

Untitled [glossy black painting]

By [Caitlin Haskell](#), July 2013

Part of the [Rauschenberg Research Project](#)

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- 1 In the late 1940s, American painters developed an art that could be practiced with just two colors: black and white. Critics tended to describe these paintings as an apotheosis, a sign that art had reached a point of exhaustion.¹ Artists offered more pragmatic explanations. Of the black-and-white paintings he produced around 1948 Willem de Kooning (1904–1997) recounted, "I needed a lot of paint. . . . I could get a gallon of black paint and a gallon of white paint—and I could go to town."² The result was a type of art making that appeared both elemental and alive (fig. 2). Color and line, contour and form—the building blocks of pictorial construction—were isolated to the point that they seemed to function independently, no longer constituents of a picture but whole entities in themselves.³
- 2 A generation younger than de Kooning and his abstract expressionist colleagues, Robert Rauschenberg was nevertheless part of their artistic milieu, both in New York and at North Carolina's Black Mountain College, where he studied intermittently between 1948 and 1952. And while Rauschenberg's art was not always deemed rigorous by the members of the New York School, his work in black and white continues to be an especially lasting contribution to that school's close scrutiny of painting's technical means. Among his greatest works related to this chapter in the history of art is [Untitled \[glossy black painting\]](#) (ca. 1951). Few of Rauschenberg's fragile and highly experimental pieces from the period around 1950 are extant; although this painting has survived it has been subject to modifications—as have many of Rauschenberg's works—some of which have dramatically altered its appearance.⁴
- 3 One of the best-known accounts of an early Rauschenberg painting undergoing episodes of change involves *Untitled [small black painting]* (1953, fig. 3), a work that belonged to John Cage (1912–1992) for more than thirty years and shares a number of similarities with the painting under discussion here. In the summer of 1985, *Untitled [small black painting]* was returned to Rauschenberg's studio for repair, and David White, the artist's curator, took the opportunity to document its history. As he explained, Rauschenberg produced the first version of the painting on top of an existing canvas by Susan Weil, who was the artist's wife at the time. He then exhibited it at the Betty Parsons Gallery, New York, in 1951, and around this time it entered Cage's collection.⁵ Later, while Rauschenberg was house-sitting for Cage, he painted the work black. And finally, in 1985, during its restoration, he painted it black again.⁶ In all, *Untitled [small black painting]* bore the traces of three distinct creative deposits by Rauschenberg, and he seems to have felt no need to halt its ongoing development. As he added in a handwritten note to White's account: "This is part of the history of this single canvas—I hope the dialogue continues for many more years. I will if John dares."⁷
- 4 White's history of *Untitled [small black painting]* refers to a "series of black paintings" that Rauschenberg was working on, and it is to this group that *Untitled [glossy black painting]* belongs. The Black paintings are typically understood as comprising two bodies of work: the first was begun and ostensibly completed at Black Mountain College in 1951, and the second, also started at Black Mountain during the 1951–52 academic year, was returned to in 1953, after Rauschenberg had traveled in Italy and North Africa. It is not known if *Untitled [glossy black painting]* was produced as part of the first or second campaign.⁸ But the work's facture resembles that seen in paintings associated with the first group, such as the Whitney Museum of American Art's *Untitled [glossy black four-panel painting]* (fig. 4), and it explores the ambiguities of "monochrome" in ways that seem more closely tied to the abstract expressionist project than to the later paintings' concern with the degradation of materials, an interest often linked to Rauschenberg's 1953 visit to Alberto Burri's (1915–1995) studio in Rome.⁹



1. Robert Rauschenberg, [Untitled \[glossy black painting\]](#), ca. 1951; enamel and newspaper on canvas, 71 15/16 x 53 in. (182.72 x 134.62 cm); Collection SFMOMA, Purchase through a gift of Phyllis Wattis; © Robert Rauschenberg Foundation / Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY; photo: Ben Blackwell



