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Robert Rauschenberg's Queer Modernism: The Early Combines and Decoration

Tom Folland

The main thing about [Rauschenberg] is the way he lays out a picture—pure graphic design, with an ab-ex overlay. Facile and decorative.—Eugene V. Thaw, 1978¹

In 1955 Robert Rauschenberg decided to lay down a broad swath of a dark paisley-printed shawl onto a stretcher, substituting a readymade ground for the blank canvas before which the artists of the New York school had anxiously stood. With this act, Rauschenberg effectively repositioned the aesthetic decision-making process of the Abstract Expressionists—so often touted in the literature as the element that secured their membership in the existentialist *Zeitgeist* of the time—as nothing more than choices one might make when standing before a storefront window. Pictorially, a large portion of *Hymnal* (Fig. 1) is given over to the lyrical pattern of this dark rust-colored shawl, whose paisley forms sweep across the surface like Abstract Expressionist trails of paint—only its arabesques have been mechanically produced. On top of it, Rauschenberg collaged an array of other equally decorative materials and printed reproductions: a small “wanted by FBI” notice veiled by two sheer bits of nylon laid across it, an arrow, an anonymous photograph of two boys. A square cut into the canvas, prominently placed in the upper center, where a Manhattan phone directory was bolted in place beneath its surface, was his final assault on the heralded flatness of the picture plane. And it was through an engagement with this flatness that Leo Steinberg's 1972 essay “Other Criteria” was to suggest the emergence of a triumphant *post-modernism*.² Postmodern critics later seized on the plethora of imagery infinitely reproduced via Steinberg's “flatbed picture plane” as an assault on modernism proper.

At the time, however, Rauschenberg's work received harsh criticism, often tinged with moral outrage. An exhibition in 1953 with Cy Twombly at Eleanor Ward's Stable Gallery is a case in point. Ward noted that she “had to remove the guest book during his show because of the obscenities being written into it,” and that “many people really thought that it was immoral.”³ Indeed, Rauschenberg's entire body of work up until the early 1960s was summarily reviled as the sensibility of a vulgarian whose taste ran to *Harper's Bazaar* or the “decorative displays which often grace the windows of Bonwit Teller and Bloomingdales,” as Hilton Kramer put it. There is “no difference in fact,” Kramer went on to say.⁴ In 1961 Robert Rosenblum scoffed, “The extravagant reorganization of vulgar objects is hardly the most jolting thing about Rauschenberg's work; far more upsetting is the artistic logic which produces such illogical results.”⁵

Shared by both early commentators who saw a degenerate modernism and the later critics following Steinberg's lead who proposed a proto-postmodernism is the assertion that has become a mainstay of the literature on Robert Rauschenberg: the Combines do not cohere; their seeming narratives

never coalesce; their fragmented parts yield only partial claims to legibility. Such a drastically reduced field of meaning in the postmodern version of Rauschenberg, in which questions of subjectivity and sexual politics have been occluded in favor of a generalized critique of representation, has given way to a newer wave of scholarship that wrestles fixed signifieds from the Combines' purloined objects and pilfered images. A Judy Garland autograph, for example, or magazine reproductions of muscular marathon runners become newly legible. This has been the case particularly with art historians interested in dealing with the issue of Rauschenberg's sexual orientation through an iconographic reclaiming of his work for a gay art history. The primary image projected on American painting in the 1950s—one perhaps even desired by critics and artists alike—is as the myth-making material of a hypermasculine and heroic avant-garde movement.⁶ It has equally been maintained by a number of authors, including Kenneth Silver, Jonathan Katz, and Caroline Jones, that Rauschenberg's work was part of a larger resistance to and negation of that heroic masculinity. Maintaining that “the critique of abstract expressionism by subsequent generations of American artists was engaged primarily with this subjectivity—a complex, discursively constructed and ever-shifting interpellation,” Jones has posited a “homosexual aesthetic.”⁷ Katz has proposed a referential view of the Combines, reading into the photographic reproductions and comic strips codes that “directly allude to his identification as a gay man” in the closeted world of postwar America.⁸ But in following this potentially rich trail, many writers have come to a less gainful account of the Combines. Lisa Wainwright, for example, has gone so far as to see in *Satellite*, 1956, the staging for a coming-out. Having determined that “socks were sexual tokens within gay culture,” Wainwright averred that these “erotic signs are set against a backdrop of domestic familiarity so that Rauschenberg seems to reveal himself to mother, broaching the subject of sexuality within the domestic frame.”⁹

In an alternative view, the “queering” of representation, a deconstruction of the tropes of masculinity as they were embodied in abstract form, are set in opposition to gay iconographic approaches, tied as they are to an anachronistic conception of the “gay” closet, which impoverishes the larger, and radically queer nature—the “vulgar illogic”—of Rauschenberg's enterprise.¹⁰ The concept of “queer modernism” is meant to strategically problematize the art historical categories of modernism (understood here in its strictly Greenbergian postwar American model) and postmodernism (or the related terms *avant-garde* and *neo-avant-garde*) in raising the question of queer subjectivity. Reexamining the Combines within the early, homophobic discourse that first framed them in the contentious terms of a deviant subjectivity, *queer* is not deployed here in service of a locatable, clos-



1 Robert Rauschenberg, *Hymnal*, 1955, oil, paper, fabric, printed paper, printed reproductions, and wood on fabric with telephone directory, metal bolt, and string, 64 × 49½ × 7¼ in. (162.6 × 125.7 × 18.4 cm). Private collection (artwork © Estate of Robert Rauschenberg/Licensed by VAGA, New York)

eted gay identity—a content, in other words—that lurks behind elements composing these painted assemblages. Without reducing or even narrowly defining the epistemological scope of the term “queer,” I suppose that it is bound by a relation to identity, but only in that it is both “identity affirming” and “identity eradicating,” in accordance with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s definition: “an open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning where the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or *can’t be* made) to signify monolithically.”¹¹ On a formal or material rather than referential level, the decorative dimension of Rauschenberg’s work destabilized Abstract Expressionism’s aesthetics of purity that were “repeatedly made coextensive,” as Marcia Brennan has asserted, “with gendered period formulations of bourgeois heterosexual identity.”¹²

This queerness is in opposition to and in alliance with the iconographic readings of Rauschenberg’s work that claim

legibility (of gay identity or other forms of content) and postmodern readings that argue for a deconstructive illegibility, or a radical openness.¹³ Whether proffered as “random order” or “perpetual inventory,” such accounts tend toward generalized conceptions of subjectivity. To say, for example, that Rauschenberg’s Combines worked to “defamiliarize perception”¹⁴ only evokes a new set of questions: Whose perception? And why? Overlooked is the very historicized problematic of identity in the context of postwar anxiety over masculinity and its relation to high culture.¹⁵ Negative reactions to Rauschenberg’s work—because it did not fall in line with the New York school—were couched strongly in terms of decadence or immorality. If his work was read as some sort of challenge to normative masculinity via the decorative, I want to insist that I am not speaking of authorial intent but effect, a queer effect on viewers and critics that sustained the homophobic readings of Rauschenberg’s work by his earlier detractors and, before the critical recuperation of the Com-

bines, by authors who, in perhaps perceiving this queerness, sought to defend against it.

To return to an earlier moment in the reception of Rauschenberg's work also involves reconsidering its postmodern appropriation. As an allegory of representation for a postmodern profusion of media data—objects and images arrayed every which way on a “flatbed picture plane”¹⁶—Rauschenberg's work was theoretically rescued from the charges—implicitly homophobic—of diletantism, of window dressing, of being nothing more than the product of a prankster. Whereas such characterizations held his work up as practical jokes or, more sinisterly, as indices of an abject decadence—“the bracing pungency of the urban miasma,” as a reviewer put it in 1961¹⁷—Steinberg and those critics who followed in his footsteps began to take Rauschenberg more seriously, his irreverence now taken for a studied indifference, his “pranksterism” now understood as Duchampian wit. “[I]f you pointed admiringly to a necktie, or a stuffed bird in one of his Combines,” observed Steinberg, “or to the paisley fabric in *Hymnal*, saying ‘what lovely fabric,’ Bob would respond with enthusiasm, ‘Yes, isn’t it—I just had to put it in.’”¹⁸

The central focus of the art historical literature on Rauschenberg, Steinberg's reference to paisley fabric aside, has been with media imagery and photographic reproduction viewed as an allegory of representation in general (its postmodern condition) or, more recently, in the referential or iconographic viewpoint, as a window onto a gay subcultural world of 1950s America. But what of this “lovely fabric”? It has played a minor role in the literature on Robert Rauschenberg's Combines, even though, as Charles Stuckey noted only recently: “Textiles woven with fabrics and images are probably Rauschenberg's favorite collage materials after photographs.”¹⁹ Rauschenberg's enthusiastic—albeit hypothetical—response is, Steinberg wants to suggest, a trademark feature of his proto-Warholian acceptance of the random banality of mass culture and an indifference to any symbolic import such pictorial choices might have: “I just had to put it in.” What if this rich array of patterns and prints in the Combines functioned as much more than haphazard materials enlisted simply in the service of a newly wrought system of collage that earned him the title of enfant terrible of the New York school?²⁰ Taken up neither by the supporters of gay iconographic readings nor by the postmodernists, these decorative fabrics overwhelm the use of photographs and reproductions in Rauschenberg's work, the more so that they constituted the major arsenal of his Combine works produced during the period under consideration here—a group of work both small and large in which Rauschenberg first began to plot a sustained use of decorative fabrics in the years from 1953 through 1956.²¹

A Dangerously Decorative Patterning

There is a way to view Rauschenberg's work without tracking any direct referent or, conversely, restating the radical indeterminacy of the Combines without attention to the question of subjectivity. The profound reorientation of the modernist picture plane in Rauschenberg signifies a queered vision in which decorative and abject materials with all sorts of domestic, feminine, and debased connotations are enlisted in a rejection of modernist culture, with its attendant formula-

tions of postwar subjectivity. This queered vision, as I am describing it, is a willful misrecognition of the “appropriate” contours of the picture plane, a decisive blurring of boundaries between public/private, male/female, and high/low. Consider the work that soon became the touchstone for a new art: *Bed*, 1955 (Fig. 2), a painted sheet with pillow and quilt tilted upright. Using materials that included fingernail polish and striped toothpaste, Rauschenberg here turned to imagery and materials historically excluded from the high art canon: a quilt with sheet and a pillow tacked onto the wall and then painted, inverting the method of rolling the canvas onto the studio floor—the quintessentially Jackson Pollock approach made iconic in Hans Namuth's photographs for *Life* magazine—and then attaching it to the wall. This inversion is doubled by the invocation of a semi-unmade, single bed within the public space of a gallery, its newly upright orientation (as well as its decontextualized domestic object) perhaps a nod to Marcel Duchamp's rotation of the infamous urinal titled *Fountain*, 1917. The quilt is noted in the literature as a reference to both Josef and Anni Albers, who taught at Black Mountain College, Asheville, North Carolina, in the 1940s, during the time Rauschenberg had attended.²² Allowed to function in harmony with its referent, the quilt still does its duty as a bed covering, however soiled by the drips of expressionist paint that trail down from the upper portion where the pillow is positioned. Minimally altered, the use of domestic material in *Bed* is redolent with suggestions of the decorative labor of women: quilting was in fact a course that Anni Albers had taught at Black Mountain College, and Rauschenberg's choice of a geometrically patterned one recalls Josef's interest in geometry and color theory.

