

White on White

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# White on White

**Branden W. Joseph**

On 18 October 1951, just three days before his twenty-sixth birthday, Robert Rauschenberg sent a letter to Betty Parsons from Black Mountain College announcing the completion of his *White Paintings* (fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> Parsons had given Rauschenberg his first one-person show that May, exhibiting his earliest work in her gallery's second room. Yet Rauschenberg was already entreating Parsons for another opportunity to exhibit. "I will be in N. Y. Nov. 1st," he informs her, "and will forfeit all right to ever show again for their being given a chance to be considered for this year's calender." Although Rauschenberg could not have been unaware of how unusual was his request for another show, he clearly felt this situation was exceptional. As he explained to Parsons, he considered his *White Paintings* "almost an emergency" (*RR*, p. 230).

This letter—the only statement about the *White Paintings* that we have from this time—reveals Rauschenberg in transition. It marks the end of what he termed a "short lived religious period,"<sup>2</sup> from which had

This paper was originally delivered as a talk at the Center for Advanced Studies in the Visual Arts at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. A slightly different version appeared in French in *Les Cahiers du Musée National d'art moderne* in Spring 2000.

1. Robert Rauschenberg, letter to Betty Parsons, 18 Oct. 1951, in Walter Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg: The Early 1950s* (Houston, 1991), p.230; hereafter abbreviated *RR*. An unfortunately abridged and somewhat inaccurately transcribed version of the letter appears in Mary Lynn Kotz, *Rauschenberg: Art and Life* (New York, 1990), p. 78. Rauschenberg's spelling, punctuation, and capitalization have been retained throughout.

2. Quote taken from notes of a Rauschenberg interview by Hopps, 18–22 Jan. 1991, Captiva Island, Fla., located in Rauschenberg's archives, New York City.

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come such works as *Crucifixion and Reflection* (c. 1950) (fig. 2) and *Mother of God* (c. 1950). To some extent, this line of thinking continues with the *White Paintings*. Describing them in the same letter, Rauschenberg wrote,

they are large white (1 white as 1 GOD) canvases organized and selected with the experience of time and presented with the innocence of a virgin. Dealing with the suspense, excitement and body of an organic silence, the restriction and freedom of absence, the plastic fullness of nothing, the point a circle begins and ends. they are a natural response to the current pressures of the faithless and a promoter of intuitional optimism. It is completely irrelevant that I am making them—*Today* is their creator. [RR, p. 230]<sup>3</sup>

The cause of Rauschenberg's urgency, however, seems not to have stemmed primarily from the religious impulse that had underlain his earlier work but rather to have been the result of a newfound engagement with the developmental logic of modernist painting. What Rauschenberg meant by the declaration that "today is their creator" is perhaps explained by another of the letter's comments on the *White Paintings*: "they bear the contradictions that deserves them a place with other outstanding paintings and yet they are not Art because they take you to a place in painting art has not been. (therefore it is)," (RR, p. 230).

Here, what Rauschenberg seems to be invoking is the modernist trope by which artistic progress proceeds via the transgression and subsequent reformation of the historically specific, conventional definitions of artistic genre.<sup>4</sup> If the *White Paintings* transgressed the heretofore accepted, canonic standards of art (signaled by Rauschenberg with the capital *A*), this canon would eventually, or so Rauschenberg believed, be reformed to accommodate his most recent additions. In the end—as indicated by

3. Lawrence Alloway erroneously substitutes "institutional optimism" for "intuitional optimism" in his "Rauschenberg's Development," *Robert Rauschenberg* (Washington, D.C., 1976), p. 3.

4. Although Thierry de Duve does not discuss Rauschenberg's *White Paintings*, he explores at length the imbrication of formalist modernism and the idea of the white monochrome in "The Monochrome and the Blank Canvas," in *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris, and Montreal, 1945–1964*, ed. Serge Guilbaut (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), pp. 244–310, repr. in an expanded form in de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp* (Cambridge, Mass., 1996), pp. 199–279.

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his parenthetical, elliptical reminder, “therefore it is”—their status as Art would be assured by this very **transgression**. Not wishing that Parsons miss this point, Rauschenberg explained to her: “that is the the pulse and the movement the truth of the lies in our peculiar preoccupation” (*RR*, p. 230).

Rauschenberg had been absent from Black Mountain College in the summer of 1950 when Clement Greenberg taught courses there on Kantian aesthetics and the history of modernism.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, Greenberg’s specter hovers over Rauschenberg’s observations, as it was in the critic’s writings that the underlying tenets of modernist painting were most clearly developed. For Greenberg, of course, the specificity of the medium of painting was defined as its flatness.<sup>6</sup> One way to take painting to a place where art had not yet been, therefore, would be to pursue it further towards its “essential” two-dimensionality. In 1951, Rauschenberg seems not only to have discovered such an underlying logic behind modernist painting but immediately to have advanced to its conclusion. For the *White Paintings* were purged of all remnants of image, mark, or color that could represent or imply illusionistic depth (fig. 3). In this way, Rauschenberg’s pure white, monochrome canvases occupy a terminal point in this modernist development, reprising the historical role played by the monochrome as the degree zero of painting.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the language Rauschenberg used to describe his achievement—terms like “silence,” “restriction,” “absence,” “nothing,” and “the point a circle begins and ends”—clearly conveys such an aura of finality (*RR*, p. 230).

Despite Rauschenberg’s enthusiasm, Parsons failed to give him a show. When Rauschenberg finally exhibited the *White Paintings* in New York at the Stable Gallery in 1953, Hubert Crehan, reviewer for *Art Digest*,

5. On Greenberg’s teaching at Black Mountain College, see Mary Emma Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain College* (Cambridge, Mass., 1987), p. 214.

6. This trope runs throughout Greenberg’s criticism. For a particularly clear (although later) presentation, see Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting” (1960), *Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1969*, vol. 4 of *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O’Brian (Chicago, 1993), pp. 85–93.

7. On the historical avant-garde manifestation of the monochrome, see Yve-Alain Bois, “Malévich, le carré, le degré zéro,” *Macula* 1 (1976): 28–49. Despite the extreme position represented by the *White Paintings*, at the moment of their inception Rauschenberg seems to have judged them to exist *within* the framework established by Greenberg. All of Rauschenberg’s recollections over the years point to the conclusion that, while he saw the *White Paintings* as advancing painting further along its developmental path, they nonetheless maintained a viable presence and quality as paintings. As he said in recounting his initial enthusiasm to Barbara Rose, “I was so innocently and indulgently excited about the pieces because they worked. I did them as an experiment to see how much you could pull away from an image and still have an image” (Barbara Rose, *An Interview with Robert Rauschenberg* [New York, 1987], pp. 45–46). See similar recollections by Rauschenberg in Richard Kostelanetz, “A Conversation with Robert Rauschenberg,” *Partisan Review* 35 (Winter 1968): 94, and Julia Brown Turrell, “Talking to Robert Rauschenberg,” in *Rauschenberg Sculpture* (Fort Worth, Tex., 1995), p. 76.

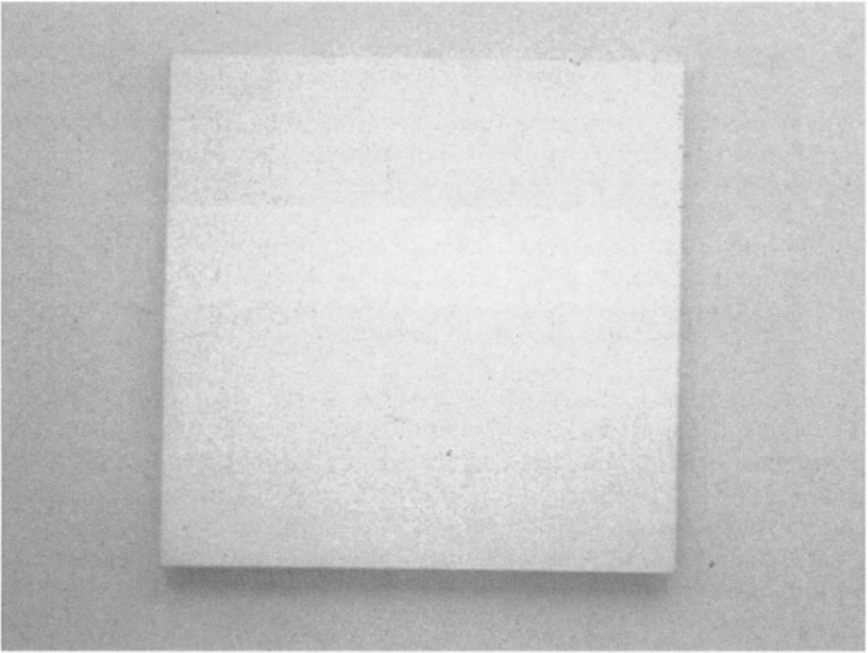


FIG. 1.—Robert Rauschenberg, *White Painting*, 1951. One panel.

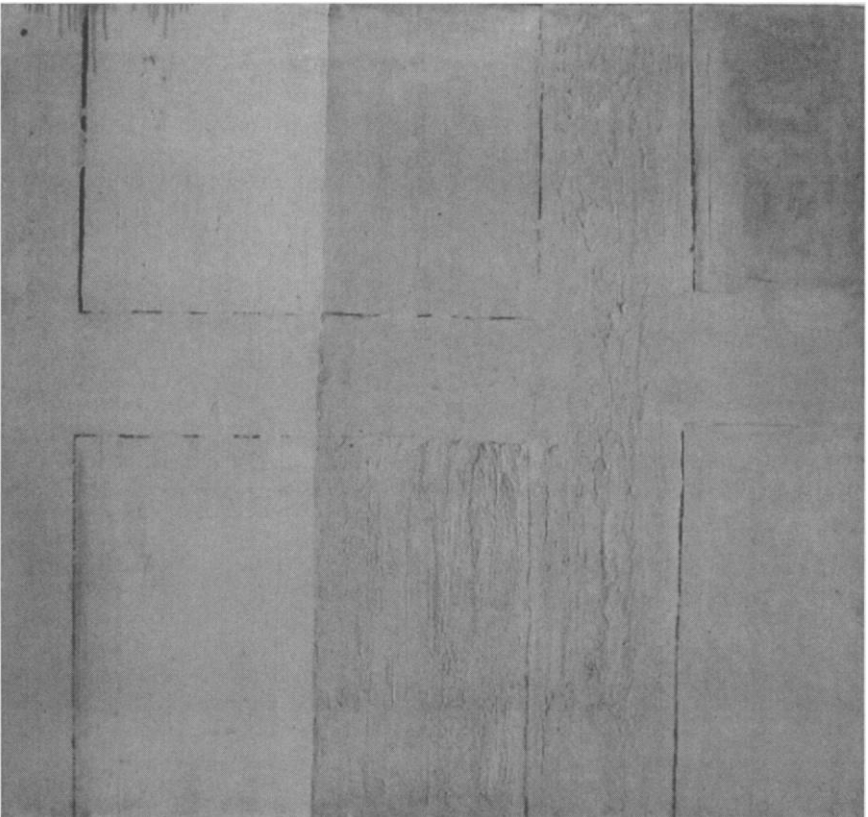


FIG. 2.—Robert Rauschenberg, *Crucifixion and Reflection*, c. 1950.