2. Willem de Kooning, *Untitled*, 1948–49. Oil and enamel on paper, mounted on composition board, 36 1/4 x 48 3/4 in. (92.1 x 123.8 cm). Art Institute of Chicago, gift from the Mary and Earle Ludgin Collection; © The Willem de Kooning Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



3. Robert Rauschenberg, *Untitled [small black painting]*, 1953. Oil and paper on canvas, 22 x 28 in. (55.9 x 71.1 cm). Private collection; © Robert Rauschenberg Foundation / Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY



4. Robert Rauschenberg, *Untitled* [glossy black four-panel painting], ca. 1951. Oil and newspaper on four canvas panels, 87 x 171 in. (221 x 434.3 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, gift of The American Contemporary Art Foundation Inc., Leonard A. Lauder, President; © Robert Rauschenberg Foundation / Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

- 5 *Untitled* [glossy black painting], much like *Untitled* [small black painting], did not originate as a black painting or even a particularly glossy painting. It was instead created atop an existing composition, some of which is still visible along the tacking margins in the form of red-orange and pink brushstrokes (fig. 5).¹⁰ The tacking margins also tell us something about the next phase in the work's material history, when it took on the general appearance it has now. Visual analysis of the painting's edges reveals black drips, some wrapping around the sides of the stretched canvas. The direction of these drips, as well as the lack of directionality in areas where paint has pooled on the surface of the work, indicates that Rauschenberg created the painting with the canvas lying flat at least part of the time. This working orientation is significant not only because of Rauschenberg's storied association with the flatbed picture plane¹¹—the radical, ninety-degree shift relative to human posture that redefined the encounter between image and viewer in the postwar era—but also because of a subsequent intervention that would give *Untitled* [glossy black painting] the appearance of a vertically made composition. More on this to come.



5. Detail of verso of Robert Rauschenberg's *Untitled* [glossy black painting] (ca. 1951) showing tacking margin

- 6 For the historian eager to set *Untitled* [glossy black painting] into the context of its making, it is helpful to consider Rauschenberg's exposure to the ideas of one of his teachers at Black Mountain College, the great colorist Josef Albers (1888–1976). In an interview published during Rauschenberg's first semester at the school, Albers explained of his paintings, "You see I want my inventions to act, to lose their identity. What I expect from my colors and forms is that they do something they don't want to do themselves. For instance, I want to push a green so it looks red."¹² A similar desire seems to have motivated the construction of *Untitled* [glossy black painting], which despite being a monochrome rarely appears only black. By design, the densely textured, almost hyperactive surface catches and reflects light, creating a visual experience that invariably includes a range of colors, from grays to brilliant whites.

- 7 Rauschenberg's inventiveness with painting's physical means, most specifically his use of paint-dipped newspaper strips as the equivalents of painted brushstrokes, resulted in a composition that readily "loses its identity" in Albers's sense of that term. Not only do the ribbons of paper that activate the work's surface create the illusion of a range of color values, there are other unexpected painterly effects to perceive. At the corners of the canvas, where complexes of newspaper strips lie flush with the picture plane, the torn edges might read as drawn lines. At the center of the canvas, where flexible paper pieces lift off the support, their forms "pop" as if outlined in white. The picture both upsets the expectation that artworks register past actions and isolates elements of image making by foregrounding them at their point of contact with the canvas. Rauschenberg, in other words, used the language of Abstract Expressionism to offer yet another redefinition of painting.¹³ Indeed, this early phase of the composition is not strictly a painting at all. Rather, according to the process by which it was made, it is a collage of brushstroke-size pieces of newspaper held together by the paint that coats them.