If Rauschenberg's Combines—the painted, collaged, and sculptural hybrids he began in 1954—transgressed the medium specificity heralded by Clement Greenberg as the sine qua non of modernism, as embodied by Abstract Expressionism, one of the primary means by which they did so was by foregrounding what high modernism of the 1950s sought to repress: a dangerously decorative patterning (coextensive with policed metaphors of gender in 1950s culture) that was a consequence of the flattening of modernist painting already present in work by Henri Matisse (Fig. 3). Matisse enjoyed a resurgence in the 1950s with a major exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. His heirs were seen to be the Abstract Expressionists, but the decorative remained a potentially disruptive force that needed to be managed in relation to the dominant trend of painterly abstraction in the New York school. It is a commonplace to assert that postwar modernism was driven by a rejection of mass culture, but it was also underwritten by a fear of the ornamental that threatened always to return and to render the serious, high moral ground of a functionalist aesthetic impure by injecting a domestic aesthetic of craft and frivolity.²³ Rauschenberg drew attention to what loomed at the edges in Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and others. The disavowal of the decorative was concomitant with the expulsion of the domestic from the frame of the existentialist picture plane—particularly evident, as Silver notes, in the Namuth photographs for *Life* magazine of Pollock in his studio, where “they remove the artist entirely from a living space, from a studio that bore any traces whatsoever of a home life.” The Combine *Bed* was



2 Robert Rauschenberg, *Bed*, 1955, oil and pencil on pillow, quilt, and sheet on wood supports, $75\frac{1}{4} \times 31\frac{1}{2} \times 8$ in. ($191.1 \times 80 \times 20.3$ cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Leo Castelli in honor of Alfred H. Barr, Jr. (artwork © Estate of Robert Rauschenberg/Licensed by VAGA, New York)



3 Henri Matisse, *La musique*, 1939, oil on canvas, framed: $55 \times 55 \times 4$ in. ($139.7 \times 139.7 \times 10.2$ cm), support: $45\frac{1}{4} \times 45\frac{3}{8}$ in. (114.9×115.3 cm). Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, N.Y., Room of Contemporary Art Fund, 1940 (artwork © 2010 Succession H. Matisse, Paris/Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York; photograph provided by Albright-Knox Art Gallery/Art Resource, NY)

shocking perhaps for just that reason. It vitiated the boundaries of public/private where the distinction, in art, was really between a public arena and a domestic space that shored up the binaries of male/female (or heterosexual/homosexual). “By its absence,” Silver continues, “the role of the domestic in American art was clear: it marked the limits of masculinity. . . .”²⁴

Bed forms the tail end of a group of work that explored the abject properties of material shortly after the conclusion of a series of black paintings Rauschenberg had completed in 1953. Discarded, homey materials became a mainstay of his work during the 1950s, and while “abject” and even “*informe*” are common enough in discussions of the twentieth-century avant-gardes, I want to suggest the queer valence such terms can take in relation to these works.²⁵ In this group that includes such large-scale pieces as *Collection*, 1954 (Fig. 4), fabrics with deep hues of red are repeatedly used until their potentials were exhausted. In *Levee*, 1955, a small swatch of paisley is tucked next to a photographic reproduction of poplar trees set above large strips of pastel-colored fabrics laid down horizontally and painted over. *Bantam*, a small work from 1955, has a square of paisley in the upper center placed at an angle underlain by a red-and-peach flower pattern; a sheer oblong length of cloth partially obscures a photograph just to its left in another repeated motif of the Combines. A square patch of polka-dot print is one of the profusion of elements from sources as varied as garbage and newspapers in *Untitled (Man with White Shoes)*, 1955, and a polka-dot print turns up again in two small works from 1955, both *Untitled*. The presence of this decorative fabric is some-



4 Rauschenberg, *Collection* (formerly *Untitled*), 1954, oil, paper, fabric, wood, and metal on canvas, 80 × 96 × 3½ in. (203.2 × 243.8 × 8.9 cm). San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Harry W. and Mary Margaret Anderson (artwork © Estate of Robert Rauschenberg/Licensed by VAGA, New York)



5 Rauschenberg, *Charlene*, 1954, oil, charcoal, paper, fabric, newspaper, wood, plastic, mirror, and metal on four panels mounted on wood with electric light, 89 × 112½ × 3½ in. (226.1 × 284.5 × 8.9 cm). Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (artwork © Estate of Robert Rauschenberg/Licensed by VAGA, New York)

what diminished with these two works, occupying equal terrain with some cartoon panels, postcard images, and large gobs of paint that are laid down horizontally in one and vertically in the other. But fabric prints reassert themselves in *Red Interior*, 1954–55, where a mass of silk velvet takes up a large section of the painting; *Yoicks*, 1954, which consists of horizontal bands of red paint intermixed with strips of green polka-dot cloth; and *Honeysuckle*, 1956, where the pale pink and faded blue of what could be a curtain or tablecloth forms

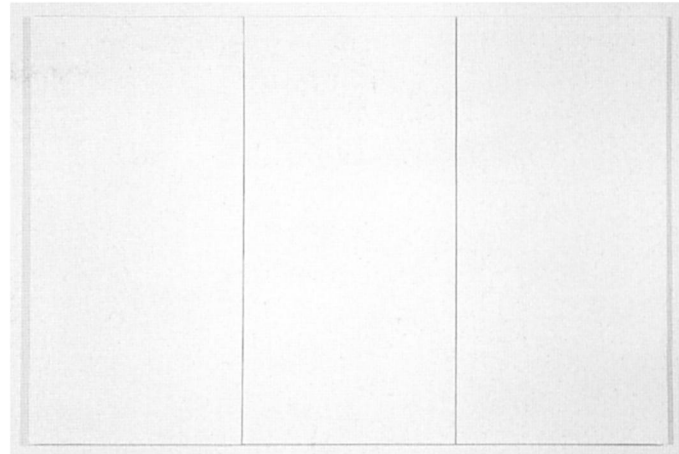
the top half of this large canvas, a decidedly feminine evocation of domestic space within the public space of heroically large-scale painting.

Rauschenberg's use of the decorative was not frivolous or merely irreverent. It invoked instead a visceral, guttural, almost violent engagement with materials. The fabrics put to use in Rauschenberg's work are not at all "lovely." In a Combine like *Collection*, *Charlene*, or *Hymnal* (Figs. 4, 5, 1)—works in which decorative materials were first employed on a

large scale—lace, gauze, nylon, paisley, embroidered and printed curtain and tablecloth material ripped, torn, and desecrated by aggressive brushwork and objects glued down next to photographic reproductions carry no quaint or reassuring associations one might expect from polka-dot or flower patterns and images of birds sewn onto fabric. Standing before massive compartments and panels placed upright with layers of paper and cloth and photographic reproductions encrusted into place, the effect—noted in the early critical reception of the work—is that of filthiness, decadence, immorality, surpassing anything that Kurt Schwitters's *Merz* collages, work often cited as influential, might have elicited.

It was about 1954 that Rauschenberg made a decisive move away from the extremely minimalist language of his early monochromatic canvases and small object sculptures toward an art that he would soon refer to as “Combines,” or “Combine-paintings.”²⁶ In seeming opposition to the Cagean silence of the all-white paintings he had produced at Black Mountain College during the summer and fall of 1951, this work could only be described as an art of a disorienting excess: found objects and imagery from everyday life—“the world outside my window,” as Rauschenberg famously said—all rather messily attached or collaged to large-framed support structures.²⁷ *White Painting (Three Panel)*, 1951 (Fig. 6), devoid of any painterly brushwork or subject matter, is almost invariably described with reference to John Cage's famous remark that the *White Painting* series functioned as “airports for the lights, shadows and particles,” a work, in other words, whose opacity deflected meaning outside the canvas. Cage ascribed to this work a minimalist austerity of form in contrast to the plenitude of Abstract Expressionism. The *White Paintings*' ghostly imperceptibility might be better understood as a mapping of the limits of representation of homosexuality in the cold-war 1950s.²⁸ The sheer profusion of patterned materials in the Combines glued into place alongside, underneath, or above the found objects and imagery from this “world outside [his] window” continues this strategy of resistance through new and startling means.

A strategy of resistance to interpretation is only one aspect of a queer reading of the Combines in relation to modernist culture of the 1950s. What also needs to be reconsidered is the seriousness of the critical enterprise that came to reject what it saw as the decadent foolishness of the young Rauschenberg. From the moment that Rauschenberg's work began to be canonized in earnest in the 1960s, with the retrospective organized by Alan Solomon at the Jewish Museum in New York in 1963 and Rauschenberg's triumph at the Venice Biennale in 1964, the 1950s Combines tended to be read backward. By the 1970s, their accommodation to the discourses of high art and its attendant markets characterized the rehabilitating efforts of critics who now took Rauschenberg seriously: “Not Just a Joker” was the *Sunday Telegraph* headline in a 1964 review of his Whitechapel exhibition in London.²⁹ Moreover, the soiled decorativeness of his work, so noticeable in the 1950s as part of what carried the charge of amorality and foolishness, soon became barely perceptible, nudged aside by the photographic imagery that, to be sure, came to dominate the work of the 1960s but also that came to be the primary mode through which the 1950s Combines



6 Rauschenberg, *White Painting (Three Panel)*, 1951, oil on canvas, 72 × 108 in. (182.9 × 274.3 cm). San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Purchased through a gift of Phyllis Wattis (artwork © Estate of Robert Rauschenberg/Licensed by VAGA, New York)

were read by critics, now anxious perhaps not to read too much into the work.

Patrilineage and Recuperation

The Abstract Expressionist generation and its successive wave of postpainterly abstraction paralleled the austere, modernist “International Style” of postwar architecture, with its rejection of both ornament and mass culture, rooted in late-nineteenth-century European culture where the relation between ornamentation and streamlined industrial modernism was cast in the gendered terms of deviancy and normalcy.³⁰ An overdetermined masculinity in culture was the flip side of an increasingly regressive political climate during the anti-Communist 1950s that policed signs of difference and viewed with anxiety the precarious state of male identity. The *Kinsey Report on Male Sexual Behavior* released in 1949 added to this anxiety and, as David Johnson notes, “seemed to quantify signs that the war had loosened America's moral conduct.”³¹ Taking Rauschenberg seriously was one of the first steps in loosening the association between the decadent Combines and a moral opprobrium that had steadily gained ground the more outlandish the Combines became throughout the 1950s. In his catalog for Rauschenberg's 1963 retrospective, Solomon decided to clear the decks, claiming, “There are no secret messages in Rauschenberg's work, no program of social or political discontent transmitted in code, no hidden rhetorical commentary on the larger meaning of Life or Art, no private symbolism available to the initiate.”³²

With any kind of content or, indeed, legibility—immoral or otherwise—ruled out, the stage now seemed to be set for a more benign Rauschenberg whose work, far from posing an affront to modernism, was easily assimilated.³³ One of the first steps taken toward Rauschenberg's rehabilitation was to establish for him a traditional art historical patrilineage via the models of the Dada readymade and the Cubist collage. His reuse of untransformed objects, attracting the label of neo-Dada, codified during the late 1950s, aligned him with Duchamp, while his route to collage has been traced by