duly noted their culminating role within the history of modernist painting. Of the two *White Paintings* then on view Crehan wrote:

They do make an extraneous impression: they are a climax to an aesthetic that began to enchant a cult of painters some time ago—I mean the esthetic of the purge, with its apparatus of elimination, its system of denials, rejections and mortifications. In the drama of this cult the bare canvas has always been the spectral hero.<sup>8</sup>

Although sharing Rauschenberg's view of the paintings' radicality, Crehan did not share the artist's enthusiasm, judging that these works had gone too far. "White canvas," Crehan concluded unequivocally, "conceived as a work of art, is beyond the artistic pale. If anything, it is a *tour de force* in the domain of personality gesture" ("RD," p. 25). This last term, "personality gesture," was code for arbitrary or anarchic negation, in other words, shock, or what Crehan called "dada shenanigans" ("RD," p. 25).<sup>9</sup>

Greenberg would later echo Crehan's opinion. Although he encountered the *White Paintings* in 1953, Greenberg withheld commentary until 1967 when, in the article "Recentness of Sculpture," he denigrated them as being "familiar looking and even slick."<sup>10</sup> Unlike Crehan, Greenberg did judge the *White Paintings* to be valid as art, albeit certainly not as good art. But like Crehan, Greenberg also saw Rauschenberg as succeeding only in crossing into the dadaist realm of gratuitous, "far-out" gestures. For both Crehan and Greenberg, Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* were the markers of art's having crossed the razor-thin dividing line between a determinate negation (upon which the dialectic of formalist modernism's perpetual self-critique was founded) and an indeterminate or abstract form of negation that marked a revival of earlier avant-garde shock.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, in "Recentness of Sculpture," Greenberg more than implied that

8. Hubert Crehan, "Raw Duck," *Art Digest*, 15 Sept. 1953, p. 25; hereafter abbreviated "RD."

9. For a similar evaluation, see James Fitzsimmons, "Art," *Arts and Architecture* 70 (Oct. 1953): 9, 32–36. One almost has to pity Crehan; he had no idea how bad it could get. On the occasion of Rauschenberg's first exhibit of Combine paintings at the Egan Gallery in late 1954, Crehan's annoyed review would read in its entirety, "Since he is determined to avoid the responsibility of an artist, it is better that he should show blank canvases rather than the contraptions that he has hung in this side show" (Hubert Crehan, "Fortnight in Review: Rauschenberg," *Arts Digest*, 1 Jan. 1955, p. 30).

10. Greenberg, "Recentness of Sculpture," (1967), *Modernism with a Vengeance*, vol. 4 of *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, p. 251.

11. Michael Fried would most explicitly formulate the role of negation in modernist painting in his *Three American Painters: Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Frank Stella* (1965), *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago, 1998), pp. 213–65. Having taken great pains to present Noland, Olitski and Stella's work in terms of a "dialectic of modernism" in line with the thinking of Hegel, Marx, Lukács, and Merleau-Ponty, Fried found the situation "complicated" by the existence of neo-dada, pp. 217, 259.

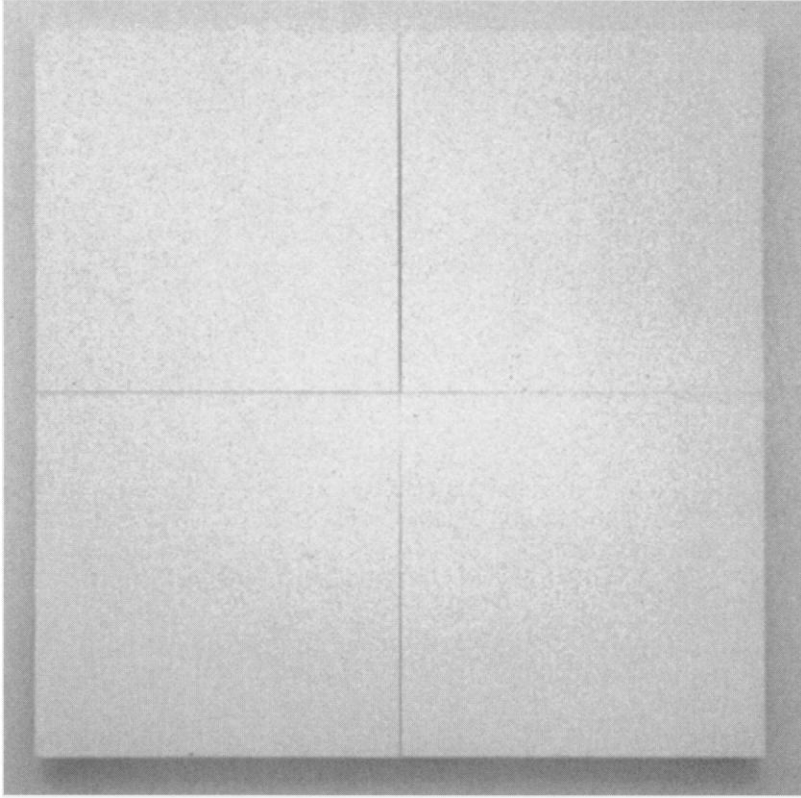


FIG. 3.—Robert Rauschenberg, *White Painting*, 1951. Four panel.

Rauschenberg's monochromes were responsible not only for the advent of minimalism (against which he was principally arguing), but also for the rise of pop, op, assemblage and all those other manifestations of "Novelty art" that disavowed the role of taste and "aesthetic surprise" in legitimate artistic production.<sup>12</sup>

Of these dissident movements, as Hal Foster and Thierry de Duve have shown, it was minimalism that depended most directly on formalism's discursive framework and the continuation of its determinate negation and dialectical critique.<sup>13</sup> Following the evolution from perspectival illusion to the evident and self-reflexive flatness of modernist painting, the minimalists transgressed the canvas's two-dimensionality by moving

12. Greenberg, "Recentness of Sculpture," pp. 252, 254.

13. See de Duve, "The Monochrome and the Blank Canvas;" and Hal Foster, "The Crux of Minimalism," in *Individuals: A Selected History of Contemporary Art, 1945–1986*, ed. Howard Singerman (New York, 1986), pp. 162–83. Repr. in a slightly revised version in Foster, *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, Mass., 1996), pp. 35–68; hereafter abbreviated TRR.

outward into real space. As Annette Michelson and Rosalind Krauss have established with regard to Robert Morris's play with gestalt forms, the result was a form of "specific object" or "blank form" sculpture that led toward an active engagement with the phenomenological processes of perception.<sup>14</sup> This shift in the locus of self-reflexivity from the internal dynamics of the work to the viewer's interaction with it formed a crucial stage in the development of a series of critical art practices, leading ultimately to those developments known collectively as institution critique (*TRR*, p. 59). Given minimalism's formalist imbrication, it is not surprising that critics devoted to minimal art have maintained more than a hint of Crehan and Greenberg's negative evaluation of Rauschenberg. While minimalism and, to some extent, pop have come to be defended for their critical revival of an avant-garde legacy, the neo-dada artists of the 1950s—and Rauschenberg here is paradigmatic—are still understood as merely recycling the anarchic tendencies of earlier dada.<sup>15</sup>

The irony to Rauschenberg's continued, if surreptitious, judgment according to standards originally set by formalist modernism is that Rauschenberg had already abandoned his short-lived involvement with such a discourse by 1953, the year of the *White Paintings*' exhibition. It is to the context of Rauschenberg's collaborative relationship with John Cage—whom he met in 1951, but would only come to know in the summer of 1952—that we must look to understand this transformation in the discursive framework surrounding Rauschenberg's *White Paintings*, a development by which his work would escape the aporias related to an understanding based on negation and open up a new path beyond the endpoint of modernist painting represented by the monochrome.

In 1961, a year in which Rauschenberg was toasted at the Museum of Modern Art's *Art of Assemblage* symposium and that figures plausibly as the birthdate of minimalism, Cage published the article, "On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and his Work."<sup>16</sup> In it, Cage wrote his oft-quoted but little-analyzed statement, "The *White Paintings* were airports for the

14. See Rosalind E. Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge, Mass., 1977), and Annette Michelson, "Robert Morris: An Aesthetics of Transgression," in *Robert Morris* (Washington, D.C., 1969), pp. 7–79.

15. That the neo-avant-garde merely recycled earlier avant-garde strategies is the thesis of Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis, 1984). For an important elaboration and critique of Bürger's position that nonetheless follows his conclusions with regard to the work of Rauschenberg and Cage, see Foster, "What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?" *October*, no. 70 (Fall 1994): 5–32. This essay is reprinted in a slightly altered version as "Who's Afraid of the Neo-Avant-Garde?" Foster, *TRR*, pp. 1–32.

16. Although the canonical works and writings of Minimalism date from the mid-1960s, 1961 marks the year that Robert Morris rejected Cage's aesthetic position to begin what would become his Minimalist pursuit of phenomenological formalism. See Morris, "Letters to John Cage," *October*, no. 81 (Summer 1997): 70–79. 1961 also marks the year in which Yvonne Rainer completed *Satie for Two*, the last of her choreographed works to



lights, shadows, and particles.”<sup>17</sup> To date, the most perceptive commentary on Cage’s remark may be Louise Lawler’s 1987 photograph *Shadow Summer* (fig. 4). Depicting the shadow of *Paris Air* (1919) across the image’s white, monochromatic surface, Lawler implicitly relates Cage’s insight to the example of Marcel Duchamp. Indeed, Rauschenberg’s white canvases can be related to Duchamp’s *Tu m’* (1918), a painting that includes representations of shadows of Duchamp’s readymade bicycle wheel, his hat-rack, and a corkscrew (fig. 5).<sup>18</sup> Cage’s comment that the *White Paintings* were to receive airborne particles also invokes a Duchampian precedent, recalling nothing so much as Man Ray’s famous photograph, *Dust Breeding*, a close-up depiction of Duchamp’s *Large Glass* covered with enough dust for it to resemble a miniature landscape (fig. 6). In his article on Rauschenberg, Cage evoked the idea of examining the work in similarly microscopic detail. “The white paintings caught whatever fell on them,” he said, “why did I not look at them with my magnifying glass? Only because I didn’t yet have one?” (“ORR,” p. 108). Even Cage’s description of the *White Paintings* as “airports” may have been suggested by this image. In the magazine *Littérature*, the caption beneath Man Ray’s photograph reads in part, “view taken from an airplane by Man Ray.”<sup>19</sup>

Although Rauschenberg had little or no exposure to Duchamp’s work before 1953,<sup>20</sup> Cage had long been familiar with it from visits to the home of Walter and Louise Arensberg in the 1930s.<sup>21</sup> Despite such precocious exposure, however, Cage’s understanding of the *White Paintings* seems not to have derived directly from Duchamp, but rather from László Moholy-Nagy’s *The New Vision*, a book Cage found extremely influential.<sup>22</sup> In it, Moholy-Nagy discusses Kasimir Malevich’s painting

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employ a Cagean chance score. See Yvonne Rainer, *Work 1961–73* (Halifax, N.S. and New York, 1974), p. 7.