6. Views of Robert Rauschenberg's *Untitled* [glossy black painting] (ca. 1951) documenting changes in appearance caused by different lighting

- 8 I have been arguing that *Untitled* [glossy black painting] presents a different visual experience from one viewing to the next. It can even change during the same viewing (fig. 6). Over a greater duration, the propensity for chance to intervene increases exponentially, and this was, at least in part, Rauschenberg's preference. However, his commitment to unpredictability and continuous change would be tested sometime before 1970, when *Untitled* [glossy black painting] took on a new appearance.¹⁴ Rauschenberg's dedication to allowing works to exist diachronically entailed an ethical resolve that went beyond accepting and reacting to the more-or-less calculated interventions conceived in dialogue with a friend such as Cage. It also meant admitting the potentially deleterious effects of accident. David Prentice, a friend of the artist who occasionally assisted in the studio, recalled that some of the Black paintings in Rauschenberg's collection were damaged by a careless housepainter who splashed white paint on the works at Rauschenberg's home or studio. *Untitled* [glossy black painting] seems to have been among them. In slides in the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation archives (fig. 7), three long drips of white paint streak across its feathery surface, making literal the presence of white that the artist had created through optical highlights. Prentice remembered Rauschenberg's dismay at the damage, and his own shock at the housepainter's decision not to move or cover the paintings.¹⁵ The white marks undid Rauschenberg's monochrome. More ruinously, they spoiled the surface by not allowing the torn and crumpled paper reliefs to create the lightest and darkest tones through the attraction and reflection of ambient light. The drips also established a figure/ground relationship that Rauschenberg had deliberately avoided. And because they fell from a consistent angle, they provided a level of orientation, thus breaking the viewer's sense that each piece of torn paper has its own direction and point of view.



7. View of Robert Rauschenberg's *Untitled* [glossy black painting] (ca. 1951) showing white paint drips, from a slide taken ca. 1970. Image courtesy the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

- 9 Because the textured surface of *Untitled* [glossy black painting] is so delicate, any attempt to undo the housepainter's accident would have been a challenge. But for Rauschenberg, fixing the painting did not mean removing the white streaks. When he returned to the canvas, he ultimately chose to paint it black again.¹⁶ Today, the white drips are no longer visible and the painting appears less matte overall, having become glossier and more lustrous over time. More surprising are the large areas of cascading black drips, which the viewer might assume were added to cover the white paint. But they are more than a cover-up. Hardly discreet, these drips are an index of the work's ongoing creation. The black drips compress the surface, flattening what had once been in relief and introducing a tension between the vertical and the horizontal that was absent in the painting's earlier incarnation.
- 10 In 1953, Rauschenberg was quoted as saying: "My black paintings and my white paintings are either too full or too empty to be thought—thereby they remain visual experiences."¹⁷ Was he prophetic? The fullness of *Untitled* [glossy black painting] has increased with time. The weight of the paper surface has caused the canvas support to bow slightly, and there are more and different things to see than there were sixty years ago. As much as Rauschenberg's work of the early 1950s had been championed for its elimination of painterly conventions—no subject, no image, no taste, no object, no beauty, no message—*Untitled* [glossy black painting] makes the case that Rauschenberg was equally radical for what he was willing to let in—chance, duration, changing context, accidents, a life in the present.¹⁸ Historians tell us about the Rauschenberg who pursued a mode of creativity that had "a life beyond its initial conception," but it is not always possible to observe the process of accretion.¹⁹ In 1986, *Untitled* [glossy black painting] would appear on the cover of *Arts Magazine*, its identity photographically stilled.²⁰ That was part of the history of this single canvas. As Rauschenberg might have added, there are other parts, too, and more still to come.
- 11 *I wish to thank Paula De Cristofaro, Amanda Hunter Johnson, Sarah Roberts, and Meredith George Van Dyke for generously sharing their research, observations, and personal insights into the creation and history of Untitled [glossy black painting].*

Notes

1. See, for example, Clement Greenberg, "American Type Painting," in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, 4 vols., ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986–1993), 3:227. On the many uses and significations of black and white in postwar American painting, see Katy Siegel, *Since '45: America and the Making of Contemporary Art* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011), 47–91.
2. Willem de Kooning quoted in Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swan, eds., *de Kooning: An American Master* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 245.