7 Alberto Burri, *Sacco e rosso*, 1954, sackcloth and acrylic paint on canvas, 33½ × 39⅞ in. (85 × 100 cm). Tate Modern, London (artwork © 2010 Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York/SIAE, Rome; photograph © SIAE, provided by Fondazione Palazzo Albizzini Collezione Burri, Città di Castello)

numerous scholars to his encounter with the work of Schwitters and the Italian artist Alberto Burri, each of whom had transformed the Cubist collage aesthetic of Pablo Picasso.³⁴ Walter Hopps raised the Burri connection with his 1991 exhibition *Robert Rauschenberg: The Early 1950s*, even as he affirmed that Rauschenberg's early work was "attuned more with the rectilinear figure-ground compositions within Abstract Expressionism."³⁵ Rauschenberg, traveling with Twombly, met Burri on their trip to Europe in 1952, and he later photographed one of the several exhibitions of Burri's work at the Stable Gallery in New York.³⁶

But Burri created a body of work of an entirely different register. Aside from the obvious similarities seen in, for example, Burri's *Sacco e rosso*, 1954 (Fig. 7), and Rauschenberg's *Red Import*, 1954 (Fig. 8), Rauschenberg's composition and materials are strikingly divergent. Like the artists of the post-war European movement Art Informel, Burri employed rugged materials in his rough-hewn work, creating an effect of brute materiality. The composition of the oil, fabric, newspaper, and wood on canvas in Rauschenberg's piece, by contrast, is tighter and more layered; the burlap or sackcloth that became Burri's signature material is roughly torn and arranged on the canvas's monochromatic field of red in a distinct figure-ground relation that Rauschenberg's *Red Import* annihilates with an overlapping arrangement—a *pas de deux* of paint and fabric. Most striking in this early and small work (it measures 18 by 18 inches) is the bit of decoration in the upper center, just above a patch of red-orange. Hopps identified this as "perhaps the first occurrence in Rauschenberg's abstract work of a decorative motif: three small heart



8 Rauschenberg, *Red Import*, 1954, oil, fabric, newspaper, and wood on canvas, 18 × 18 in. (45.7 × 45.7 cm). Private collection (artwork © Estate of Robert Rauschenberg/Licensed by VAGA, New York)

shapes have been demarked by a pattern of yellowish paint dots above the portal form."³⁷ This inauspicious bit of fabric signals the beginning of a widespread invocation of soiled decorativeness that in the 1950s would range from shawl paisley and brocaded fabric and lace to doilies, scarves, nylon, and curtain fragments, in some cases incorporating the most clichéd still-life imagery of apples or plums woven into the fabric (*Minutiae*, 1954, Fig. 9), or postcard images and reproductions of photographs showing the detritus of urban life (*Untitled*, 1954, which pairs polka dots with pinups).

Equally distinct from Schwitters, whose Dadaist assemblages of garbage, commercial posters, and material culled from the streets of Hannover, Germany, during the post-World War I period had been the subject of a solo exhibition at the Sidney Janis Gallery, New York, in the fall of 1952, Rauschenberg was seen by art historians to heroically transform the Cubist model resulting in, Rosalind Krauss argued, "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 Schwitters or the Cubists."³⁸ However, the collage elements that Rauschenberg chose in these early Combines, the fabrics, woven with images in some cases or in others simply standing alone, seem to tease out of this collage paradigm its more egregious rather than heroic dimension: a decorativeness that some found not far removed from the window displays that Rauschenberg had done with Jasper Johns under the pseudonym Matson Jones. Similarly, Picasso's application of the decorator's material, such as wallpaper and prints, in the small collages of his Synthetic Cubist phase after 1913 was subsequently overlooked in later accounts, where the structural logic of Cubism's operations on the



9 Rauschenberg, *Minutiae*, 1954, combine: oil, paper, fabric, newspaper, metal, wood, plastic, and mirror, on wood structure, 84½ × 81 × 30½ in. (214.6 × 205.7 × 77.5 cm) (artwork © Estate of Robert Rauschenberg/Licensed by VAGA, New York)

semiotics of the picture plane was privileged over the associative qualities of any material he had used.³⁹

Writ large in such massive works as *Collection* and *Charlene*, the decorative fabrics Rauschenberg employed brought to light the flip side of modernism, its debased other: the feminine, the commodity, the decorative, the queer. What might it mean to acknowledge another formative influence—a Depression-era mother who arranges her dressmaking patterns so tightly on the fabric before her that she was the talk of Port Arthur, Texas, Rauschenberg's hometown—that was matrilineal? "That's where I learned collage," he once stated, facetiously perhaps,⁴⁰ or typical of the artist who prepared the way for another, Andy Warhol, whose own close relationship with his mother was well documented, as was his window-display work in the world of a gendered consumerism. To take Cubist collage at its face value in the 1950s—and to reposition Rauschenberg's strategic use of it beyond a patri-

lineal framework—is to recognize that the advertising industry had fully absorbed collage. Cubist collage as a paradigm for Abstract Expressionism eventually receded in the 1950s (as did the importance of Picasso, whose influence was superseded by Duchamp's), not only because of its absorption by advertising but also because it was perceived, as John Ferren, a lesser-known member of the New York school rather disparagingly put it, as a "decorative discipline," part of "the new province of the industrial arts, more suitable perhaps to the flood of mass-produced interior decoration."⁴¹ This attitude may have led to the morphing of "collage" into the more acceptable term "assemblage," which can be read as an anticonsumerist aesthetic, its logic of unusable cast-offs posed in opposition to an increasingly feminized/commercialized sphere of decoration/collage. William Seitz's 1961 Museum of Modern Art, New York, exhibition and symposium *The Art of Assemblage* folded the work of the 1950s that dealt

with the flotsam and jetsam of commodity culture—Ed Kienholz, for example, who first made assembled works as early as 1954, or the West Coast artist Wallace Berman—under this new art historical banner, one that Rauschenberg nevertheless seemed to resist, as evident from his declaration at that same conference that “I’m an old collage man.”⁴²

If collage was increasingly linked to a commodified and decorative sensibility, one that Rauschenberg foregrounded, it was another means by which he strained the boundaries of modernism in comparison with the New York school—indeed, even contaminating or queering it.

The Flatbed Picture Plane as Defense

The most significant turn in the critical reception of Rauschenberg, and the nodal point around which a massive shift in the art historical discourse on his work occurred, was, of course, Leo Steinberg’s canonical essay “Other Criteria.” Originally delivered as a lecture in 1968 at the Museum of Modern Art, “Other Criteria” has long served to occlude any theoretical attempt to come to terms with the profound sense of alterity in Rauschenberg’s work. In examining the deployment of a perversely decorative materiality in the Combines, it might be necessary to rethink Rauschenberg’s relation to the modernist preoccupation with flatness that lies at the heart of Steinberg’s critical recuperation of the young, decadent Rauschenberg. By reimagining the Combines within the discursive framework of Greenbergian modernism (thus at one with high modernism, not opposed to it), as Steinberg did, a much more radical dimension of the Combines, and the challenge they posed to the discursive construct of the Abstract Expressionist ethos—and, more broadly, the discursive terrain of modernism itself—might very well have been lost.⁴³

“Other Criteria” was first published in the March issue of *Artforum* in 1972, two years after the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, presented the exhibition *New York Painting and Sculpture: 1940–1970*, which cemented the already formidable reputation of the leading painters and sculptors of the New York school, along with the publication in 1970 of Irving Sandler’s *The Triumph of American Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism*. While “Other Criteria,” was a position paper aimed at Greenbergian orthodoxy, its importance lies in its formulation of a postmodernist aesthetic for Rauschenberg’s Combines.⁴⁴ “Even as Abstract Expressionism was celebrating its triumph,” noted Steinberg, Rauschenberg “proposed the flatbed or work-surface picture plane as the foundation of an artistic language that would deal with a different order of experience.”⁴⁵ But this “order of experience” became for Steinberg another way to address the pictorial conditions of the picture plane—its materiality, its rejection of content. Rauschenberg could thereby be accommodated within—not positioned outside—the discursive parameters of the New York school, while simultaneously being seen as advancing triumphantly forward to a “postmodern” picture plane. The hens, recycled art reproductions, images of flight, shoes, shirts, and ties—Rauschenberg’s irreverent use of material that ranged from nylon to tablecloth, once excoriated in reviews of his work, now became understood as important pictorial devices for a larger concern with the machinations of a flatbed picture plane. Rauschenberg’s work was effec-

tively repositioned by Steinberg squarely within the central concerns of the modernist paradigm it was supposed to challenge. Steinberg posited, in other words, that the stakes concerned the battle between depth or illusionism and flatness or surface, and that Rauschenberg had successfully resolved that problem:

Rauschenberg found that his imagery needed bedrock as hard and tolerant as a workbench. If some collage element, such as a pasted-down photograph, threatened to evoke a topical illusion of depth, the surface was casually stained or smeared with paint to recall its irreducible flatness. The “integrity of the picture plane”—once the accomplishment of good design—was to become that which is given. The picture’s “flatness” was to be no more of a problem than the flatness of a disordered desk or an unswept floor.⁴⁶

Erased de Kooning Drawing, 1953, in which Rauschenberg scrubbed almost clean a drawing that de Kooning had donated for just that purpose, thus was not a youthful prank played on an older generation of artists but a shift in orientation that reaffirmed its ineluctably two-dimensional surface: “he was changing—for the viewer no less than himself—the angle of imaginative confrontation: titling de Kooning’s evocation of a worldspace into a thing produced by pressing down upon a desk.”⁴⁷ Aside from the question of whether or not the multipaneled stage set that is *Minutiae* or the boxes cut into both *Red Interior*, 1954, and *Hymnal* containing objects bolted in place or hanging are at all concerned with flatness—or even oriented like a desk, as Steinberg described it—the more obvious question is: How is this postmodern? For is not the emphasis on surface, on picture planes and flatness, on the destruction of illusionism really a modernist (and painterly) project? Further, what Steinberg really points to then is just another, more nuanced way to invoke that painterly concern.