17. John Cage, “On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and His Work,” (1961) *Silence* (Middletown, Conn., 1961), p. 102; hereafter abbreviated “ORR.”

18. For a discussion of Duchamp’s *Tu m’*, see Krauss, “Notes on the Index: Part 1,” in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass., 1985), pp. 196–209.

19. *Littérature*, n.s., no. 5, 1 Oct. 1922, n.p.

20. Calvin Tomkins, *Off the Wall: Robert Rauschenberg and the Art World of Our Time* (New York, 1980), pp. 129–30; hereafter abbreviated *OW*.

21. Not only had Cage met and visited with the Arensbergs, but, at the time still pursuing interests in painting as well as musical composition, he reports having discussed his art with Walter Arensberg. See Alan Gillmor, “Interview with John Cage,” *Contact* 14 (Autumn 1976): 18.

22. Cage has stated that Moholy-Nagy’s book was extremely influential to his thinking from the 1930s on and that reading it was what attracted him to teach at Moholy-Nagy’s Chicago Institute of Design in 1941. See *John Cage Talking to Hans G. Helms on Music and Politics*, (Munich: S-Press Tapes, 1975), audiocassette; see the abridged version published as Cage, “Reflections of a Progressive Composer on a Damaged Society,” *October*, no. 82 (Fall 1997): 77–93. See also Cage and Joan Retallack, *Musicage: Cage Muses on Words, Art, Music* (Hanover, N.H., 1996), p. 87.

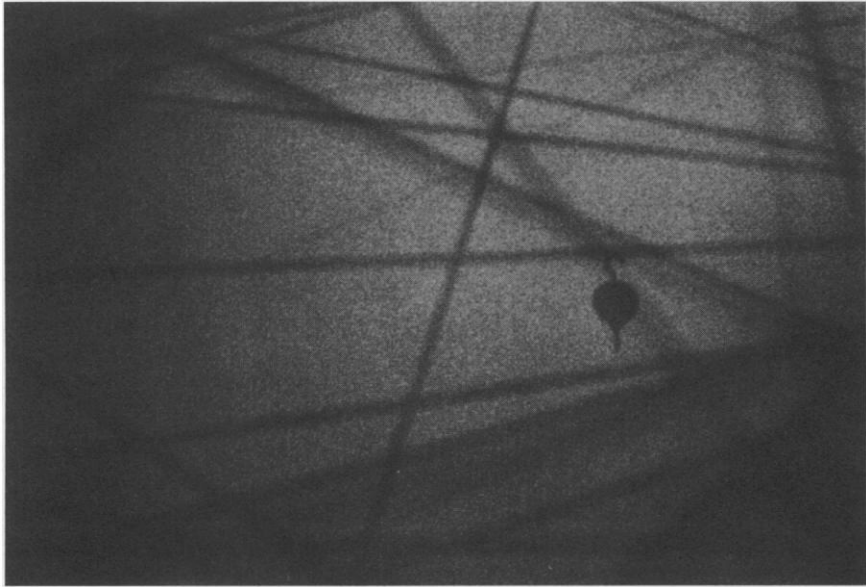


FIG. 4.—Louise Lawler, *Shadow Summer*, 1987.

*White on White* of 1918 (fig. 7).<sup>23</sup> Virtually ignoring the depiction of the square on its surface, Moholy-Nagy described Malevich's work as "the projection screen" and explained,

Here is to be found the interpretation of Malevich's last picture—the plain white surface, which constituted an ideal plane for kinetic light and shadow effects which, originating in the surroundings, would fall upon it. In this way, Malevich's picture represented a miniature cinema screen.<sup>24</sup>

This paragraph comes at the end of Moholy-Nagy's account of the history of modern painting, a development he charted through two inter-related factors: the attempt to capture temporal change and the inauguration of a new concept of space. For Moholy-Nagy, the endpoint of modernist painting was not a self-reflexive flatness but a literal reflectivity. His narration of modern art included such developments as photograms, airbrushing on polished surfaces, and the use of mirrors and

23. During the 1930s when Cage was considering a career as a painter, he had been strongly attracted to pure geometric abstraction. Although he reports having been devoted above all to the work of Mondrian, he also recalled liking Malevich's white square. Cage and Retallack, *Musicage*, p. 109; and *Conversing with Cage*, ed. Kostelanetz (New York, 1994), p. 173.

24. László Moholy-Nagy, *The New Vision* (1928; New York, 1946), p. 39; hereafter abbreviated *NV*.

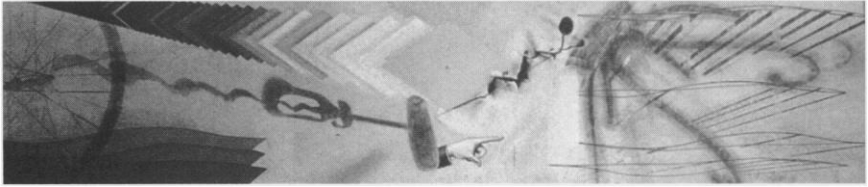


FIG. 5.—Marcel Duchamp, *Tu m'*, 1918.

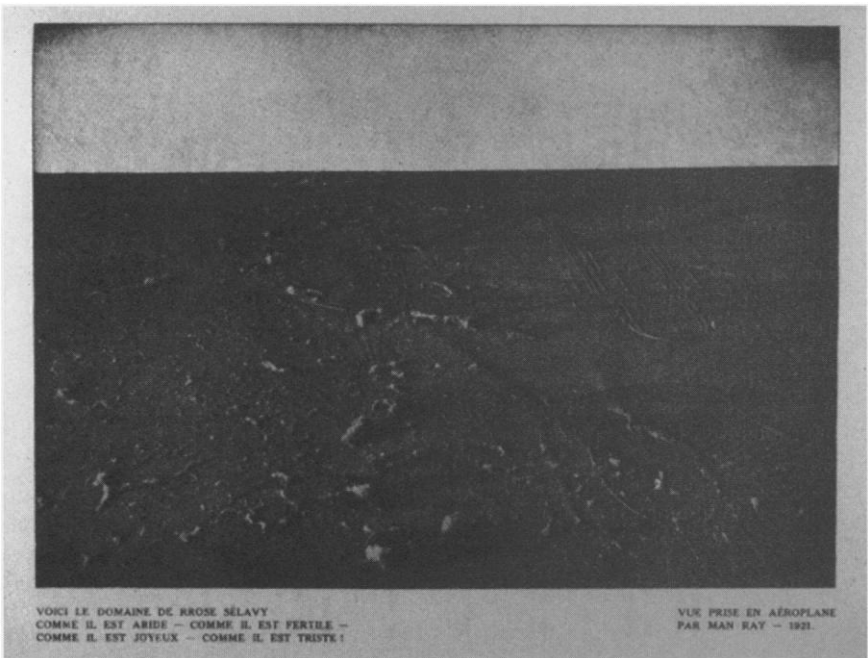


FIG. 6.—Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray, *Dust Breeding*, 1920.

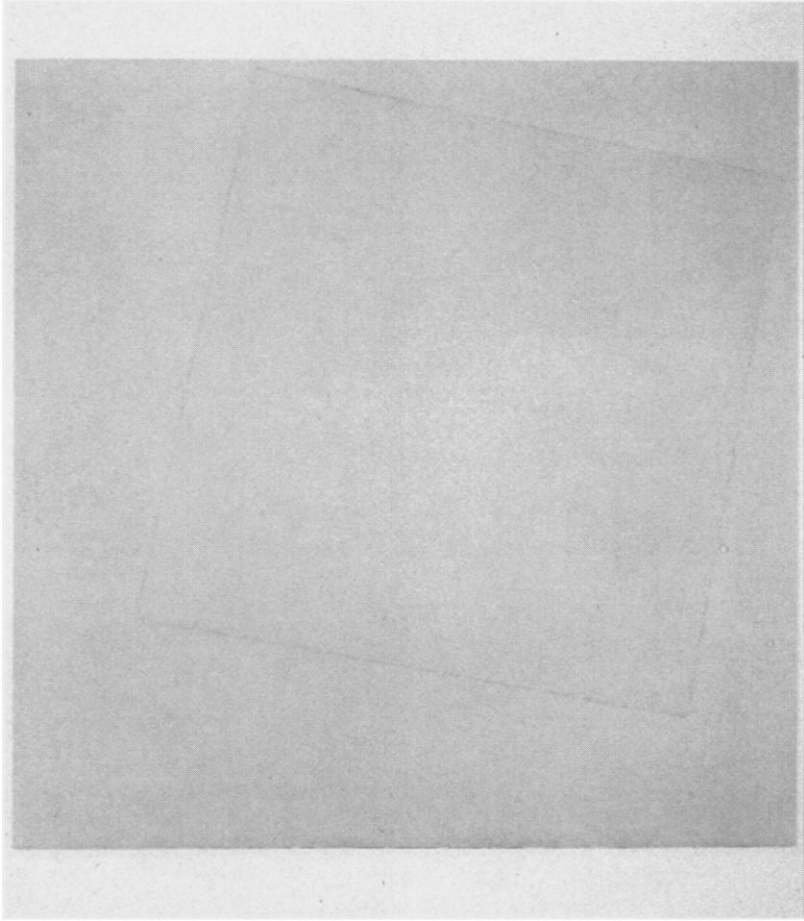


FIG. 7.—Kasimir Malevich, *White on White*, 1918.

transparencies. In a section entitled “Neoplasticism; Suprematism; Constructivism,” Moholy-Nagy explained,

These actual reflections and mirrorings bring the surroundings into the picture, attaining through this a pliability of surface which has been striven for ever since the first days of impressionism.

The surface becomes part of the atmosphere, of the atmospheric background; it sucks up light phenomena outside itself—a vivid contrast to the classical conception of the picture, the illusion of an open window. [*NV*, p. 39]

In closing the era of perspectival illusion, neoplasticism, suprematism, and constructivism produced a new kind of artistic *space*: “a new space,” Moholy-Nagy explained, “created with light directly, subordinating even

paint (pigment)—or at least sublimating it as far as possible” (*NV*, pp. 38–39).

Figuring as the culmination of Moholy-Nagy’s (somewhat chronologically inconsistent) narrative of modern painting, Malevich’s white square was “the final simplification of the picture” (*NV*, p. 39). Not only did it open up a new form of artistic space, it achieved the complete subordination of pigment initiated in the earlier movements Moholy-Nagy had chronicled. About Malevich’s work, Moholy-Nagy concluded, “It seems—from the standpoint of technical development—that a picture painted by hand is surpassed by the physically pure, ‘unblemished,’ light projection” (*NV*, p. 39).

In the remainder of *The New Vision*, Moholy-Nagy follows sculpture and architecture on similar paths, leading from the subordination of matter and the incorporation of light to an idea of transparency that, as I have argued elsewhere, had an enduring influence on Cage.<sup>25</sup> Moholy-Nagy concludes his account by bringing together the idea of the white projection screen and the transparency of glass architecture to form a startling image of matter’s complete sublimation. “A white house with great glass windows surrounded by trees becomes almost transparent when the sun shines,” he writes.

