and not as early as 1951 at Black Mountain. Evidently, he did not store all of the Parsons works with his friends and in-laws. See note 26 above.
47. Gruen, "An Audience of One," 46.
48. Ibid. This quote also appears in Feinstein, "The Unknown Early Robert Rauschenberg," 126.
49. Rose, "Seeing Rauschenberg Seeing," 56. Mirrors were a consistent motif in Rauschenberg's art from this time forward.
50. The details of this story have yet to be fully determined. Some accounts have Cage visiting the exhibition, making the quip about having no money, and receiving the gift from Parsons; other accounts place Rauschenberg in the gallery when Cage visited and giving Cage the work himself. Rauschenberg has said that he met Cage at Black Mountain in 1949 or 1950, but this is surely incorrect because Cage was not teaching there in those years. For a recent restating of the story in an (unsuccessful) attempt at clarification, see Kay Larson, *Where the Heart Beats: John Cage, Zen Buddhism, and the Inner Life of Artists* (New York: Penguin, 2012), 227–35. Feinstein says that *No. 1, 1951* was "a fetishistic work that consisted of a hand outline, a leaf from a fortune teller's notebook, and a black arrow on a silver background" but offers no source for this information. See Feinstein, "Random Order," 72–73. While house-sitting for Cage in 1953, Rauschenberg painted the work black (as he would again in 1985). The current owner has confirmed the presence of pink under the black, but no silver. See email correspondence between the current owner and Paul Franklin, July 6, 2012, and July 12, 2012; copies in the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation archives.
51. This transaction is unsubstantiated and the author has been unable to access the Leo Castelli Gallery Records, recently processed at the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., to confirm.
52. Seckler, "Reviews and Previews," 59.
53. Rauschenberg, unpublished interview with Hopps, January 18–20, 1991. The author was present during this exchange.
54. See Roni Feinstein, "[Robert Rauschenberg: Engaging the Everyday](#)," in *San Francisco Museum of Modern Art: 75 Years of Looking Forward*, ed. Janet Bishop, Corey Keller, and Sarah Roberts (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2009), 145–51. A complete [exhibition history for *Mother of God*](#) is available on the artwork's overview page.
55. Frances Colpitt, "Rauschenberg: In the Beginning," *Art in America* 80, no. 4 (April 1992), 125.
56. Roberta Smith, "Robert Rauschenberg, At Home and Abroad," *New York Times*, August 6, 1991.
57. Fred Camper, "The Unordered Universe," *Chicago Reader*, March 26–April 1, 1992, 31.