My concern here, however, is not to press Steinberg’s essay on its relation to postmodernism, nor even on its relation to Greenberg, which has been done elsewhere.⁴⁸ It might be more productive to delineate how this turnabout in the claims made for Rauschenberg’s work, from a “bracing pungency of the urban miasma”⁴⁹ to a decidedly more benign and highbrow “pictorial space that let the world in again,”⁵⁰ emerged. A work like *Bed*, for Steinberg, became a foundational moment in the swing from the New York school to a postmodern movement in which all the central claims of the modernist project—transcendentalism, universality, unique and auratic artwork, authorial presence—came under attack. I would not disagree with Steinberg’s characterization of the Combines as being postmodern, but simply to add that the condition for that postmodernism, with Rauschenberg, is founded on a sense of difference that can be articulated through queerness, a 1950s otherness that challenged the dominant cultural sensibility through a strategic use of the decorative, decadent, feminine. Yet those involved in rehabilitating Rauschenberg’s Combines had to deny that very dimension, which, in the case of *Bed*, had a bodily dimension, and, along with other Combines, a markedly domestic one. Moreover, consider Steinberg’s choice of materials: “Palimp-

sest, canceled plate, printer's proof, trial blank, chart, map, aerial view." Displaced from the imaginary space of the domestic—an "overt reference to rooms," Andrew Forge found in *Charlene* and *Red Interior*, "their battered panels suggest close, familiar doors and walls"⁵¹—Rauschenberg's studio has now become an office and the Combines the product of office work. Elsewhere in this essay, Steinberg characterizes the Combines in similarly workmanlike fashion, as if their ersatz materials and fabrics were the epitome of a printer or architect's craft—decidedly not the domestic material of a decorative femininity. A manly art, in other words: "The flatbed picture plane makes its symbolic allusion to hard surfaces such as tabletops, studio floors, charts, bulletin boards—any receptor surface on which objects are scattered, on which data is entered, on which information may be received, printed, impressed—whether coherently or in confusion."⁵²

In omitting mention of the polka-dot and paisley prints, or the invocations of domestic space in the more architectural Combines where Rauschenberg incorporated doorjambs or window frames, Steinberg foregrounds the gendered tools of a masculine trade, those that "needed bedrock as hard and tolerant as a workbench." But *Bed* is not a hard workbench; a large portion of it is, in fact, a soft quilt. It is not only a quilt but an upright bed, which appears to be the site, as often noted, of an axe murder.⁵³ Helen Molesworth, more recently, has characterized *Bed* as an invocation of the body, not in the active performative manner of Pollock but as an utterly abject figure expressed excrementally: "Rauschenberg radically reinserts the lower body into art. He desublimates the hand of the artist, allowing it to smear and rub, press and glue, privileging tactility over sight."⁵⁴

Steinberg addresses none of the Combines from the mid-1950s aside from *Bed*. His choices include pieces that book-end these works: *White Painting with Numbers*, 1951; the Blueprints done in 1951 with Susan Weil, to whom he was then married; *Growing Painting*, 1953; and the later Combines *Winter Pool*, 1959, *Third Time Painting*, 1961, and *Overdraw*, 1963. Yet "Other Criteria" had such a great impact on the literature that followed—particularly in the writings of the 1980s by Douglas Crimp and Craig Owens, where Rauschenberg's legacy for 1980s postmodernism was taken up—that Steinberg's characterizations of the work he did choose have come to stand in for the Combines as a whole.⁵⁵ Not surprisingly, the question of sexuality was equally bracketed.

Queering Iconography, Biography, and the "Closet"

Where it pertains to sexual identity, discussion of decorativeness or ornament in modernist culture generally hews to the paradigm of repression and the gay closet. I am not examining the place of the decorative in the Combines here, however, in order to smuggle in another way to identify Rauschenberg as a closeted gay man in the context of a repressive 1950s culture. I have already described Lisa Wainwright's treatment of the fabrics Rauschenberg used as a symbolic reconstruction and revelation of his homosexuality. He "seemed to reach back to childhood," she argues, "while piecing together his fabric facades to help him reconstruct another domestic space in which safely to discover who he had become and who he was becoming."⁵⁶ Timothy Rohan

has equally read Paul Rudolph's Yale Art and Architecture Building, designed in the late 1950s, as a parable of the closet in describing

... a form of ornament that has been literally pressed (or repressed) into the concrete. Moreover, in a broader sense, this method of concealing ornament seems to parallel Rudolph's situation as a closeted, homosexual man during the Cold War period. Indeed, for the homosexual Rudolph, the so-called "brutalism" of his surfaces can be interpreted as a hyper-masculinity perhaps unconsciously designed to combat any aspersions cast on the possible effeminacy of ornament.⁵⁷

These characterizations tracing biographical elements through symbolic constructs that reveal hidden aspects of an artist's personal life, like the "homosexual aesthetic" referred to earlier, posited by many critics who believe that artists of this period, including Rauschenberg, challenged the hegemonic formulations of the New York school, are dependent on a coherently formed, knowable homosexuality. The essentialist claims of this formulation proceed through iconographic means to identify a concrete gay identity through a metaphor of the closet. Jonathan Katz, following lines similar to those pursued by Rohan and Wainwright, maintains that Rauschenberg's Combines "reveal" his "closeted" homosexuality to informed viewers through coded invocations of 1950s gay subculture.⁵⁸ Katz's work on Rauschenberg is built on earlier attempts to "read" Rauschenberg coherently. It was Charles Stuckey who first proposed that the Combines could be decoded for legible content in positing that *Rebus*, 1954, could literally be read from left to right in anagrammatic form as a sentence, his analysis directed perhaps against the formalist art history that had dominated the postwar years in American art.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, it marked the beginning of an iconographic move in Rauschenberg scholarship that soon became inimical to an interest in determining Rauschenberg's sexual identity through biographical emblems.⁶⁰

I hope that it is clear at this point that my approach is theoretically perpendicular to the positing of a sexual identity in direct relation to the Combines; "queer" as a strategic redeployment of sexual identity is politically opposed to its unproblematic construction, just as it disputes the transparency of meaning suggested by such an alignment of signifier and signified. Fundamental to my own argument is that there was no gay closet in the 1950s. Homosexuality was spoken of through references to behaviors that were coded as deviant, immoral, or pathological. To be "out" in the post-Stonewall definition of the term presupposes a civil-rights notion of identity only formulated in the 1960s and subsequently radicalized in the 1970s. It certainly was not a term in use by gays and lesbians prior to the 1960s, as George Chauncey makes clear in his book *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay World 1890–1940*:

Given the ubiquity of the term today and how central the metaphor of the closet is to the ways we think about gay history before the 1960s, it is bracing—and instructive—to note that it was never used by gay people themselves before then. Nowhere does it appear before the 1960s in



10 Cy Twombly, *Untitled*, 1955, pencil on paper, 24 $\frac{3}{8}$ × 36 $\frac{1}{8}$ in. (62 × 91.7 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Jo Carole and Ronald S. Lauder, 503.1992 (artwork © Cy Twombly; photograph © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA, provided by Art Resource, NY)

the records of the gay movement or in the novels, diaries, or letters of gay men and lesbians.⁶¹

An examination of two 1954 works serves to demonstrate how queerness might account for what a reading dependent on iconographic/biographical constructions of a closeted gay identity needs to leave behind. *Collection* and *Charlene*, two major and early statements of “the application of figurative elements within the framework of an abstract style,” as William Rubin once put it,⁶² or “de Kooning plus objects,” as described by someone else,⁶³ comprise a repertoire or inventory of gestural fields and infinitely reproducible, mass-culture objects. In addition, both these works section the surface into compartments, employ architectural elements, and are heavily ornate. Monochromatic panels of primary and secondary colors are intertwined with areas of wildly applied brushwork.

Divided into three panels of equal size, *Collection* is crowned with a decorative wooden frieze on top of the center panel that resembles deer antlers that might stare down at one as if from high atop a hunting-lodge wall. To its right sits an oblong block of wood sporting a cigar tin hammered into a flattened strip. Newspaper headlines and story fragments, sundry objects, decorative and plain fabrics, comic strips, reproductions of works of art, and plain sheets of paper are all arranged haphazardly on fields of red, yellow, pink, peach, and blue, all appearing to rain objects on a row of monochromatic panels on the bottom, as well as to bleed and drip paint styles that range from the graffitiquesque scrawls of Twombly (Fig. 10) to the frenzied brushwork of de Kooning (Fig. 11) and the drip technique of Pollock. On the bottom center panel, a cut-up silk scarf floats at the point where the gestural field meets the monochromatic. The scarf, from a series issued by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the early 1950s, displays reproductions of works from its collection.

Charlene contains that same scarf, but this time vertically arranged, underscoring Rauschenberg’s fascination with randomness and degrees of legibility. The multipaneled surface



11 Willem de Kooning, *Gotham News*, 1955, oil on canvas, framed: 71 $\frac{1}{2}$ × 82 × 2 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. (181.6 × 208.3 × 7 cm), support: 69 × 79 in. (175.3 × 200.7 cm). Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, N.Y., Gift of Seymour H. Knox, Jr., 1955 (artwork © 2010 The Willem de Kooning Foundation/Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York; photograph provided by the Albright-Knox Art Gallery/Art Resource, NY)

of *Charlene* is equally compartmentalized and messy. The largest panel, off centered to the left, is arranged top-to-bottom, uniformly encrusted with paint, fabric, and newspaper reproductions, almost blackened in parts, as if by fire. Its frenzied chaos is somewhat stabilized by surrounding compartments that present a more ordered arrangement of fabrics and objects, including a large, flattened umbrella in the top-right section and a small, burgundy panel in the uppermost top left with a lace overlay on which sits, slightly askance, a widely brushed horizontal strip of bright orange paint. Just below it, an inset panel with an electric light sitting on its bottom edge is wallpapered with crumbly material covered in paint.

Noted often in the literature are the clippings, letters, photographs, and hometown mementos included in many of the Combines made during 1954 and 1955 that have the effect—like a private drawer whose contents have been emptied out—of an interior monologue on home made public. Much like Pollock’s notorious cigarettes embedded in his work that function as indexical traces of his body, Rauschenberg incorporated numerous references to himself, often highly mediated, throughout the period of the Combines: from family photographs and watercolors in *Untitled (Man with White Shoes)*, 1955, for example, to the work of his circle of lovers and friends, Jasper Johns, Susan Weil, Ray Johnson, and Twombly, in *Short Circuit*, 1955, integrated into a cabinetlike space, opened by hinged doors. *Charlene* and *Collection* are no exception. *Charlene*, in fact, contains a letter from his mother in the upper-right section of the second panel of this Combine as well as numerous other references that could be conscripted into autobiographical mode. Solomon noted, “The color reproductions in *Charlene* might be found on a

parlor wall in Port Arthur; the patches of cloth used for collage recall the country kitchen or attic, fabrics which might be used for housedresses or curtains, doilies, lace or india prints.⁶⁴ “[E]mbarrassingly private” is even how William Rubin described these Combines:

In comparison with the art of the past, Abstract Expressionism is an inherently autobiographical style. Rauschenberg has developed this dimension through the application of figurative collage elements within the framework of an abstract style of painting, rendering it even more personal, more particular, and sometimes almost embarrassingly private.⁶⁵

It might be the triteness of such renderings that compelled Rubin's comments, the disconcerting recognition of a trail of paint terminating at the point of a newspaper clipping about Rauschenberg's sister winning a beauty pageant, to take another example from *Untitled (Man with White Shoes)*, or the letter from his mother in *Charlene*. Other critics were less kind, however, sensing that there might be something more here to which one might attribute something untoward, even though that “something more” was never quite named. But it was alluded to; Rauschenberg was the subject of all sorts of personal invective exceeding the usual denunciations that accompany the emergence of startlingly new art and beyond the equally frequent appellations of foolishness or pranksterism. A visitor had written “Fuck You” onto *Rebus*, 1955, at Rauschenberg's solo exhibition in March 1958 at the Leo Castelli Gallery;⁶⁶ Robert Rosenblum called the work “vulgar”; and Hilton Kramer's choice of terminology—including “narcissistic” and “gutter”—was so extreme that it brought forth letters to the editor of *Arts* magazine for months, even from the usually reticent Jasper Johns.⁶⁷ Clement Greenberg, who for the most part ignored Rauschenberg's work, was compelled at one point to weigh in: according to Douglas Davis, “Clem Greenberg, on a panel, once said ‘Rauschenberg is a very meretricious artist.’”⁶⁸ Even Solomon, in his retrospective catalog essay that marked a beginning to the reversal in the criticism on Rauschenberg, nonetheless declared the Combines to be “manifestly decadent . . . tawdry or repulsive.”⁶⁹