The white walls act as projection screens on which shadows multiply the trees, and the glass plates become mirrors in which the trees are repeated. A perfect transparency is the result; the house becomes a part of nature. [*NV*, p. 64]

It is at this point that Moholy-Nagy’s narration of modern art meets up with Cage’s interest in Duchamp and particularly in the artist’s monumental, transparent “painting,” *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (1915–23) (fig. 8). Although Moholy-Nagy all but ignores Duchamp,<sup>26</sup> *The New Vision*—read as stressing the interconnections among space, transparency, and the development of painting—would certainly have informed Cage’s understanding of the *Large Glass* as the paradigmatic example of an art that produces a new space, welcoming the intervention of ambient events and blurring the boundaries between interior and exterior. As Cage later explained,

Looking at the *Large Glass*, the thing that I like so much is that I can focus my attention wherever I wish. It helps me to blur the distinction between art and life and produces a kind of silence in the work itself. There is nothing in it that requires me to look in one place or

25. See my “John Cage and the Architecture of Silence,” *October*, no. 81 (Summer 1997): 81–104.

26. Moholy-Nagy mentions Duchamp only once, in a footnote, and then only to note that he is being “neglected” (*NV*, p. 40).

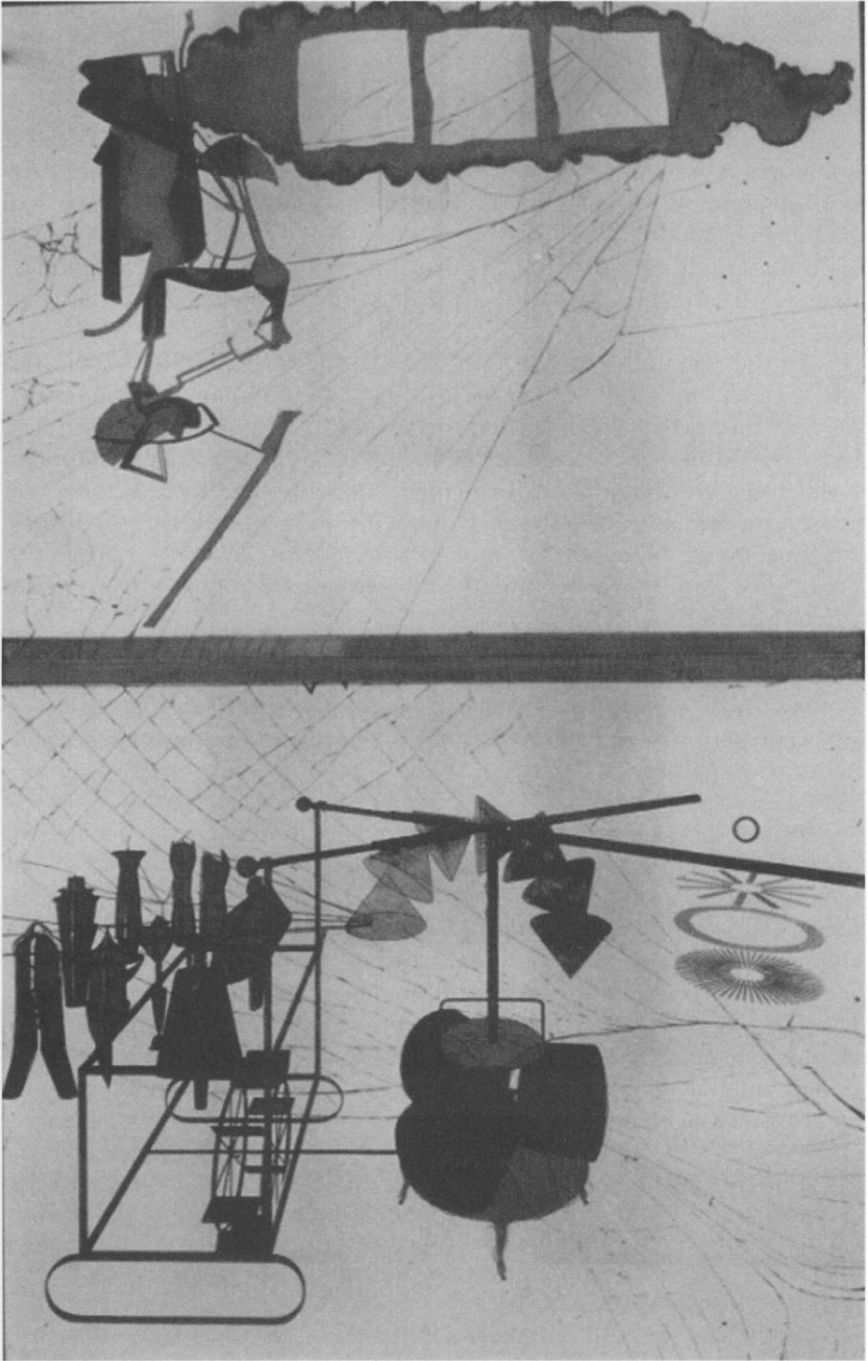


FIG. 8.—Marcel Duchamp, *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)*, 1915–23.

another or, in fact, requires me to look at all. I can look through it to the world beyond.<sup>27</sup>

To Cage's mind, it is this idea of transparency, of a space or emptiness that allowed the artwork to open up to the environment, that formed the primary difference between the historical phase of dada and its neo-dada incarnation and separated Duchamp from his counterparts.<sup>28</sup> Invoking the interconnected examples of the glass architecture of Mies van der Rohe, the open-lattice sculptures of Richard Lippold, and the works on glass of Duchamp, Cage frequently stressed the idea that "Dada nowadays has in it a space, an emptiness, that it formerly lacked."<sup>29</sup>

When Cage encountered Rauschenberg's *White Paintings*, it would have been easy for him to assimilate them into the framework set forth by Moholy-Nagy. Not only had Rauschenberg created his own versions of Malevich's white square, he had also incorporated mirrors into at least one piece Cage already knew from the Parson's exhibition.<sup>30</sup> Cage would also undoubtedly have noted the similarities between the blueprint images Rauschenberg had made in collaboration with Susan Weil (c. 1949–50) and the photograms Moholy-Nagy characterized as "a technical first stage" in neoplastic, suprematist, and constructivist practice (*NV*, p. 38) (figs. 9 and 10). Seen in this way, Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* occupied exactly the point where Moholy-Nagy's narrative of modern painting left off, surpassing the fixity of pigment in favor of the reception of ambient, temporal events. From this point onward, Cage would adopt Moholy-Nagy's idea that a legitimately "modern" painting had to be capable of incorporating such external, temporal movement. "The way to test a modern painting is this," Cage explained, "If it is not destroyed by the action of shadows it is genuine oil painting."<sup>31</sup>

27. Moira Roth and William Roth, "John Cage on Marcel Duchamp," *Art in America* 61 (Nov.–Dec. 1973): 78.

28. As Cage wrote in the foreword to *Silence*, "what was Dada in the 1920's is now, with the exception of the work of Marcel Duchamp, just art" (p. xi).

29. *Ibid.* This statement first appeared in Cage's "Preface to *Indeterminacy*" (1959), in *John Cage: Writer*, ed. Kostelanetz (New York, 1993), p. 79. See also Cage, "Juillard Lecture" (1952), *A Year from Monday* (Middletown, Conn., 1967), p. 102; "Experimental Music" (1957), *Silence*, pp. 7–8, hereafter abbreviated "EM;" Cage's comments in Kostelanetz, "Conversation with John Cage," in *John Cage: An Anthology*, ed. Kostelanetz (New York, 1970), pp. 11, 26; and in Michael Kirby and Richard Schechner, "An Interview with John Cage," in *Happenings and Other Acts*, ed. Mariellen R. Sandford (New York, 1995), p. 64.

30. *Stone, Stone, Stone* (c. 1951) was included in the Parsons Exhibition, as was most likely *Untitled [With Collage and Mirror]* (c. 1951). See *RR*, pp. 52–53.

31. Cage, "45' for a Speaker" (1954), *Silence*, p. 161, hereafter abbreviated "S." See also p. 187. See also his comments in "Where Are We Going? And What Are We Doing?" (1961), *Silence*, pp. 238–39, and "Happy New Ears!" (c. 1964), *A Year from Monday*, p. 31. Although this set of ideas would seem to have derived from Cage, issues of registering external events within the artwork would have meshed with Rauschenberg's own early interest in photography. In both their receptivity to the indexical traces of light and shadow,



FIG. 9.—Robert Rauschenberg and Susan Weil, *Light Borne in Darkness*, c. 1949. Monoprint: exposed blueprint paper.

Cage has always been clear that his infamous 4'33" of silence was composed after seeing Rauschenberg's *White Paintings*.<sup>32</sup> In this, the most controversial of Cage's works, a performer sits at his or her instrument for the requisite amount of time without sounding a single note, while the audience hears the sounds occurring in the surroundings. Cage explained that not only did seeing Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* give him the "courage" to compose a piece of such radicality, they made him fear that the development of music had fallen behind that of art.<sup>33</sup> "Oh, yes, I must," Cage recalls thinking, "otherwise I'm lagging, otherwise music is lagging."<sup>34</sup>

The idea of a completely silent piece, however, had been in Cage's mind for some time, and ideas already developed about it influenced his

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as well as in the idea that they could be reproduced at any time—even existing as multiple copies (*RR*, p. 80)—Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* can be understood as an appropriation of the logic of mechanical reproduction rather than as a pure, autonomous reaction against it.

32. As Cage wrote in the preface to his article on Rauschenberg in *Silence*: "To Whom It May Concern: The white paintings came first; my silent piece came later" ("ORR," p. 98). Rauschenberg has recently stated of Cage that "he wrote the silent piece because of my paintings. And there were lots more" (Turrell, "Talking to Robert Rauschenberg," p. 62).

33. Richard Dyer, "A Refreshing, Surprising Exchange with John Cage," *Boston Globe*, 20 Oct. 1988, p. 88, and Deborah Ann Campana, "Form and Structure in the Music of John Cage" (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1985), p. 103.

34. Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage*, p. 67.