3. Here I paraphrase Rauschenberg as quoted in Dorothy Gees Seckler, "The Artist Speaks: Robert Rauschenberg," *Art in America* 54, no. 3 (May–June 1966): 84. "All of these things—elements of painting, such as line and color—are now being separated out, taken out of traditional relationships so that they function independently. Each one becomes a whole rather than a detail. And these elements will never fit back together to make anything we have seen. I think that it's a great time."
4. On this topic, see Catherine Craft, "In Need of Repair: The Early Exhibition History of Robert Rauschenberg's Combines," *Burlington Magazine* (March 2012): 191–97. Even some of Rauschenberg's student work at Black Mountain College—for example, *This Is the First Half of a Print Designed to Exist in Passing Time* (ca. 1949)—was designed to have a durational or diachronic aspect. In the context of this essay, it is perhaps useful to note that de Kooning also routinely made revisions on his canvases. *Attic* (1949), for example, in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, was exhibited at two different stages of completion. On the process of this painting's construction see Richard Schiff's entry on *Attic* in *Abstract Expressionism and Other Modern Works: The Muriel Kallis Steinberg Newman Collection in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, ed. Gary Tinterow, Lisa Mintz Messinger, and Nan Rosenthal (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2007), 75–79.
5. As is discussed by Susan Davidson in her [essay on *Mother of God*](#) in this project, *Untitled* [small black painting] was known as *No. 1, 1951* before it was painted black. See in particular Davidson notes 46 and 50.
6. White's account reads: "Sue Weil, the former wife of Bob Rauschenberg, originally did a painting on this canvas. Later Bob made a new work, *No. 1*, on top of it. This was exhibited at his one man show at Betty Parsons Gallery in 1951. It became the property of John Cage. Some time later, Cage was going out of town and let Rauschenberg stay at his apartment (while Bob's place was being fumigated for bed bugs—that were brought in from the streets with the fish boxes). Bob was then working on his series of black paintings and he decided to thank John for the use of his apartment by making a new black painting on top of the existing work. In 1985 the painting was in need of restoration and Rauschenberg painted it black again." David White, "Short History of This Painting," July 1985, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation archives. This text was sent to John Cage with the restored painting in August 1985. (*Untitled* [small black painting] was originally known as *No. 1, 1951*. See note 5 above.)
7. Robert Rauschenberg, annotation to White, "Short History of This Painting."
8. Walter Hopps first dated the painting 1951–52 in Walter Hopps, ed., *Robert Rauschenberg* (Washington, D.C.: National Collection of Fine Arts, Smithsonian Institution, 1976), 67. He revised the date to ca. 1951 during research for the 1991 exhibition *Robert Rauschenberg: The Early 1950s*, suggesting ongoing uncertainty. See Walter Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg: The Early 1950s* (Houston: Menil Foundation and Houston Fine Art Press, 1991), 66–67, and 88–89 (ill.). Additionally, the size and fragility of the painting would have made moving it from Black Mountain to New York quite difficult, opening the possibility that it may have been worked on with the second group of Black paintings in New York in 1953. The other Black painting in this project, [Untitled \[black painting with portal form\]](#), is part of the second campaign.
9. On Rauschenberg's travels to Italy and North Africa, see Nicholas Cullinan, "Double Exposure: Robert Rauschenberg's and Cy Twombly's Roman Holiday," *Burlington Magazine* 150, no. 1264 (July 2008): 460–70. On Rauschenberg's debt to Burri following this trip, see Cullinan's essay "The Empty Canvas" in *Destroy the Picture: Painting the Void, 1949–1962*, ed. Paul Schimmel (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2012), 224–38.
10. Some have suggested that the work underneath *Untitled* [glossy black painting] might have belonged to Susan Weil, Cy Twombly, Jack Tworokov, or Rauschenberg himself. However, technical analysis of the painting has not been undertaken, and we can only speculate on the artist of the work beneath and on its relative state of completion when the composition now visible was begun.
11. On the "flatbed picture," see Leo Steinberg, *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 82–91.
12. Josef Albers quoted in "Nothing Definite," *Time*, January 31, 1949, 39.
13. Here one might consider *Untitled* [glossy black painting] as a work whose construction literalizes the desires of painters active circa 1950 to "connect a figure and a background"; to "prevent the image from coming loose"; or to "have one wind blowing through the whole picture." On these ambitions in the work of de Kooning, see Sally Yard, "The Angel and the Demoiselle: Willem de Kooning's 'Black Friday,'" *Record of the Art Museum, Princeton University* 50, no. 2 (1991): 11, 13.
14. The dating of this event is based on the date stamped on the slide, "Feb 70N10," likely indicating that it was produced in February 1970.
15. Sarah Roberts, telephone conversation with David Prentice, March 5, 2013.
16. The exact date of the repainting is not known, but one strong possibility is that the white drips were addressed in preparation for the Larry Gagosian Gallery exhibition *Rauschenberg: The White and Black Paintings 1949–1952* (New York, April 18–May 31, 1986). Both *Untitled* [small black painting] and *Untitled* [glossy black painting] were included in this show, so it follows that *Untitled* [small black painting] was repainted in 1985 (also see note 6 above) to ready it for this exhibition. Another Black painting, the three-panel work, is also documented as having been refabricated and repainted for the exhibition. This revisiting of the Black paintings is consistent with the artist's practice of freshening up the *White Paintings* (1951) in advance of exhibitions. *Untitled* [glossy black painting] was not shown publicly from 1969 to this 1986 exhibition; thus, it seems likely that SFMOMA's painting received its secondary coat of paint at this time.
17. Robert Rauschenberg quoted in Hubert Crehan, "The See Change: Raw Duck," *Art Digest* 27, no. 20 (September 1953): 25. See also the discussion of this in Roni Feinstein, "The Early Work of Robert Rauschenberg: The White Paintings, the Black Paintings, and the Elemental Sculptures," *Arts Magazine* 61, no. 1 (September 1986): 30.