There is a very slippery chain of signifiers here that I wish to construct as a queer modernism in Rauschenberg's Combines. A queer practice, that is, that trucks in the very kinds of double articulations, slippages, and resistance to interpretation that have for many authors furnished Rauschenberg's purchase on the proto-postmodernist picture plane. Some—but not all—of the Combines' queerness lies in their *unreadability*, their resistance to narratives of stabilized homosexual identity that in the 1950s would only have been read as a narrative of deviancy, political sedition, and immorality and that make the claims to confession—such as the one I cited by Wainwright or in the writing of Katz—fall flat. In his discussion of *Collection*, Katz points to a number of fragments of text and imagery that he believes represent Rauschenberg's relationship with Jasper Johns, whom he had met just prior to the construction of this early and significant Combine:

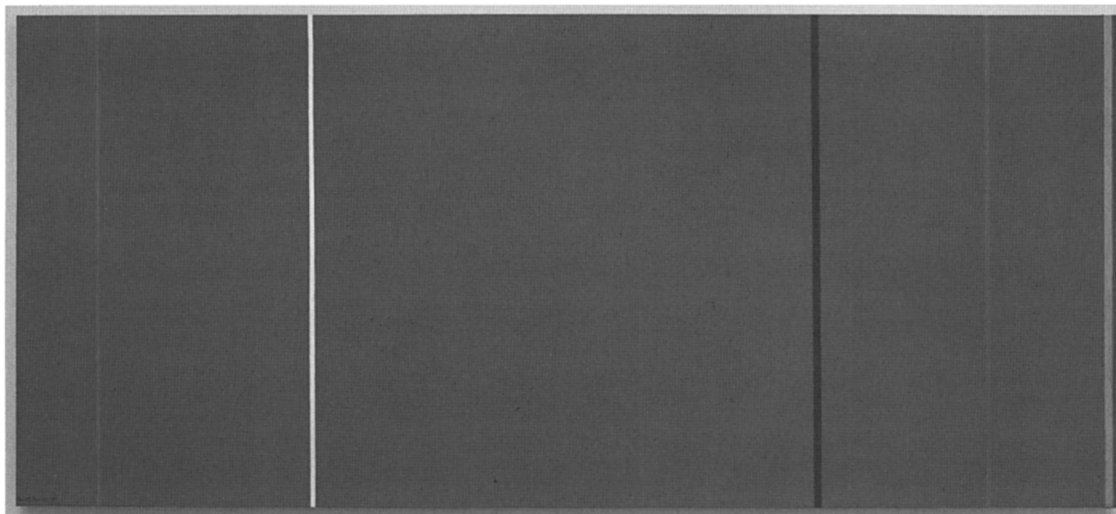
Nearly seven feet off the ground and far from easy to see in the upper right of the canvas, there is that remarkable

fragment of a comic strip reading, “How gruesome life would be if our guiding stars hadn't introduced you to me and . . .” Below it, in a fragmentary Timmy comic, the narrative concerns two boys trying to set up house in a pup tent in the most inappropriate places. After numerous rejections, they ultimately erect the tent in the only open space available, the dangerous middle of the street. Could this be an allusion to Johns and Rauschenberg setting up their domestic household together, the rejection and perhaps even the dangers therein confronted?⁷⁰

Katz argues that there is an “intertextual richness” here, but it is bound by the only possible answer to the rhetorical question posed at the end of this passage; other interpretations—a “museum without walls,” an infinitely limitless housing of art through photographic reproduction indicated by the title and the vast “collection” of ephemera randomly aligned, is just one⁷¹—are swept aside. Katz identifies a specific content for aspects of the Combines that correspond directly, once decoded, to a gay subcultural milieu outside the Combines.

In a review that critiqued two monographic studies on Robert Rauschenberg for neglecting the vexed question of gay identity, Richard Meyer turned to the work *Hymnal* and offered a similarly iconographic reading, but with caveats, suggesting that in “the far-flung materials (nylon, paint, paisley shawl) and fragments of recognizable imagery (the outlaw, the arrow) a homoerotic charge might be carried by the partially obscured photograph of the shirtless boys without adducing homoeroticism as the organizing secret or subtext through which the work's meaning may be captured.”⁷² Meyer's book review is directed toward a larger debate over interpretations of Rauschenberg's work that emerged since Katz first proposed that Rauschenberg's Combines “directly mine gay cultural references. . . .”⁷³ Given the radically disjunctive collage aesthetics of the Combines, which seem particularly hostile to an iconographic decoding of meaning, whether it be one pertaining to identity or some other kind of strictly referential viewpoint, Meyer evokes the concern that *without* iconography, any critical project of contextualizing Rauschenberg's work within a larger framework of a gay cultural politics of identity is thrown out. In claiming, “Far from flattening art into a set of coherent narratives or easily recognizable themes, iconography at its most ambitious returns us, again and again, to the density and difficulty of visual form,” Meyer attempts to thicken it, in order to sustain the idea of *Hymnal* and other Combines as connected to a homosexual aesthetic: “Those surfaces, overlays, and veils are the meaning and matter of this work no less than the symbols, scenes, and external references they carry or cover over.”⁷⁴

The opposite view, taken up by critics following Steinberg's identification of Rauschenberg as a postmodern artist, holds that the Combines evince a shift from a stable iconographic realm of signs and symbols based in nature to an indeterminate one of a cultural world in which the signs and symbols of the postindustrial and media-saturated world can only be read allegorically.⁷⁵ However, recent approaches seeking confirmation of sexuality identity in the Combines have had to resort to iconography, attempting to match up such vaguely incriminating terms as “embarrassing,” “immoral,”



12 Barnett Newman, *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, 1950–51, oil on canvas, 7 ft. 11 $\frac{3}{8}$ in. \times 17 ft. 9 $\frac{1}{4}$ in., (242.3 \times 541.7 cm), framed. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Ben Heller, 240.1969 (artwork \copyright 2010 The Barnett Newman Foundation, New York/Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York; photograph \copyright The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA, provided by Art Resource, NY)

“decadent,” or even “narcissistic” with a more stabilized—and contemporary—nomenclature of symbols found within the Combines. At the same time, the Combines continually thwart such iconographic tactics with either too much or too little, the very “excesses of meaning where the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or *can’t be* made) to signify monolithically,” as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick postulated on the nature of queerness.⁷⁶

Unlike the grand narratives of Abstract Expressionism functioning in concert with Freudian or Jungian notions of the unconscious⁷⁷ and existential philosophies of postwar morality and being,⁷⁸ Rauschenberg’s self-explication never fully coheres. To work in the autobiographical mode of the New York school was to succumb to the lavish metaphors of heroic subjectivity acted out by its leading figures—Pollock’s frenzied drips, de Kooning’s violent slashes of color, Barnett Newman’s muscular abstractions (Fig. 12), and so on. But much like Rauschenberg’s vaunted claim that he operates “in the gap between art and life,”⁷⁹ the refusal of one does not equal embrace of the other. The thesis that he embraced the opposite—a gay subjectivity—perpetually runs aground when sifting through the debris of the Combines’ constituent elements for signs of gay life. An axiom from Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* might be instructive here: “the differences between the homosexuality ‘we know today’ and previous arrangements of same-sex relations may be so profound and so integrally rooted in other cultural differences that there may be no continuous, defining essence of ‘homosexuality’ to *be* known.”⁸⁰ Such unknowability is particularly relevant to any argument concerning identity posed by the resistant strains of self-reference in the Combines. A “gay identity” that immediately takes on the contours of certainty shored up through an iconographic tracing of elements linked to gay subculture runs the risk of ahistoricity, given that there was no gay closet in the 1950s.

The discursive framework of homosexuality in the 1950s was such that terms like “in” or “out” were not applicable. The lingua franca of homosexuality revolved instead around terms like “admitted” or “alleged,” “overt” or “covert” behavior, thereby constituting homosexuality as an act more than an identity. To wit: in an interview with Calvin Tomkins, Earle

Brown recounted the following on the subject of homosexuality in relation to Robert Rauschenberg’s circle: “never anything overt between John [Cage] and Merce [Cunningham]; slightly more so with Bob and Jap [Rauschenberg and Johns], especially when drunk.”⁸¹ The discourse on homosexuality in the 1950s was fraught with ambiguity and incoherence. In the Truman administration’s efforts to dampen the publicity effects of charges that its State Department was rampant with gay and lesbian employees, it countered congressional claims that homosexuality posed a security risk with the argument that it was a medical problem. As David Johnson recounts in *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government*, even the security-risk theory promulgated by Republican senators was couched in such contradictory terms that the subsequent congressional investigation—following on the heels of Senator Joseph McCarthy’s claims to have discovered Communists in the Truman administration—was marked by a pronounced inability to clearly define the exact threat outside of a vaguely moral framework. In attempting to shore up the slippery connections between Communism and homosexuality, Senator Kenneth Wherry “best captured,” Johnson asserts,

both the ambiguity of the alleged connections and the certitude with which they were voiced. “You can’t hardly separate homosexuals from subversives,” he explained. “Mind you, I don’t say that every homosexual is a subversive, and I don’t say every subversive is a homosexual. But a man of low morality is a menace to the government, whatever he is, and they are all tied up together.”⁸²

Constrained on the one hand by a medical category and on the other by a definition of immorality derived from the Cold War fear of an emasculated national identity, the homosexual emerged, according to Cindy Patton, “not as a communist invader pursuing a world order, but as an obsessive, neurotic masculinity that has failed to integrate subnational identification into a national identity.”⁸³ Homosexuality was not often named as such in popular-culture discourse; its naming and identification worked by association, an allusive chain of signifiers that spoke through codes (camp, for example)—

not the codes of identity but of practice. Thus, as opposed to Katz's contention that "there is a relatively coherent text that underlies the images,"⁸⁴ which posits a stable gay identity secured through iconographic emblems of a repressed sexuality, a queer reading of the Combines sees them operating through a deconstructive aesthetic logic. Premised on the inversion of the material signifiers of the picture plane that unsettle certainties of Cold War notions of subjectivity, through Rauschenberg's own ambivalent relation to the reigning ideology of postwar abstract painters, the Combines present not a coherent text but a queer one. There can be no "relatively coherent text," because there was no relatively coherent homosexuality that existed in the 1950s.

This reality underlies the *incoherence* of the Combines that continues to bedevil art history. In Rauschenberg's work, Pollock's fundamental method of an overall painted surface that often trapped objects or even indexical imagery—shards of glass, cigarettes butts, handprints—as submerged elements in an overall composition of abstraction becomes inverted: abject and quotidian objects come to the fore, themselves trapping or submerging the painterly gesture. Turning Abstract Expressionism inside out was one of the means by which Rauschenberg attempted to situate his own work within the dominant aesthetic sensibility of the mid-1950s, and that rather ambivalently, as he suggested in a 1966 interview: "My work was never a protest against what was going on, it was all expression of my own involvement."⁸⁵ Rauschenberg's interest in prewar avant-garde practices might be characterized less in terms of pictorial content or the logic of the readymade and more in concert with their destabilizing effects on the general logic of modernist representation, the larger stakes of which were grounded in a postwar reconstruction of social identity.⁸⁶ That Rauschenberg seemed intent on upsetting this appellation was clear, judging by the reception of his work at the time, which saw visibly inscribed on the surface of these strange ensembles the very queerness I have been claiming.