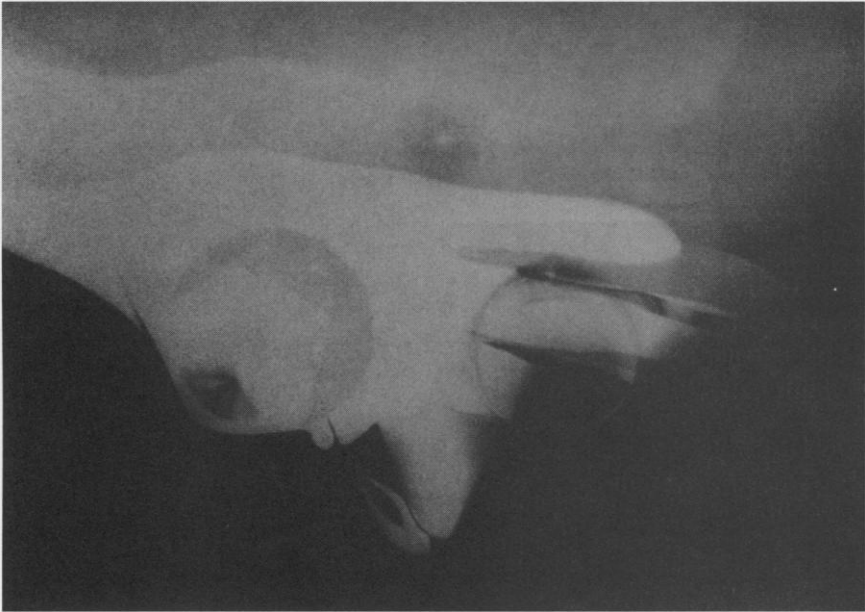


FIG. 10.—László Moholy-Nagy, *Self-portrait Smoking a Cigar (Photogramme)*, 1924.

understanding of Rauschenberg. It was an oft-recounted experience within an anechoic chamber at Harvard in 1951 that brought about a significant transformation in Cage's understanding of silence.<sup>35</sup> Once inside the room, specially dampened so that no sound could penetrate the walls or reverberate on the inside, Cage heard, not the absolute silence he had been expecting, but rather two distinct sounds emanating from his own body: the first, a low tone resulting from his blood in circulation and the second, a high one coming from his nervous system.<sup>36</sup> As a result, Cage came to understand the strict impossibility of silence, famously redefining it as, not the complete absence of sound, but the presence of unintentional noises. "The situation one is clearly in," Cage concluded, "is not objective (sound-silence), but rather subjective (sounds only), those intended and those others (so-called silence) not intended" ("EMD," p. 14).

This event is among the most significant and most recounted in the literature on Cage. Nevertheless, it seems to have gone unnoted that,

35. For a more thorough discussion of the transformations in Cage's idea of silence, see Eric De Visscher, "'There's no such thing as silence . . .': John Cage's Poetics of Silence," in *Writings About John Cage*, ed. Kostelanetz (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1993), pp. 117–133, and my "Experimental Art: John Cage, Robert Rauschenberg, and the Neo-Avant-Garde" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1999), esp. pp. 51–56.

36. This story is recounted many times in Cage's writings; see, for example, "EM," p. 8; "Experimental Music: Doctrine," pp. 13–14, hereafter abbreviated "EMD"; "Composition as Process," p. 23; "S," p. 168; and *A Year from Monday*, p. 134.

whatever his actual experience in the anechoic chamber, both Cage's story and the insight derived from it were, in essence, a recasting of Henri Bergson's critique of "The Idea of 'Nothing'" from *Creative Evolution*.<sup>37</sup> In this discussion, with which Cage was familiar, Bergson demonstrates the futility of attempting to imagine nothing by invoking a scene directly analogous to Cage's within the anechoic chamber. "I am going to close my eyes, stop my ears, extinguish one by one the sensations that come to me from the outer world," writes Bergson.

Now it is done; all my perceptions vanish, the material universe sinks into silence and night.—I subsist, however, and cannot help myself subsisting. I am still there, with the organic sensations which come to me from the surface and from the interior of my body, with the recollections which my past perceptions have left behind them—nay, with the impression, most positive and full, of the void I have just made about me. [*CE*, p. 278]

Through this demonstration, Bergson sought to prove that nothingness was devoid of ontological status: that it was merely a "pseudo-idea" resulting from confusion within the subject (*CE*, p. 277). What was perceived as the absence of an object or the negation of an idea actually corresponded only to the finding of one thing while searching for, or expecting, another. It was—to use one of Bergson's examples—like declaring "this is not verse" when, while searching through a bookshelf in order to find verse, one happens upon a book filled with prose (*CE*, p. 232).

In the story of the anechoic chamber, Cage imported Bergson's critique of negation from philosophy into music, applying it to sound specifically rather than to being in general. The conclusion, however, was the same. Indeed, a substitution of the term *sound* for that of *reality* in Bergson's writing provides Cage's mature understanding of silence exactly. This is Bergson:

Now the unreality which is here in question is purely relative to the direction in which our attention is engaged, for we are immersed in realities and cannot pass out of them; only, if the present reality is not the one we are seeking, we speak of the *absence* of this sought-for

37. See Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (New York, 1911), pp. 272–98, hereafter abbreviated *CE*. To my knowledge, the impact of Bergson's thinking upon Cage has not previously been noted. Cage makes explicit reference to Bergson at the end of the article "Experimental Music," where he writes: "Here we are concerned with the coexistence of dissimilars, and the central points where fusion occurs are many: the ears of the listeners wherever they are. This disharmony, to paraphrase Bergson's statement about disorder, is simply a harmony to which many are unaccustomed" ("EM," p. 12). This idea of Bergson's to which Cage makes reference is to be found on pp. 220 and following in *Creative Evolution* and forms part of Bergson's larger critique of negation.

reality wherever we find the *presence* of another. We thus express what we have as a function of what we want. [CE, p. 273]

It is Bergson's critique of negation, expressed in his contention that "there is no absolute void in nature," (CE, p. 281) that ultimately underlies Cage's statement that "there is no such thing as silence," ("S," p. 191) as well as Rauschenberg's later pronouncement that "a canvas is never empty."<sup>38</sup>

However, while inextricably related to his understanding of Bergson's critique of negation, Cage's experience in the anechoic chamber was not, as existing literature would have it, sufficient to produce the understanding of silence showcased in *4'33"*. In the chamber, environmental noises were completely shut out, and what Cage heard was entirely predicated on their exclusion. In *4'33"*, by contrast, the sounds of the environment are allowed to resonate freely within the composition, hence the startling effect that Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* had upon Cage at Black Mountain College. Understood in terms of Moholy-Nagy's incorporation of external events, they indicated a means of escaping the solipsism of Cage's Harvard experience.<sup>39</sup> With *4'33"*, Cage succeeded in moving music into the same "modern" paradigm occupied by Rauschenberg. As he later noted, "A cough or baby crying will not ruin a good piece of modern music" ("S," p. 161).

In the following year Cage further clarified the connection between Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* and his *4'33"* in the score for the work dedicated to Irwin Kremin.<sup>40</sup> The original version of the score to *4'33"* was measured out on conventional music paper, with staves and bar lines but without notes or rests. The Kremin version, however, consists of six sheets of entirely blank paper onto which Cage drew six long, vertical lines (fig. 11). Each line represents the beginning or the end of one of the work's three separate movements, which last, respectively: thirty seconds; two minutes, twenty-three seconds; and one minute, forty seconds. Clearly recalling the edges of Rauschenberg's abutted canvasses, these

38. Quoted in *Sixteen Americans*, ed. Dorothy C. Miller (New York, 1959), p. 58.

39. Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* quickly confirmed Cage's own artistic thinking. The earliest quotation relating transparency and music occurs in the "Juilliard Lecture" delivered on 27 Mar. 1952: "It acts in such a way that one can 'hear through' a piece of music just as one can see through some modern buildings or see through a wire sculpture by Richard Lippold or the glass of Marcel Duchamp." Cage, "Juilliard Lecture," *A Year from Monday*, p. 102. Date of lecture given in David Wayne Patterson, "Appraising the Catchwords, c. 1942-1959: John Cage's Asian-Derived Rhetoric and the Historical Reference of Black Mountain College" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1996), p. 336, hereafter abbreviated "AC," and in John Holzaepfel, "David Tudor and the Performance of American Experimental Music, 1950-1959" (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 1994), p. 223 n. 32.

40. This version of the score for *4'33"* initially appeared in *Source* (July 1967) and has been published in a corrected version by C. F. Peters (New York, 1993), 6777a. For a discussion of the different versions of the score of *4'33"*, see William Fetterman, *John Cage's Theatre Pieces: Notations and Performances* (Amsterdam, 1996), pp. 69-84.

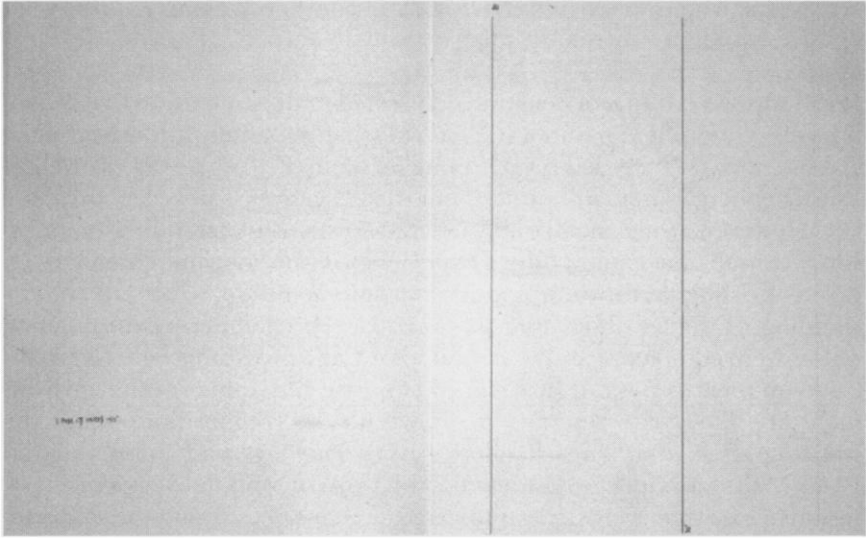


FIG. 11.—John Cage, *4'33"*, 1952. *Score in Proportional Notation*, 1953. Key and first page.

lines form the structure of *4'33"*. A key provided at the bottom of the page reads “1 page = 7 inches = 56” [seconds]” and provides the means for reading the score horizontally across the page to give the timing of the movements. Visually, the score acts just as one of Rauschenberg’s *White Paintings*; the lights, shadows and particles falling on it become analogues of the environmental sounds occurring within the piece when “performed” (fig.12).

Cage’s assimilation of the ideas of Moholy-Nagy to those of Bergson went beyond the employment of “transparency” to escape the hermeticism of the anechoic chamber. Indeed, the depth of Cage’s Bergsonism was profound. If, in *The New Vision*, Moholy-Nagy described the concept of transparency as opening the artwork to temporal changes in the surrounding environment and—in his description of the white house with great glass windows—described this environment as “nature,” it was in Bergson’s *Creative Evolution* that Cage (and, through him, Rauschenberg) would find the ideas of nature and temporality or, more properly, duration most intricately intertwined.

Since the mid-1940s Cage had adopted Ananda K. Coomaraswamy’s idea that the purpose of art was “to imitate nature in her manner of operation.”<sup>41</sup> Initially, he sought simply to illustrate a cyclical idea of nature,

41. See Cage, “ORR,” p. 100 and Cage, “Happy New Ears!” in *A Year from Monday*, p. 31. On Cage’s study of Coomaraswamy, see “AC,” pp. 95–99.