18. The allusion here is to John Cage's statement on the *White Paintings* for Rauschenberg's 1953 exhibition at the Stable Gallery: "To whom / No subject / No image / No taste / No object / No beauty / No message / No talent / No technique (no why) / No idea / No intention / No art / No object / No feeling / No black / No white (no *and*) / After careful consideration, I have come to the conclusion that there is nothing in these paintings that could not be changed, that they can be seen in any light and are not destroyed by the action of shadows. / Hallelujah! the blind can see again; the water's fine." See Walter Hopps and Susan Davidson, eds., *Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1997), 553.
19. Rosalind Krauss, "Rauschenberg and the Materialized Image," *Artforum* 13, no. 4 (December 1974): 37. Consider as well Roberta Smith, "Introduction," in *Rauschenberg: The White and Black Paintings, 1949–1952* (New York: Larry Gagosian Gallery, 1986), n.p. "While none of the Black Paintings has yet been remade from scratch like the White Paintings, an important part of Rauschenberg's thinking about them then and now is that they are not fixed objects but may be altered." On the *White Paintings*, see Sarah Roberts's essay on [White Painting \[three panel\]](#) in this project.
20. *Arts Magazine* 61, no. 1 (September 1986). The cover is related to a Roni Feinstein article in this issue, "The Early Work of Robert Rauschenberg," 28–37. The painting appears on the cover in its current state, with its drippy coat of glossy black covering the white splashes, further supporting the possibility that the repainting occurred in preparation for the 1986 exhibition *Rauschenberg: The White and Black Paintings 1949–1952*.