Queer Combines

"Bob has gone too far," announced Rauschenberg's future dealer Leo Castelli in 1957, on the occasion of his visit to Rauschenberg's Pearl Street studio, standing perhaps before a work like *Odalisk*.⁸⁷ As of 1957, when Castelli was able to view a large assortment of the Combines in Rauschenberg's studio for the first time, the Combines had been only infrequently seen in group exhibitions since the artist's 1954 show of the Red Paintings at the Charles Egan Gallery. They would be the subject of a solo exhibition the following year, but only after Castelli had given Jasper Johns his first show. Johns's collection of flags, targets, and numbers would soon eclipse Rauschenberg's outrageously messy and apparently incoherently assembled works that had become more and more architectural, flamboyant, even theatrical, at the point of Castelli's visit, undoubtedly giving rise to his shock on witnessing them together.

The critics at the time, as noted above, did not receive these works well, perceiving in them something of the queerness that informed them. Of course, they saw them through the lens of a view encapsulated by a 1957 book entitled *Is Homosexuality a Menace?*⁸⁸ that tagged the culture of homo-

sexuality as a threat to the reigning social order—as, indeed, it was. These homophobic accounts of Rauschenberg's art did not, however, adduce their own evidence of homosexuality through the discovery of coding and punning references to a gay subcultural context—the subcultural context of a collage from *Physique Pictorial* magazine, or the symbolic import of a cartoon narrative. They did not, in other words, go the iconographic route. What Kramer or the *Art News* critic Jack Kroll recognized, in their own densely coded terminology, was the pictorial effect, not the ("hidden") content, of a work that seemed to pulsate in its frenzied compositions and abject materiality with the taint of a deviant sexuality. For example, in a review of Rauschenberg's 1961 exhibition at the Leo Castelli Gallery, Kroll wrote:

But Rauschenberg sometimes snags his sweater between the sanctum of private reference and the littered tundra of commemorative decay. A poof of incense disperses the bracing pungency of the urban miasma; the sharp punning weapons of the inscrutable ironist corrode gracefully with a lavender rust; a Firbankian frisson ripples the confident, humanly demoniac Baron Corvo incognito; we get too close to the artist in the wrong sense. . . . The rubber-spiked pitfall of Capotean indulgence, of *Harper's Bazaar* sensibility, gaggles menacingly before this art. . . .⁸⁹

The menace that Rauschenberg's art is seen to pose here is the menace of a subjectivity that could only be rounded up through recourse to the most obscurant but still legible metaphors of deviant personage in the form of "poof," or the "inscrutable ironist" whose tools "corrode" with a "lavender rust": these are the terms that, doubled with the proper names of gay camp figures given adjectival stress—"Capotean indulgence," "Firbankian frisson," and a "demoniac Baron Corvo incognito"—leave no doubt as to the effects of the despoliation under way in the art of Robert Rauschenberg. In a "Month in Review" column for *Arts* magazine published in February 1959, Kramer put it more plainly. He described in Rauschenberg's and Johns's work what he perceived as a "breakdown in standards" and cited Rauschenberg as a "designer with a sensitive eye for chic detail . . . who shares the window decorator's sensibility." It was not, however, the proto-Pop disregard for distinctions between mass culture and high art that the New York school had by now failed to shore up that so enraged Kramer. He did not restrict his comments to the dilemma of modernism's decline via an emerging Pop and Minimalist sensibility. The stakes were higher. Stating that "there is more than a sociological interest in this kind of success," he recognized in the soiled, decorative materiality of the Combines a greater challenge to the discursive constraints of postwar modernism than one that could be summoned through formalist means alone. In *Hymnal*, he would have found, rather boldly stated, the decorative, the "specter that haunted modernism," as Greenberg expressed it.⁹⁰ Rauschenberg covertly deployed an expanse of paisley shawl stretched onto a frame in lieu of canvas—as one might use a chic fabric print to wallpaper a surface—in deflating the New York school's heroics of self-discovery. *Hymnal* and the work that followed could not but offend. "His gaily contrived constructions," Kramer went on to say, "combine the official good taste of the most epigonous

Abstract Expressionists with some decorative bits of nastiness intended to 'offend.' . . . Like Narcissus at the pool, they see only the gutter and are exhilarated to think that art can be proliferated out of a milieu in which they feel so comfortably at home."⁹¹ Kramer saw, rightly I believe, that the so-called death of subjectivity that many critics have ascribed to this period, particularly with the work of Warhol, might in fact have been premised on the birth of newer subjectivities that emerged in the civil-rights era of the 1960s, where claims on identity were being made that challenged the hegemony of the 1950s model of a heroic, white, heterosexual masculinity.⁹² The milieu Kramer cites is the very one often—and irrationally—juxtaposed with the 1950s Comintern. Its portmanteau was "Homointern," and it was Harold Rosenberg—from the vantage point of the 1970s—who put the issue frankly: "is there a homosexual art? And I think the answer is unmistakable. Yes there is. It has to do with decoration, and pleasure, and having a good time."⁹³

It is perhaps on that point that I have sought to disentangle an essentialist and unchanging theory of gay subjectivity—whether offered in condemnation or discovery—in my attempts to locate a queer criticality for the Combines. If queer theory's claim, as Judith Butler maintains, is "opposed to the unwanted legislation of identity," it must necessarily counter any attempt to stabilize and thus make normative, however inverted, sexual identity and aesthetic form of any kind, homosexual or heterosexual:

In the same way that queer theory opposes those who would regulate identities or establish epistemological claims of priority for those who make claims to certain kinds of identities, it seeks not only to expand the community base of antihomophobic activism, but, rather, to insist that sexuality is not easily summarized or unified through categorization.⁹⁴

Rather than argue an epistemologically stable queerness in the Combines, or posit that they embody an essentially "homosexual" or even an antihomophobic aesthetic, I have instead read Rauschenberg's strategic use of debased, decorative material as a queering of representation, particularly of the extended metaphors produced by the New York school, but more generally of the postwar project of modernism itself. The Combines have been situated art historically on the fault line of modernism and postmodernism—between Greenberg's self-defining autonomous field of art that shored itself up against the onslaught of commercial culture and artistic practices of the 1960s that forced modernist dogma to its breaking point. But this neat binarism has resulted in a deracinated postmodernist theory of the Combines that has settled into a kind of neoformalism. In upholding Rauschenberg's work as the product of an exalted and hermetic neo-avant-gardism, postmodernism has elided the question of Rauschenberg's homosexuality. Poised against a familiar enemy of iconography, which became a stand-in for the political question of subjectivity, this binarism has taken on the contours of a seeming inevitability.⁹⁵

I would suggest that the terrain of that opposition—firmly ensconced within art history—needs revision. To think of the queerness of Rauschenberg's enterprise as captured through his statement of acting in "the gap between art and life"—as

suspended, in other words, between many apparently intractable oppositions, not least of which those that pertain to subjectivity—might point to new means by which to redraw the borders between modern and postmodern, but equally to acknowledge the increasing elasticity, as well as contamination, of the very term "modernism" itself.

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Notes

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1. Eugene V. Thaw, 1978, quoted in the Calvin Tomkins Papers, IV.C.4, the Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.
2. Leo Steinberg, "Other Criteria," in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 55–91.
3. Eleanor Ward, 1978, quoted in the Calvin Tomkins Papers, IV.C.10. This story was recounted in Tomkins's biography of Rauschenberg with the additional comment, "A great many people really thought that it was immoral." In the transition from the notes to the book, "obscenities" is replaced with the phrase "awful things." Calvin Tomkins, *Off the Wall: Robert Rauschenberg and the Art of Our Time* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1980), 85.
4. Hilton Kramer, "Month in Review," *Arts* 33, no. 5 (February 1959): 49.
5. Robert Rosenblum, "In the Galleries: Robert Rauschenberg," *Arts* 32, no. 6 (March 1958): 61.
6. The link between machismo and the New York school was acknowledged early on, as evident from a 1965 review by Rosalind Krauss in which she noted a "myth of masculinity surrounding the central figures of Abstract Expressionism, the admiration for the violence with which they made their attack on the canvas, and the sexual potency read into their artistic acts." Krauss, "Jasper Johns," *Lugano Review* 1, no. 2 (1965): 97, quoted in 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*, ed. Russell Ferguson (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1993), 181. On the general question of Abstract Expressionism, the New York school, and masculine subjectivity, see Marcia Brennan, *Modernism's Masculine Subjects: Matisse, the New York School, and Post-Painterly Abstraction* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004); Anne Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); and Anne Wagner, "Lee Krasner as L.K.," *Representations*, no. 25 (Winter 1989): 42–57.
7. Caroline A. Jones, "Finishing School: John Cage and the Abstract Expressionist Ego," *Critical Inquiry* 19, no. 4 (Summer 1993): 639. Jones's treatment of the underlying essentialism of the formulation "homosexual aesthetic" is tempered by her acknowledgment of its constructed nature. At the same time, it remains engaged with notions of hidden content that presuppose an identity fully formed, and one that is closeted. It nevertheless marked a significant shift in the discourse around Rauschenberg's relationship with Jasper Johns, Merce Cunningham, and John Cage that had previously been described somewhat apolitically as an "aesthetics of indifference," in Moira Roth's "The Aesthetics of Indifference," *Artforum* 16, no. 3 (November 1977): 46–53.