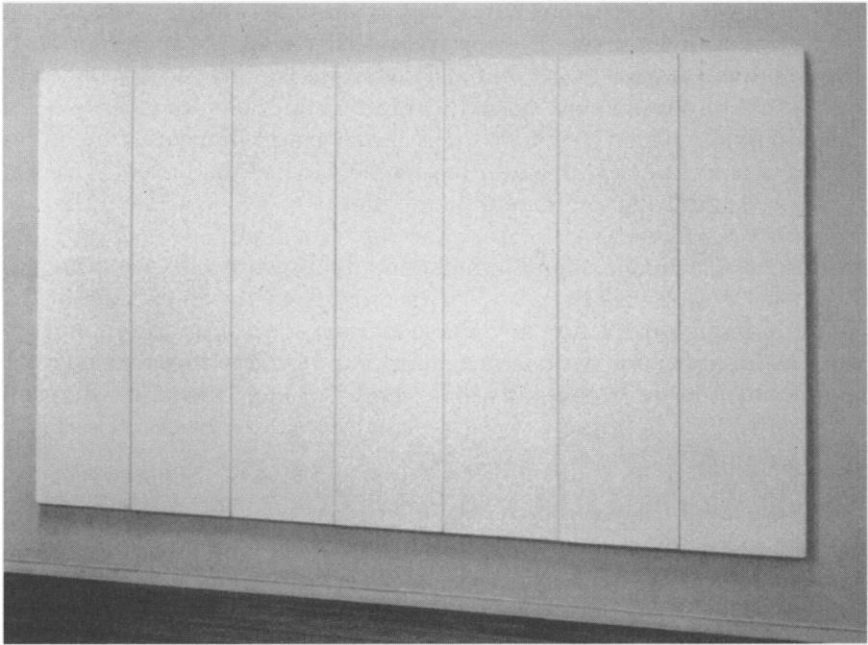


FIG. 12.—Robert Rauschenberg, *White Painting*, 1951. Seven panel.

as in the 1947 ballet, *The Seasons*, in which each movement corresponds to a different time of year. Around 1950, however, Cage began to espouse a more Bergsonian view of nature as a continual process of creation and change. For Bergson, the ideas of nature and life were not characterized in terms of cyclical recurrence, but in terms of “continual change,” “perpetual becoming,” and the “undivided flux” of creation (*CE*, pp. 302, 272, and 249 respectively).<sup>42</sup> Although often discussed in terms of an almost animistic life force—Bergson’s famous “*élan vital*”—what ultimately underlay this perpetual becoming was the incessant, unidirectional flow of time.<sup>43</sup> As Bergson wrote in *Creative Evolution*, “the more we study the nature of time, the more we shall comprehend that duration means invention, the creation of forms, the continual elaboration of the absolutely

42. This contrasts markedly with certain of Coomaraswamy’s ideas of nature, largely held to be the source of Cage’s own. According to Patterson, Coomaraswamy ultimately felt that all of existence was already present, that there was nothing actually being created. As Patterson summarizes Coomaraswamy’s attitude, “All human activities and extant artifacts throughout all time and within all cultures are merely evidence of the endless cycle of ‘rediscoveries’ of the same essential, immutable Reality that serves as the basis of all things” (“AC,” p. 82).

43. See Gilles Deleuze, “Bergson,” in *Les Philosophes célèbres*, ed. Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Paris, 1956), pp. 292–99.

new” (*CE*, p. 11). Duration’s irreversibility ultimately guaranteed that all of creation would incessantly differ from itself, if for no other reason than the fact that it existed at a fractionally later moment.<sup>44</sup>

Although humankind existed within this fluid temporal movement, this situation escaped humanity’s perceptual grasp. Bergson argued that perception was filtered through the intellect, which had evolved with a view toward utilizing and manipulating nature to its own benefit. In *Creative Evolution*, however, Bergson was concerned with determining the means by which one might understand reality-in-itself. According to Bergson, to do so necessitated a turn away from the intellect, with its focus on intentional action and the associated idea of negation, and toward an identification with nature. Bergson referred to this turn as “intuition,” which he understood as philosophy’s proper substance. Bergson summarized the different ontological visions resulting from intellect and intuition thus:

If we pass (consciously or unconsciously) through the idea of the nought in order to reach that of being, the being to which we come is a logical or mathematical essence, therefore non-temporal. And, consequently, a static conception of the real is forced on us: everything appears given once for all, in eternity. But we must accustom ourselves to thinking being directly, without making a detour, without first appealing to the phantom of the nought which interposes itself between it and us. We must strive to see in order to see, and no longer to see in order to act. Then the Absolute is revealed very near us and, in a certain measure, in us. It is of psychological and not of mathematical nor logical essence. It lives with us. Like us, but in certain aspects infinitely more concentrated and more gathered up in itself, it *endures*. [*CE*, pp. 298–99]

For his part, Cage never explicitly echoed Bergson’s interest in intuition, nor the typically Bergsonian emphasis on evolution and biology. Combined as they were with his interest in Zen, Cage’s borrowings were more abstract and less strident than Bergson’s *Lebensphilosophie*. Cage did, however, adopt for his own purposes Bergson’s idea of nature as flux in duration, of the role of temporality in the perpetual creation of the new, and of the interrelated functioning of intellect and memory. Like Bergson, Cage saw that to transcend an understanding accorded by the intellect one had to turn away from the anthropocentric point of view and identify oneself with nature or, as Cage termed it, the “outside.”<sup>45</sup> In the

44. “Nevertheless the vision I now have of [an object] differs from that which I have just had, even if only because the one is an instant older than the other” (*CE*, p. 2).

45. Cage refers to the nonanthropocentric point of view as the “outside” in “Morris Graves” (1957), in *John Cage*, p. 126.

article “Experimental Music,” in a passage immediately following a discussion of his experience in the anechoic chamber, Cage explained,

until I die there will be sounds. And they will continue following my death. One need not fear about the future of music.

But this fearlessness only follows if, at the parting of the ways, where it is realized that sounds occur whether intended or not, one turns in the direction of those he does not intend. This turning is psychological and seems at first to be a giving up of everything that belongs to humanity—for a musician, the giving up of music. This psychological turning leads to the world of nature, where, gradually or suddenly, one sees that humanity and nature, not separate, are in this world together. . . . (“EM,” p. 8).<sup>46</sup>

In this we find Cage echoing not only Bergson’s ideas but also his terms. As opposed to the Bergsonian emphasis on intuition, however, Cage characterized the turn towards nature primarily in terms of the avant-garde strategy of perceptual estrangement. Following Moholy-Nagy, Cage saw the task of the artist as producing works that fostered the direct perception of duration. In Cage’s terminology, the distinction between a conventional work of art and one that allowed for the direct perception of temporal events became that between the work as “object” and the work as “process.” As Cage explained,

. . . we’re no longer making objects but processes and it is easy to see that we are not separate from processes but are in them, so that our feelings are not about but *in* them. Criticism vanishes. Awareness and use and curiosity enter into making our consciousness. We are glad to see that we are noticing what happens. Asked what happened, we have to say we don’t know, or we could say we see more clearly but we can’t tell you what we see.<sup>47</sup>

Signaled here by the precise deployment of past and present tense, Cage makes a distinction between intellect (predicated on the grasping of a stable, non-temporal entity) and perception (understood as a nearly pure perception existing within the temporal flux of the present).<sup>48</sup> When asked “what *happened*” in the past, Cage does not know; nevertheless, he is “noticing what *happens*” in the present, seeing it more clearly even though it cannot be grasped, cognized or readily communicated.

46. Cage’s use of the term *psychological* in this context seems to have been derived from Bergson. See, for example, *CE*, pp. 257, 298.

47. “Where Are We Going? And What Are We Doing?” in *Silence*, pp. 236–37.

48. This is somewhat contrary to Bergson’s understanding of perception as linked to the intellect. Cage is endorsing an idea akin to that which Bergson refers to as “pure perception” and which Bergson saw as a hypothetical rather than an actual state.

On the occasion of Rauschenberg's 1953 exhibition at the Stable Gallery, Cage wrote a statement linking the Bergsonian critique of negation to the *White Paintings*' incorporation of duration. First, he noted the apparent negation of virtually all the artistic features by which the paintings could be grasped, writing:

No subject  
 No image  
 No taste  
 No object  
 No beauty  
 No message  
 No talent  
 No technique (no why)  
 No idea  
 No intention  
 No art  
 No feeling  
 No black  
 No white (no *and*)<sup>49</sup>

Cage then declared that, rather than being empty, these pieces were opened to the temporally changing processes outside themselves. "After careful consideration," he said,

I have come to the conclusion that there is nothing in these paintings that could not be changed, that they can be seen in any light and are not destroyed by the action of shadows. ["RR," p. 112]

To this, Cage added as a sort of postscript, "Hallelujah! The blind can see again; the water's fine" ("RR," p. 112). In 1961, Cage would reprint this commentary in its entirety and elaborate on it by adding the same distinction between perception and recollection noted above. After his reiteration of "Hallelujah! The blind can see again," he wrote, "Blind to what he *has seen* so that seeing is as though first seeing" ("ORR," p. 102).<sup>50</sup>

Although Rauschenberg's terminology was never as identifiably Bergsonian as Cage's and lacked the composer's relation to Eastern philosophy and religion, he did share much the same understanding of existence and of the intellect's inevitable arresting of temporal movement. This he

49. Cage, "Robert Rauschenberg" (1953) in *John Cage*, pp. 111–12; hereafter abbreviated "RR."

50. Emphasis added. For a discussion of the historical avant-garde strategy of estrangement and the attempt at attaining an unmediated form of perception, see Simon Watney, "Making Strange: The Shattered Mirror," in *Thinking Photography*, ed. Victor Burgin (London, 1982), pp. 154–76.



explained during the *Art of Assemblage* symposium, although interjected at the time without appreciable context his pronouncements have remained largely uncomprehended. "Every minute everything is different, everywhere," he declared. "It's all flowing. Where is the basis for criticism, for being right or wrong, without blindly or deliberately assuming or affecting a stop?"<sup>51</sup>

By the time of his Stable Gallery exhibition, Rauschenberg had already come to share Cage's understanding of the *White Paintings* as vehicles for perception beyond the confines of intellect. Crehan cites Rauschenberg's statement that "my black paintings and my white paintings are either too full or too empty to be thought—thereby they remain visual experiences. These pictures are not Art" ("RD," p. 25). Here, Rauschenberg's assertion that his "pictures are not Art" is not of the same order as his earlier claim to Betty Parsons that his "paintings . . . are not Art." Gone is the imbrication with formalist modernism and the attention to specificity of the medium found in his letter to Parsons of 1951. The progressive elimination of pictorial elements is no longer conceived as a reduction toward the essence of painting; it is no longer an aesthetic of negation or, as Crehan termed it, "the purge." Instead, following the implications of the critique of negation, Rauschenberg's elimination of artistic elements from his painting was now understood as allowing incorporation of the temporally changing, nonart realm. Indeed, by incorporating duration, the *White Paintings* no longer represent a return to the monochrome as degree zero of painting, but rather assert—as his hermetic statements from the "Art of Assemblage" symposium would have it—that "there is no zero which returning implies" ("AS," pp. 127–28).

In this, Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* differ from their historical avant-garde counterparts as well as from their formalist or minimalist understandings. For as they came to be understood in the summer of 1952, they no longer figure either as the final product of a determinant negation of artistic conventions or as the result of a negation of an abstract or anarchic type. Rather, following from the implications of Cage's Bergsonism, these paintings had come to be situated at the beginning of an aesthetic paradigm in which difference is conceived not in terms of negation at all, but rather as an ontological first principle, the positive and productive motor force behind the dynamic conception of nature.

Such a reevaluation of difference brings an added dimension to Rauschenberg's production of the early 1950s. Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing* of 1953, for instance, appears as a provocative negation

51. Lawrence Alloway et al., "The Art of Assemblage: A Symposium" (1961), in *Studies in Modern Art*, ed. James Leggio and Helen M. Franc (New York, 1992), pp. 138, 137; hereafter abbreviated "AS."

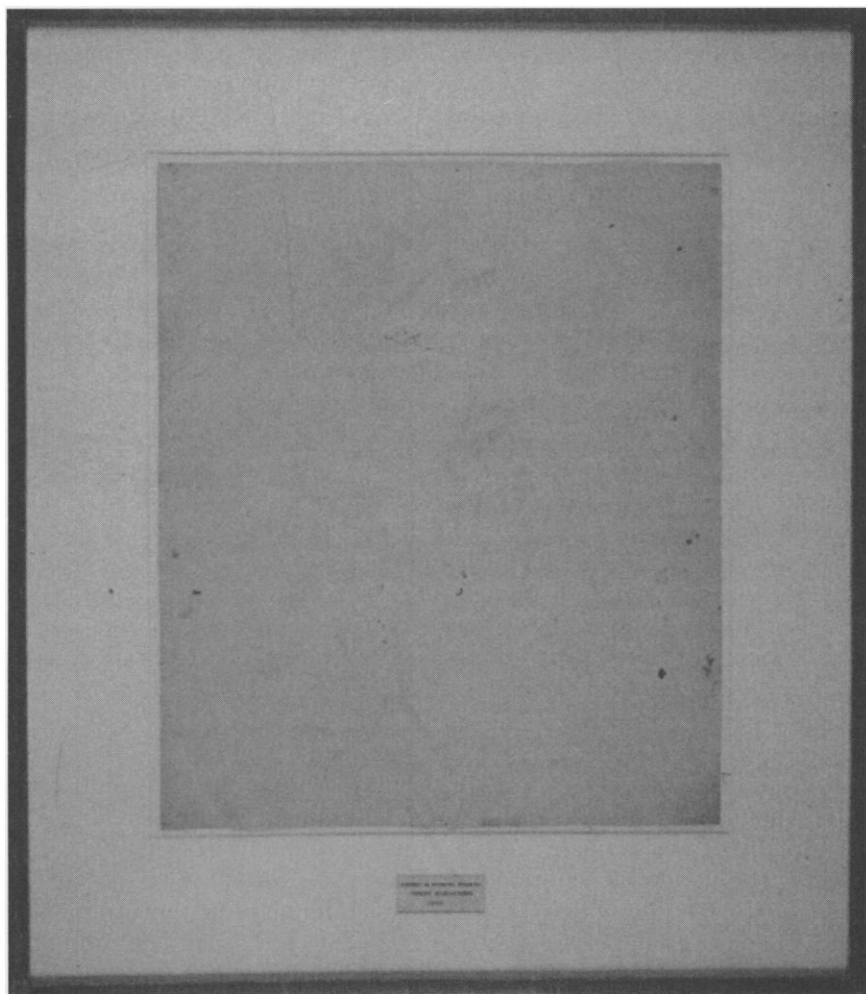


FIG. 13.—Robert Rauschenberg, *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, 1953.

of past art described by Calvin Tomkins as a blatantly Freudian, symbolic patricide (fig. 13).<sup>52</sup> Rauschenberg, however, has always maintained that “it wasn’t a gesture, it had nothing to do with destruction.”<sup>53</sup> Although certainly aggressive, when seen from a Bergsonian perspective Rauschenberg’s transformation of the de Kooning into what he called a “mono-

52. “The implications were so blatantly Freudian, the act itself so obviously a symbolic (if good-natured) patricide” (quoted in Tomkins, *Off the Wall*, p. 96).

53. Maxime de la Falaise McKendry, “Robert Rauschenberg Talks to Maxime de la Falaise McKendry,” *Interview* 6 (May 1976): 36. See also Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors; Five Masters of the Avant-Garde* (New York, 1968, 1970), pp. 210–11.

chrome no-image"<sup>54</sup> can also be understood as liberating the work from the limitations of imagery and individual expression and opening it to the reception of contingent visual sensations. The nearly imperceptible remnants of the de Kooning become mere shadows, no longer impeding perception of the actual shadows cast across its surface. Erasing the de Kooning eliminated not only image, mark, figure, and spatial illusion but also intention, expression, and meaning—all those fixed attributes of art that serve to separate it from life's changeability.<sup>55</sup>

More important, however, 1953 also saw the production of Rauschenberg's *Dirt Paintings* (fig. 14)—one of which was dedicated to John Cage—and his *Growing Painting*. Like the *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, these pieces should also be seen as more than latter-day, dadaist critiques of artistic expression. If Rauschenberg's *de Kooning* was opened to the fleeting contingencies of temporal change, his dirt and grass paintings revealed duration's longer-term effects. "He is not saying; he is painting," Cage wrote of Rauschenberg:

The message is conveyed by dirt which, mixed with an adhesive, sticks to itself and to the canvas upon which he places it. Crumbling and responding to changes in weather, the dirt unceasingly does my thinking. ["ORR," pp. 99–100]<sup>56</sup>

Importantly, the temporality at stake in Rauschenberg's dirt and grass paintings is not that of minimalism's phenomenology, necessarily entwined with the human perceptual apparatus. Rather, like Bergson's famous sugar cube that dissolves—despite all our impatience—at its own pace, Rauschenberg's works appear as attempts to show matter in its own duration, the duration of natural creation or deterioration within which humanity exists, but which is not dependent on humanity. Thus, these works call for the same turning sought by Cage, away from an anthropo-

54. Quoted in McKendry, "Robert Rauschenberg Talks to Maxime de la Falaise McKendry," p. 36.

55. In this, Cage and Rauschenberg's attitude—closely allied with the implications of a Bergsonian philosophy—nevertheless represents an inversion of Bergson's ideas about art. Bergson portrayed art as opposed to science in that art could grasp the real and science could not. The work of genius, for Bergson, represented the unknowable, the creative. (Bergson even cites Cage's nemesis, Beethoven, as an example [CE, p. 224].) For Cage and Rauschenberg, it was art as genius that equaled intentional action and cut one off from the true or pure perception of reality. On the other hand, science—understood in terms of the investigation into chaos—would be seen as supporting their viewpoint.

56. See Dore Ashton's observations on Rauschenberg's *Black Paintings* in the Stable Gallery exhibition in 1953: "Beauty is purity, he says, but decay is implicit. Appliquéd newspaper is his disdain of perpetuity" (Ashton, "57th Street: Bob Rauschenberg," *Art Digest* 15 Sept. 1953, p. 21). See also Cage's comments on the aging of Rauschenberg's collage elements in "ORR," p. 102.

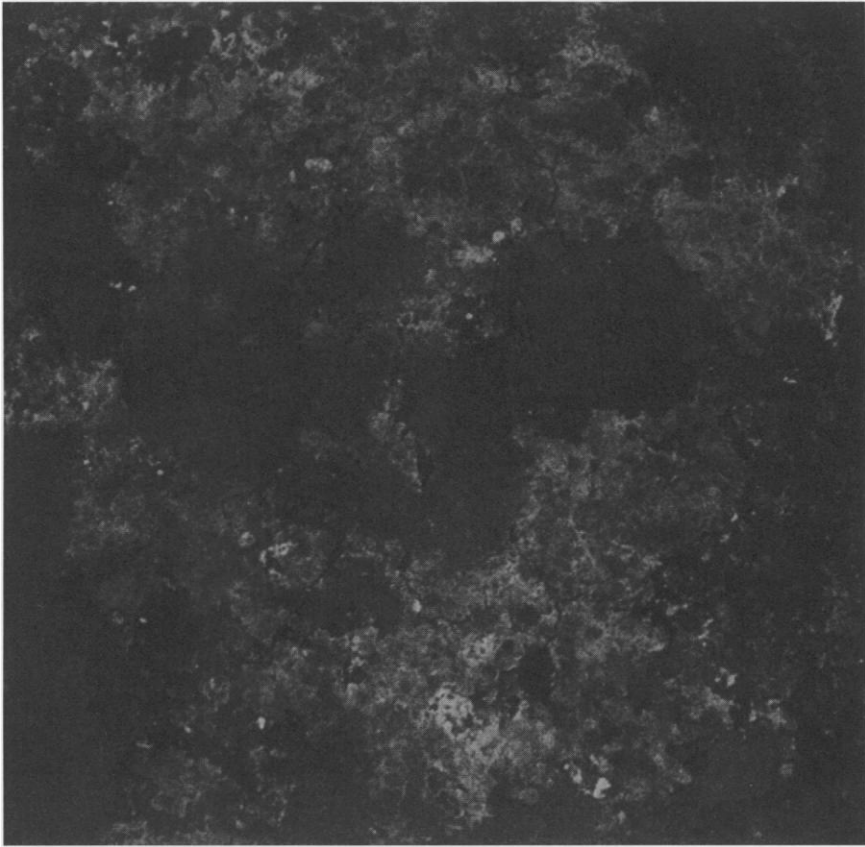


FIG. 14.—*Dirt Painting (for John Cage)*, c. 1953.

centric point of view and toward a perceptual identification with life in or as duration. As Cage wrote in 1956:

“Art” and “music,” when anthropocentric (involved in self-expression), seem trivial and lacking in urgency to me. We live in a world where there are things as well as people. Trees, stones, water, everything is expressive. . . . Life goes on very well without me, and that will explain to you my silent piece, *4'33"*. . . .<sup>57</sup>

In this, we find once again an echo of that unmediated grasp of existence called for by Bergson. “Matter or mind,” Bergson wrote,

reality has appeared to us as a perpetual becoming. It makes itself or it unmakes itself, but it is never something made. Such is the intu-

57. Cage, “[Letter to Paul Henry Lang]” (1956), in *John Cage*, pp. 117–18.

ition that we have of mind when we draw aside the veil which is interposed between our consciousness and ourselves. This, also, is what our intellect and senses themselves would show us of matter, if they could obtain a direct and disinterested idea of it. [*CE*, pp. 296–97]

For any perception of duration, a certain form of memory is required. This Bergson understood not as a dwelling in the past but as the prolongation of the past within the present, a commingling by which the very distinction of the present from the past is enabled. According to Bergson, the past that changes continually also continually builds up, increases as each moment in the present is retired and past piles upon past. This preserved past, which enables the realization of the present, is memory in a nonintentional, nonindividual sense.<sup>58</sup> More than the decay of the dirt paintings or the growing of the grass painting, it is the accumulation of dust on the *White Paintings*' surfaces that serves as an analogue of this passage of time and the storage of the past within the present. It is, in the final instance, this incessant dust accumulation that insures that no two visions of the *White Paintings* will ever truly be the same despite the similarity of environmental circumstances.<sup>59</sup> Just as a viewer at one moment would not see the same thing at another time when environmental effects had changed, so too would the dust on the *White Paintings* render it impossible for any two successive viewers to see it exactly the same way. Like the Heraclitean stream, it is, strictly speaking, impossible to see the same *White Painting* twice.