8. 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 (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 201. Katz's argument has remained consistently invested in an iconography of code. See his recent "Committing the Perfect Crime: Sexuality, Assemblage and the Postmodern Turn in American Art," *Art Journal* 67, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 39–53.
9. 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), 202.
10. It should be noted at the outset that while queer theory shares territory with the philosophy of deconstruction, it is crucially different on the question of gender and sexual identity in contesting the normative and legislative aspects of sexuality. See Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004). For a discussion of the relation between queer theory and deconstruction, see Nikki Sullivan, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 37–56.
11. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993), 8.
12. Brennan, *Modernism's Masculine Subjects*, 5.
13. The most recent example of such a postmodern reading is Branden W. Joseph's *Random Order: Robert Rauschenberg and the Neo-Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003). The trajectory of the postmodern reading of Rauschenberg is essentially mapped out in Joseph, ed., *Robert Rauschenberg: October Files 4* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), where most, if not all, the essays take up the "flatbed picture plane" model in its various postmodern incarnations, best summed up by Douglas Crimp in "On the Museum's Ruins" (1980), 57–74, at 59: "Although Steinberg, writing in 1968, could not have had a very precise notion of the far-reaching implications of his term *postmodernism*, his reading of the revolution implicit in Rauschenberg's art can be both focused and extended by taking this designation seriously."
14. Rosalind Krauss, "Perpetual Inventory" (1997), in Joseph, *Robert Rauschenberg: October Files 4*, 93.
15. For an account of the crisis in constructs of male identity during the postwar period in the 1950s, see Andrew Perchuk, "Pollock and Postwar Masculinity," in *The Masculine Masquerade*, ed. Perchuk and Helaine Posner (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Visual Arts Center, 1995), 31–42.
16. Steinberg, "Other Criteria," 82.
17. Jack Kroll, "Reviews and Previews: Robert Rauschenberg," *Art News* 60, no. 8 (December 1961): 12.
18. Leo Steinberg, *Encounters with Rauschenberg (A Lavishly Illustrated Lecture)* (Houston: Menil Foundation, 1998), 24.
19. Charles Stuckey, "Rauschenberg's Everything, Everywhere Era," in *Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective*, ed. Walter Hopps and Susan Davidson (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1998), 37.
20. Frank O'Hara first used this phrase in "Reviews and Previews: Robert Rauschenberg," *Art News* 53, no. 9 (January 1955): 47.
21. There are precedents in addressing the pronounced use of decorative material in the Combines, but these are oriented toward different conclusions than my own. Andrew Forge first provided a detailed but predominantly formalist description of Rauschenberg's collage elements, tracing material such as *broderie anglaise* and velvet throughout the mid-1950s, in Forge, *Rauschenberg* (New York: Henry N. Abrams, 1969). Rosalind Krauss has addressed the use of fabric in the early Combines, but only as part of a mapping of cultural memory through image reproduction, in Krauss, "Rauschenberg and the Materialized Image" (1974), in Joseph, *Robert Rauschenberg: October Files 4*, 39–55. Also addressing Rauschenberg's decorative material is Wainwright, "Robert Rauschenberg's Fabrics," 193–205. Wainwright reads his use of fabrics in conjunction with imagery and objects as iconographically enacting Rauschenberg's "coming-out" as a gay man.
22. Rauschenberg recounts that Dorothea Rockburne, a fellow student at Black Mountain College in the late 1940s, had given him the quilt. See Tomkins, *Off the Wall*, 136–37; and Barbara Rose, *Rauschenberg* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987), 63. James Leggio describes Anni Albers's potential influence on *Bed* in "Robert Rauschenberg's *Bed* and the Symbolism of the Body," in *Studies in Modern Art*, vol. 2, *Essays on Assemblage*, ed. John Elderfield (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1992), 79–117. For a discussion of the Alberses and Rauschenberg's student work, see Mary Lynn Kotz, *Rauschenberg/Art and Life* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990), 66–67.
23. See Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," *Art News* 51, no. 8 (December 1952): 22–23, 48–50; and Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in *Art and Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 3–21. Both of these essays are concerned with the deleterious effects of mass or commodity culture, historically intertwined in modernist culture with the decorative or ornamental. The übercontext, of course, is Austrian architect Alfred Loos's 1908 essay "Ornament and Crime," which effectively cast the decorative—impure and degenerate, immoral and effete—as the "other" of modernism. See Loos, "Ornament and Crime," in *Ornament and Crime: Selected Essays*, trans. Michael Mitchell (Riverside, Calif.: Ariadne Press, 1998), 167–76. For an excellent discussion of the function of the decorative or ornamental in relation to late-nineteenth-century modernist abstraction, and the gendered and economic stakes at work in its eventual suppression, see Jenny Anger, "Forgotten Ties: The Suppression of the Decorative in German Art and Theory," in Reed, *Not at Home*, 130–46. Greenberg's nearly phobic fascination with the decorative is traced in his writings in Elissa Auther, "The Decorative, Abstraction, and the Hierarchy of Art and Craft in the Art Criticism of Clement Greenberg," *Oxford Art Journal* 27, no. 3 (2004): 339–64.
24. Kenneth E. Silver, "Master Bedrooms, Master Narratives: Home, Homosexuality and Post-War Art," in Reed, *Not at Home*, 210–11.
25. Associated with the writings of Georges Bataille, the *informe*, or formless, shares territory with "queer," though the former is figured more abstractly as an assault on rationality and subjectivity in general, rather than taking up specific and historicized constructions of sexual desire and identity. The "abject" in Julia Kristeva's terms is equally that which threatens order and rationality through an often debased "other," whether it be death, filth, or any other kind of culturally sanctioned alterity. But again, and distinct from the "queer," its human subject is taken to be a universal one. See Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982). For a discussion of the *informe* in relation to contemporary art, see Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois, *Formless: A User's Guide* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997); and Hal Foster et al., "The Politics of the Signifier II: A Conversation on the 'Informe' and the Abject," *October* 67 (Winter 1994): 3–21.
26. Kotz, *Rauschenberg/Art and Life*, 91, suggests that the term "combine" may have initially stemmed "[f]rom the *Werklehre* exercises at Black Mountain using different materials, which Albers called 'combinations.'" There is, however, no general consensus on the term or its origin. *Untitled (With Stained Glass Window)*, 1954, exhibited in the Red Painting exhibition at the Charles Egan Gallery was the first "self-nominated Combine" according to Jonathan Katz, "Reading Watchman through the Archives," *Archives of American Art Journal* 46, nos. 3–4 (2007): 34. Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg: The Early 1950s* (Houston: Menil Foundation, 1991), 166, described the same work as "in all likelihood Rauschenberg's first combine painting," whereas Richard Kostelanetz, *The Theatre of Mixed Means* (New York: Dial Press, 1968), 78, moved the origin point up to the late 1950s, with "three-dimensional collages or 'paintings' that stand up away from the wall." But in 1987, Rauschenberg told Rose, *Rauschenberg*, 58, "*Bed* could be considered the first combine except that it really doesn't fit with the true combines. I think it was the *Untitled* piece at the Panza collection [*Untitled (Man with White Shoes)*, 1955]—the one with the Plymouth Rock chicken, mirrors and shoes in it—that was the first real combine painting."
27. Robert Rauschenberg, quoted in Jill Johnston, "Robert Rauschenberg: The World outside His Window," *Art in America* 80, no. 4 (April 1992): 116.
28. John Cage, "On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and His Work," *Silence: Lectures and Writings by John Cage* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 102. For a discussion of the White Paintings in relation to formations of gay identity as offering "different models of art and subjectivity," see Diane Allison Mullin, "Changing the Subject: Robert Rauschenberg and the 'New American Art'" (PhD diss., Washington University, Saint Louis, 1999), esp. chap. 4, "Seriality and Sexuality: Re-Reading the *White Paintings*," 182–228.
29. Edwin Mullins, "Not Just a Joker," *Sunday Telegraph* (London), February 9, 1964, 32. Seriousness is one means by which queerness can be erased, particularly as concerns camp. On nonseriousness as queer resistance to normativity, see Gavin Butt, "How I Died for Kiki and Herb," in *The Art of Queering in Art*, ed. Henry Rogers (Birmingham, U.K.: Article Press, 2007), 85–94; and Gavin Butt, "Joe Brainard's Queer Seriousness, or, How to Make Fun out of the Avant-Garde," in *Neo-Avant-Garde*, ed. David Hopkins (New York: Rodopi Press, 2006), 277–97.
30. See Loos, "Ornament and Crime," 167–76.
31. David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 54.
32. Alan Solomon, *Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective* (New York: Jewish Museum, 1963), n.p.
33. Solomon, in fact, was responsible for Rauschenberg's entry in the 1964 Venice Biennale, at which he won the Grand Prize.
34. Solomon, *Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective*, n.p., mentions the importance of Schwitters in the catalog accompanying Rauschenberg's first

- retrospective at the Jewish Museum in 1963. Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg: The Early 1950s*, has equally traced the importance of both Schwitters and Alberto Burri. For an alternative model to a patriarchal lineage, and one that stresses constructs of masculinity, see David Hopkins's recent book, *Dada's Boys: Masculinity after Duchamp* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). See also Mira Schor, "Patrilineage," *Art Journal* 50, no. 2 (Summer 1991): 58–63.
35. Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg: The Early 1950s*, 112.
 36. In a catalog essay for a recent exhibition of the work of Alberto Burri, Germano Celant notes that from the 1960s Italian critics have consciously perpetuated the Burri-Rauschenberg connection. Celant, "Alberto Burri and Material," in *Alberto Burri*, exh. cat. (New York: Mitchell-Innes and Nash, 2007), 9.
 37. Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg: The Early 1950s*, 165.
 38. Krauss, "Rauschenberg and the Materialized Image," 40.
 39. See Rosalind E. Krauss, "In the Name of Picasso," *October*, no. 16 (Spring 1981): 5–22.
 40. Rauschenberg, quoted in Sam Hunter, *Robert Rauschenberg* (New York: Rizzoli, 1999), 20.
 41. John Ferren, "Epitaph for an Avant-Garde," *Arts* 33, no. 2 (November 1958): 24.
 42. Rauschenberg, quoted in Lawrence Alloway, Marcel Duchamp et al., "The Art of Assemblage: A Symposium" (1961), in *Essays on Assemblage*, 137.
 43. While Steinberg, *Encounters with Rauschenberg*, 29, did not perceive the coded homophobic remarks in Hilton Kramer's and others' responses to Rauschenberg, he did feel it was necessary to champion Rauschenberg on Greenberg's terrain, which may account for his choice of words, as I go on to describe, "to campaign on Greenberg's own turf, on enemy territory as it were—not in defense of Rauschenberg's subject matter, or kooky procedures, or puckish inventions—but on formalist grounds and precisely in terms of the picture plane." He later pointed out that the "flatbed picture plane" was never meant to be a definitive theory of the Combines. Leo Steinberg, interview with the author, New York, January 16, 2008.
 44. Steinberg, "Other Criteria," 91, stated it directly: "The all-purpose picture plane underlying this post-Modernist painting has made the course of art once again non-linear. . . ."
 45. *Ibid.*, 85.
 46. *Ibid.*, 88.
 47. *Ibid.*, 87.
 48. For a brief summary, see Branden W. Joseph, preface to "Other Criteria," in Joseph, *Robert Rauschenberg: October Files 4*, 1–4.
 49. Kroll, "Reviews and Previews," 12.
 50. Steinberg, "Other Criteria," 90.
 51. Forge, *Rauschenberg*, n.p.
 52. Steinberg, "Other Criteria," 84.
 53. A review of Rauschenberg's solo exhibition at the Leo Castelli Gallery described *Bed* as "a police photo of the murder bed." "Trend to the Anti-Art," *Newsweek*, March 31, 1958, 94. In 1964 *Time* magazine reproduced an image of the artwork with a caption suggesting "vestiges of an ax murder." *Time*, September 18, 1964, 82, quoted in Steinberg, *Encounters with Rauschenberg*, 48. See also Tomkins, *Off the Wall*, 147.
 54. Helen Molesworth, "Before *Bed*," *October*, no. 63 (Winter 1993): 88. Amelia Jones's essay "The Pollockian Performative" describes Pollock's gestural art as integral to the postwar myth of the heroic male genius, a "laboring existentialist hero" in the reiterative performance of a heteronormative subjectivity. Jones, "The Pollockian Performative," in *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 53–102. While outside the scope of this essay, the ways in which the Combines restage the performative as theater constitute another dimension of the queerness of Rauschenberg's practice.
 55. There is, in fact, a profound blind spot when it comes to the Combines in postmodern literature. The strategic cherry-picking of Combines to highlight the more media-related ones ignored, as I have suggested, the decorative materiality of the majority of them, and thus usually stressed the later works or tended to elide them with the silk-screen pieces of the 1960s, which cleave more successfully to the paradigm of a flatbed picture plane than do the Combines of the 1950s. It should not be surprising, therefore, that a work like *Monogram*, 1954–58, given its objectness, is rarely discussed as postmodern. Craig Owens, for example, cites the works *Obelisk* (he may be referring to *Odalisk*, since to my knowledge there is no Combine with that title), *Rebus*, and *Allegory* from the late 1950s as having transformed "our experience of art from a visual to a textual encounter" and as sharing the terrain with *Thirty Four Drawings for Dante's Inferno*, 1959–60, in "Towards the Allegorical Impulse of Postmodernism" (1980), in *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 74–77. Referencing Steinberg's flatbed picture plane, Crimp, "On the Museum's Ruins," 58, treats none of the 1950s Combines, instead discussing works like the silk screens *Crocus* and *Breakthrough* from the mid-1960s to explore Rauschenberg's photographic appropriations as proto-postmodernist. Moreover, in focusing on the later Combines, the Dante drawings, or even the silk screens, these assessments often downplayed Rauschenberg's identity as a painter. Crimp in fact firmly located Rauschenberg's postmodernism in his abandonment of painting in the 1960s: "While it was only with slight discomfort that Rauschenberg was called a painter throughout the first decade of his career, when he systematically embraced photographic images in the early '60s it became less and less possible to think of his work as painting. It was instead a hybrid form of *printing*. Rauschenberg had moved definitively from techniques of *production* (combines, assemblages) to techniques of *reproduction* (silk-screens, transfer drawings). And it is this move that requires us to think of Rauschenberg's art as postmodernist." But Rauschenberg, by contrast, actually *affirmed* his identity as a painter to Jack Tworok in 1952 when he complained of the art scene in Rome. He stated that there "is absolutely nothing in painting going on. . . . I really am lonesome for MY PAINTING LIFE so if I know something of what's going on it gives me a way to think of it." Rauschenberg to Tworok, [fall] 1952, Jack Tworok Papers, the Jack Tworok Estate, New York.
 56. Wainwright, "Robert Rauschenberg's Fabrics," 197.
 57. Timothy Rohan, "Rendering the Surface: Paul Rudolph's Art and Architecture Building at Yale," *Grey Room* 1, no. 1 (Fall 2000): 85.
 58. Katz, "The Art of Code," 189–307. The theory of the closet, crucial to Katz's reading, has equally sustained other readings of Rauschenberg that figure a coherently formed but veiled or concealed gay subjectivity lurking beneath the surface. Lisa Wainwright has argued for a similarly hidden or closeted identity, as has Laura Auricchio, in reference to Rauschenberg's later silk-screen drawings. See Wainwright, "Robert Rauschenberg's Fabrics: Reconstructing Domestic Space," and 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 Seigel, and Ellen E. Berry, special issue of *Genders* 26 (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 119–54.
 59. See Charles Stuckey, "Reading Rauschenberg," *Art in America* 65, no. 2 (March–April 1977): 75–84.
 60. Aside from Stuckey, there is also Roberta Bernstein, "Robert Rauschenberg's *Rebus*," *Arts* 52, no. 5 (January 1978): 138–41. Stuckey's and Bernstein's essays were followed by Roger Cranshaw and Adrian Lewis, "Re-reading Rauschenberg," *Artscribe*, no. 29 (June 1981): 44–51, which used a semiological model but equally imputed a concrete "meaning" to the Combines, as did Kenneth Bendiner's "Robert Rauschenberg's *Canyon*," *Arts* 56, no. 10 (June 1982): 57–59. The latter was one of the first essays to ascribe a homoerotic aesthetic to Rauschenberg's late 1950s Combines, arguing, for example, that *Canyon* was a modern reinterpretation of the Greek legend of Ganymede, and is consistent with the later work of Katz, Auricchio, and Wainwright, cited above. The only deviation from these attempts to directly equate the content of the Combines with Rauschenberg's homosexuality is Silver's "Modes of Disclosure." Silver's account of Rauschenberg's work in the 1950s is more nuanced, although much of it follows the theme of a "homosexual aesthetic" that I earlier identified as the argument of Caroline Jones's "Finishing School." Most recently, see Paul Schimmel, "Autobiography and Self-Portraiture in Rauschenberg's Combines" in *Robert Rauschenberg: Combines* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2007), 211–29, which alludes to coded representations of a personal life but much more obliquely.
 61. George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890–1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 6.
 62. William Rubin, "Younger American Painters," *Art International* 4, no. 1 (February 1960): 26.
 63. Unattributed quote in Roni Feinstein, "Random Order: The First Fifteen Years of Robert Rauschenberg's Art; 1949–1964" (PhD diss., New York University, 1990), 151.
 64. Solomon, *Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective*, n.p.
 65. Rubin, "Younger American Painters," 26.
 66. Recounted in Tomkins, *Off the Wall*, 145.
 67. Kramer, "Month in Review," 49. In his response, Jasper Johns referred to Kramer's criticism as "vicious" and "rotten." See "Letters," *Arts* 33, no. 6 (March 1959): 7.
 68. Douglas Davis, 1978, quoted in the Calvin Tomkins Papers, IC.C.34. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (2010), defines meretricious as "1. Of, relating to, or befitting a prostitute; having the character of a pros-