To conceptualize the paintings' reception fully, however, another aspect must be taken into account. For people, of course, have their own access to the store of the past that is memory, and each individual's interaction with the past is a determining factor in his or her subjectivity (*CE*, pp. 4–5). Thus, arising from a combination of personal and environmental stimuli, every person's response to a *White Painting* would differ necessarily. In the *Art of Assemblage* symposium, Rauschenberg addressed this notion of individual reception, proposing it as an inherent, if unrecognized, characteristic of all art. Each person, he explained, "has a different series of experiences to fall back on":

People keep shuffling up to the picture with everything that has happened to them, and they turn to their neighbor and tell them that this is what the picture is about. But any two people and any one painting would show that that couldn't possibly be the same reaction every time. ["AS," p. 138]<sup>60</sup>

58. Bergson's discussion of memory is found in *Matter and Memory*, trans. N. M. Paul and W. S. Palmer (New York, 1991). It is, however, also summarized at the beginning of *CE*, pp. 3–4.

59. See Bergson's description of observing a motionless object, *CE*, p. 2.

60. Once again, this idea is profoundly resonant with ideas found in the thinking of Bergson. See *CE*, p. 5.

During the course of the symposium, Rauschenberg received support for his position from fellow panelist Duchamp. When asked what type of reaction his readymades were intended to provoke, Duchamp replied that after an initial moment of “disorientation” came an effect of

connotation—meaning that according to the observer’s imagination, he can go into any field or any form of imagination and associations of ideas he wants, depending on his own reactions. In other words, my reactions were not to be his reactions at all. It was a sort of catalytic form in itself, ready to be accepted by everybody, or to be interpreted by the different temperaments of all the spectators. [“AS,” p. 144]

It is this impulse to create works that underline such an individualized reception, that make each beholder aware of the role played by his or her individual history and subject-position, that forms the crux of the neo-avant-garde project of Rauschenberg and Cage. In this, their work differs from that attributed to the historical avant-garde, for it relinquishes the attempt, common to dada and constructivism, to address or forge a collective political subject. For Rauschenberg, as for Cage, all forms of collectivity—whether advocated by the Left or the Right, for political mobilization or mass cultural conformity—were suspect. Indeed, it was precisely on the grounds of collective or mass reception that Rauschenberg most strenuously rejected the entire notion of shock.<sup>61</sup> In this lies their difference from their minimalist successors, for their work does not presuppose a common denominator of subjectivity, as in the subject who comes to consciousness of his or her perceptual processes through the phenomenological interaction with the minimalist object. Neither does the form of individualized reception embraced by Cage and Rauschenberg necessarily equate with that characterizing consumerism and the society of the spectacle. Spectacular reception is, of course, individual—as in the “lonely crowd” of television viewers—but what is given to be seen is either identical or strictly circumscribed within the limits set by commercial culture. The specificity of the *White Paintings*, by contrast, is that each individual is continually given to see something different, an experience aimed at subverting any sense of stable or autonomous individuality rather than falsely buttressing it.<sup>62</sup>

61. See Rauschenberg’s comments in “AS,” p. 129 and in G. R. Swenson, “Rauschenberg Paints a Picture,” *Art News* 62 (Apr. 1963): 66. Bürger explicitly relates Dadaistic shock to collective reception (See Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p. 53).

62. In addition to Cage’s famous embrace of “no-mindedness,” see Rauschenberg’s many comments such as “I don’t like the single ego. . . . I just don’t want to have one” (quoted in Barbaralee Diamonstein, *Inside New York’s Art World* [New York, 1979], p. 311). For an important discussion of the neo-avant-garde’s relation to spectacle, see Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “The Primary Colors for the Second Time: A Paradigm Repetition of the Neo-Avant-Garde,” *October*, no. 37 (Summer 1986): 41–52. In comments quoted there, Yves

Although the *White Paintings* were always nonrepresentational, what changed between 1951 and 1953 was that they came to be understood no longer as an image of nothing but in terms of a critique of representation (fig. 15). Rather than the product of an arbitrary or anarchic negation, then, the *White Paintings* should be understood as properly anarchistic. For, as the philosopher Todd May has indicated, the critique of representation—on a philosophical as well as a political level—is the fundamental tenet of anarchism. “What motivates the critique of political representation,” writes May, “is the idea that in giving people images of who they are and what they desire, one wrests from them the ability to decide those matters for themselves.”<sup>63</sup>

In 1968, Gilles Deleuze (like Cage, an avid Bergsonian) would, in *Difference and Repetition*, formulate his own critique of representation. For Deleuze, representation serves to cover over or mask difference, sheathing it in the conceptual form of the identical and annihilating the differentiating function of time.<sup>64</sup> “Representation fails to capture the affirmed world of difference,” he writes. “It mediates everything, but mobilizes and moves nothing” (*DR*, pp. 55–56). For Deleuze, as for Rauschenberg and Cage, difference is to be seen as a positive force, and negation is, as it was for Bergson, on the order of a pseudo-idea. “Negation is difference,” Deleuze explains,

but difference seen from its underside, seen from below. Seen the right way up, from top to bottom, difference is affirmation. This proposition, however, means many things: that difference is an object of affirmation; that affirmation itself is multiple; that it is creation but also that it must be created, as affirming difference, as being difference in itself. [*DR*, p. 55]

Although Deleuze maintains that the “path leading to the abandonment of representation” was indicated by a certain understanding of modern art (*DR*, pp. 68–69; see also p. 56), it does not seem that his presentation of art history was yet equal to his vision of the task of philosophy. For if, as Deleuze maintains, it is the aim of philosophy to find “a theory of thought without image,” then it is not sufficient to emulate without qualification “that revolution which took art from representation to abstraction” (*DR*, p. 276). Indeed, as the history of the monochrome makes particularly clear, abstract art, although it eliminates illusionistic

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Klein's remarks on his monochromes seem almost to parody the form of individual reception advocated by Rauchenberg and Cage.

63. Todd May, *The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism* (University Park, Penn., 1994), p. 48.

64. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York, 1994), p. 56; hereafter abbreviated *DR*.

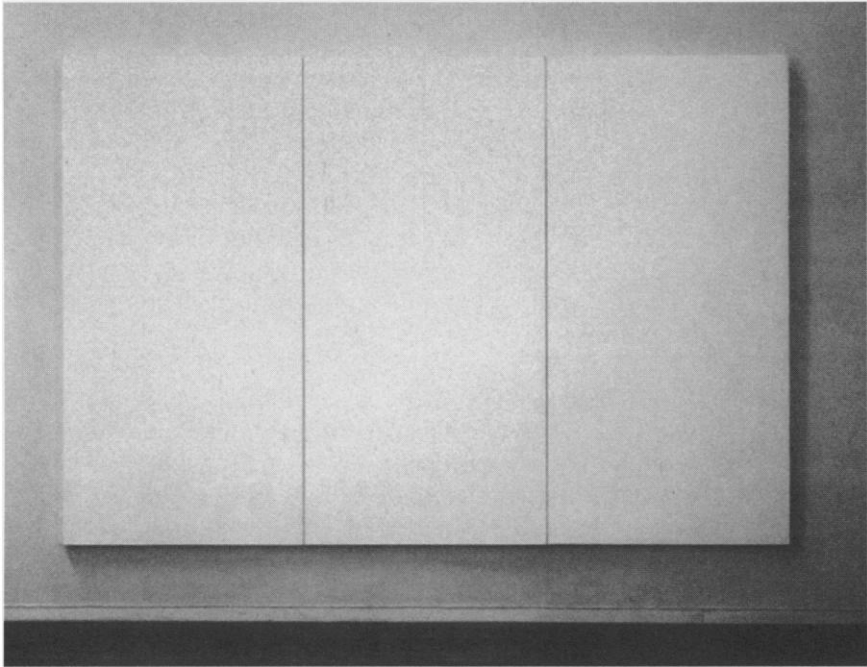


FIG. 15.—Robert Rauschenberg, *White Painting*, 1951. Three panel.

representation, by no means necessarily eliminates the representational function of the image. From Malevich or Mondrian to abstract expressionism, abstract artists have always insisted that their art had a subject to which, on some level, the work could be subordinated and understood. Indeed, the artist's club where the abstract expressionists congregated—and at which Cage lectured and Rauschenberg eavesdropped—was at one point titled the “Subjects of the Artist” School.<sup>65</sup> Yet, with an art that incorporated change in the manner of Rauschenberg's *White Paintings*, it became possible to insert a nonrepresentational form of difference into the image. Only then could difference be seen to fracture the totality that is the work of art, to fulfill Deleuze's criteria of finding “the lived reality of a sub-representative domain” and provide a vision of difference which can be shown differing (*DR*, pp. 69, 56). Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* are thus perhaps the best exemplification of Deleuze's dictum that “the object must therefore be in no way identical, but torn asunder in a difference in which the identity of the object as seen by a seeing subject vanishes” (*DR*, p. 56). Cage, after all, had already presented this idea in his

65. Caroline A. Jones, “Finishing School: John Cage and the Abstract Expressionist Ego,” *Critical Inquiry* 19 (Summer 1993): 637–38. Jones's article discusses the opposition of Cagean silence to the ethos of abstract expressionism.



discussion of object versus process. "If, at this point," Cage further explained about his revelation within the anechoic chamber, "one says, 'Yes! I do not discriminate between intention and non-intention,' the splits, subject-object, art-life, etc., disappear, an identification has been made with the material, and actions are then those relevant to its nature" ("EMD," p. 14).<sup>66</sup>

Beginning in the summer of 1952, the goal of the neo-avant-garde paradigm opened up by Cage and Rauschenberg would be two fold. On the one hand, it would affirm the positive conception of difference that the *White Paintings* had rather passively opened up; on the other, it would develop a means of utilizing imagery and sound while maintaining an anarchistically liberated form of aesthetic reception, one that kept open the possibility of a politics of difference.

66. At this point, one can see a potential danger in Cage's position: by starting from the point of view of an infinitely differentiating field of forces, one runs the risk of ending up with what is essentially a situation of nondifferentiation. Cage seems to have oscillated somewhat on the point of whether the "natural" multiplicity was a holism or not. See, for example, Cage's comments in "Where Are We Going? And What Are We Doing?" in *Silence*, pp. 248–50; and in "Diary: How to Improve the World (You Will Only Make Matters Worse) Continued 1966," *A Year from Monday*, p. 67. Deriving as Cage's position does from a Bergsonian perspective, Deleuze's discussion of the question of monism and pluralism in Bergson is apposite. See Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York, 1988), pp. 73–89.