- titute. 2. Alluring by false show; showily or superficially attractive but having in reality no value or integrity."
69. Solomon, *Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective*, n.p.
 70. Jonathan D. Katz, "Lovers and Divers: Interpictorial Dialogue in the Work of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg," <http://www.queerculturalcenter.org/Pages/KatzPages/KatzLovers.html> (accessed September 2009).
 71. Crimp, "On the Museum's Ruins," 58.
 72. Richard Meyer, "Two on One," *Artforum* 42, no. 6 (February 2004): 26.
 73. Katz, "The Art of Code," 190.
 74. Meyer, "Two on One," 26.
 75. Owens's "Towards the Allegorical Impulse of Postmodernism," for example, drawing from the theories of Walter Benjamin, is an essay delineating the allegorical strategies of appropriation in postmodern art, based on contextualized and indeterminant meanings, as opposed to the transcendent and mimetic concepts of representation germane to classical culture and its heirs. Iconography is, of course, the art historical method of Erwin Panofsky, who read subject matter in art (particularly the art of the Renaissance) as primarily symbolic; poses, gestures, objects were all drawn from a visual lexicon that referenced a larger social and aesthetic order and had stable, conventionalized meanings integrated within the composition of the artwork. Heavily reliant on literary sources that were the reference point of classical and Neoclassical art, iconography connected the visual directly to the textual. In the wake of the polyvalence of modernist and postmodernist art, iconography became a historically depleted strategy, given that aesthetic discourse, since the nineteenth century, has not hewed to an agreed-on set of conventions and, importantly, increasingly eschewed the literary in favor of visuality. In tandem with the advent of an industrial-capitalist system of exchange, visual culture increasingly yielded newer, modern paradigms of meaning production. Cubism, for example, shattered the classical model of representation by breaking apart the system of one-point and linear perspective theorized and made scientific during the Renaissance. Cubism is the primary mode of a reordering of the representational space of the artwork in line with an industrial modernity that itself was characterized by abstract systems of sign exchange.
 76. Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 8.
 77. Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).
 78. Stephen Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
 79. "Painting related to both art and life. Neither can be made. (I try to operate in the gap between the two):" Robert Rauschenberg, "Artist Statement," in *Sixteen Americans*, ed. Dorothy C. Miller (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1959), 58. It is tempting to think that Rauschenberg may have been responding to Harold Rosenberg's claim in 1952, "The American Action Painters," 22, that the "new painting has broken down every distinction between art and life."
 80. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 44. Diane Fuss reaffirms this sentiment: "The very insistence of the epistemological frame of reference in theories of homosexuality may suggest that we cannot know—surely or definitely. Sexual identity may be less a function of knowledge than performance, or, in Foucauldian terms, less a matter of final discovery than perpetual re-invention." Fuss, introduction to *Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories: Inside/Out* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 6–7.
 81. Earle Brown, 1978, quoted in the Calvin Tomkins Papers, IV.C.12.
 82. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare*, 38.
 83. Cindy Patton, "To Die For," in *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997), 336.
 84. Katz, "Lovers and Divers," n.p.
 85. Robert Rauschenberg, interview by Dorothy Gees Seckler, December 21, 1965, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
 86. My emphasis on his ambivalent relation to Abstract Expressionism is partly to counter conventional neo-avant-garde interpretations of Rauschenberg, as well as Johns, that have situated them as a springboard from the Abstract Expressionists to the work of Pop artists and, as such, a negation of the work of Pollock, Newman, Mark Rothko et al. via a nascent return to Dada. Benjamin Buchloh, for example, makes the case that "[t]he historical difficulty Rauschenberg and Johns had to overcome was that the preeminence of abstract expressionist painting—with its definitions of mark-making as expressive gestural abstraction—had not only completely obliterated the readymade imagery and mechanical drawing procedures of Dadaism but had also required that, in order to be 'seen' or legible at all in 1954, they had to conform to the locally dominant painterly conventions. Hence they engaged in *pictorializing* the radical anti-pictorial legacy of Dadaism." Buchloh, "Andy Warhol's One-Dimensional Art," in *Neo-Avant-Garde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000), 495.
 87. Leo Castelli, quoted in the Calvin Tomkins Papers, IV.C.15.
 88. Arthur Guy Mathews, *Is Homosexuality a Menace?* (New York: McBride, 1957).
 89. Kroll, "Reviews and Previews," 12.
 90. Kramer, "Month in Review," 50; and Clement Greenberg, quoted in Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics*, 36.
 91. Kramer, "Month in Review," 50.
 92. "In an odd way," Matthew Baigell posits, "Warhol's self has some of the same character that describes Rauschenberg's art of the time, although I would not push the comparison too far." To push that comparison too far would lead to an acknowledgment of the abject subjectivity Warhol shared with Rauschenberg, and thus not a loss of subjectivity but acknowledgment of a (queerly) redefined one. Baigell, "American Art around 1960 and the Loss of Self," *Art Criticism* 13, no. 12 (1998): 50. Baigell argues that in the aftermath of Abstract Expressionism, the work of Rauschenberg, Warhol, Robert Smithson, Frank Stella, and Robert Morris exhibited a decentered ego, one pushed to the edge of the frame in the case of Minimalism, or trivialized through a Baudrillardian simulacrum in the case of Pop. But if for Baigell, Warhol's "superficial self" augured the decreased centrality of a centered self, Buchloh, "Andy Warhol's One-Dimensional Art," 461–529, argued, more profoundly, that Warhol's serialized icons of commercial culture are evidence of a subjectivity under erasure.
 93. Harold Rosenberg, 1978, quoted in the Calvin Tomkins Papers, IV.C.17.
 94. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 7.
 95. By occluding the question of sexual identity and iconography, fusing the two as if the first was impossible without the second, the recent literature on Rauschenberg has bifurcated into a defensive support of iconography—as if it were the only means through which a discussion of the sexual politics of identity could be broached—and a sometimes hostile denunciation of it that at times seems to be itself a denial of Rauschenberg's sexual orientation. In a footnote to her essay "Perpetual Inventory," 130–31, in the 1997 Guggenheim Museum retrospective of Rauschenberg, Krauss described the "pressure that has been exerted on Rauschenberg's work in attempts to read it as the encoding of a coherent message." Stating that "recently the iconography has been understood as encrypting themes of gay subculture," she went on to say that "the convinced iconographer is almost impossible to dissuade." Thus conflated, homosexuality and iconography went hand in hand in the literature that followed. Joseph, *Robert Rauschenberg and the Neo-Avant-Garde*, 11, would go on to restate Krauss's thesis, collapsing the two even more: "Such [iconographic] readings have recently gained in prominence as the artist's work has come to be seen as expressing coded messages about his sexual orientation. Although as Rosalind Krauss has observed, 'the convinced iconographer is almost impossible to dissuade,' nearly three decades of such analysis . . . have yielded only partial and unsatisfactory results. Indeed those relatively few of Rauschenberg's pieces that seem to invite such readings are far outweighed by the majority that do not." This conflation, rendered too specific and in a reading too fragmentary to merit scholarly attention, has set the stage for the very universalist notion of subjectivity to which Rauschenberg's work—as I have argued here on a more structural level—was in dire opposition.