# Robert Rauschenberg:
## *Night Shades and Phantoms, 1991*

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Robert Rauschenberg, Untitled, ca. 1953. Combine: oil, fabric, newspaper, and camera bellows on wood. 11 ½ × 8 × 3 inches; depth approximate (29.2 × 20.3 × 7.6 cm). Private collection.



# Photosensitive Rauschenberg: Developing Images in the *Night Shades* and *Phantoms*

CHRIS MURTHA

In 1991, three major exhibitions and publications on Robert Rauschenberg emphasized the centrality of photography in the artist's work.[1] Later that same year, on the heels of these retrospective projects, Rauschenberg produced the *Night Shades* and *Phantoms*—two uncharacteristically austere series of silkscreened images on aluminum panels. Exclusively composed of the artist's own matter-of-fact photographs, the two grayscale series were produced as part of more than a decade-long engagement with various metal supports, though their muted, ethereal quality sets them apart. As he did with the *Borealis* series (1988–92)—"corrosions" on copper, brass, and bronze—Rauschenberg "painted" the *Night Shades* with a tarnishing agent, chemically producing veiled and dreamlike images that often appear to develop directly from the silvery surfaces. For the *Phantoms*, produced on mirrored, anodized aluminum, Rauschenberg omitted the tarnish, leaving only the spectral traces of images that become lost among reflections. In content, color scheme, technique, and effect, these two series bring to the fore Rauschenberg's career-long preoccupation with photography as a tool for seeing, framing, recording, and reproducing the world.

Rauschenberg's late paintings on reflective panels relate to the evanescent and receptive surfaces of the *White Paintings* (1951), one of his earliest series, but as images composed of other images, their origins lie as crucially in the photographic techniques of his silkscreens on canvas from 1962 to 1964. Those silkscreen paintings exemplified Rauschenberg's intermedia approach to art, fusing—or confusing—photography, printmaking, painting, and sometimes sculpture to create composite images that often obscure more than they reveal. Yet, they are fundamentally photographic: the artist transferred pictures and other reproductions to canvas using screens coated with light-sensitive emulsion. Though rarely discussed, Rauschenberg saw the initial silkscreen paintings as an early attempt to create the effect of "photosensitized" canvases in order to more seamlessly merge photographic imagery with painterly surfaces.[2] As he pursued and developed this concept, it became increasingly related to, and even integrated into, his broader efforts to "get the room into the picture"—to create artworks that were responsive to their surroundings.[3] The *Night Shades* and *Phantoms* represent the artist's fullest achievement of these two distinct yet related concepts. The works in both series simultaneously retain images and reflect their environment, momentarily enmeshing the viewer in a world of images in a way that those printed on a linen support could not. They "get the room into the picture," endowing the metal "canvas" with an additional layer of indexicality made possible by "photosensitive" surfaces.

As painterly images on metal panels, the *Night Shades* especially recall early photographs printed on metal plates, such as daguerreotypes and tintypes. Rauschenberg's *Night Shades* and *Phantoms* contain traces of each process, both of which resulted in unique impressions. In certain *Night Shades*, the artist used the tarnish to "develop" rather than obscure the image, evoking/calling to mind the light-sensitive emulsion that was applied to lacquered iron plates ("tintype" was a misnomer), allowing them to receive a direct positive image. The reflective surfaces of Rauschenberg's metal paintings resemble the highly polished, silver-plated copper of daguerreotypes, which were produced in a box camera modeled after a camera obscura.[4] Fittingly, the first camera to produce a daguerreotype in the United States was outfitted with a concave mirror instead of a lens.[5]

Of all the metal painting series, the *Night Shades* and *Phantoms* engage most directly with Rauschenberg's photography practice and the medium's conditions in general. At a minimum, this engagement begins with the fact that—like much of his photography and unlike the rest of the metal paintings series—they are largely black and white. With these two series, Rauschenberg addresses the medium of photography itself in imagery and facture—how pictures develop, multiply, and even deteriorate, but also how we view, assemble, and manipulate them. To varying degrees, Rauschenberg addressed such concerns throughout his career, making photographs a fundamental material in his toolbox.

Rauschenberg was drawn to photography from the beginning, pursuing it during his studies at Black Mountain College in 1949.[6] The photographs he incorporated into the metal paintings were taken across various cities at home and abroad between 1979 and 1991, and recall the artist's early ambition to photograph America "inch by inch" at "actual size."[7] Rauschenberg did not publicly discuss this documentary project, conceived at Black Mountain in 1951, until after his first major exhibition of photography in 1981, three decades later. On that occasion he went


fig. 1

Walker Evans, *Roadside Stand Near Birmingham*, 1936. Gelatin silver print, 8 × 10 inches (20.3 × 25.4 cm). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



fig. 2

Robert Frank, *Parade, Hoboken, New Jersey*, from "The Americans," 1955–56. Gelatin silver print, 9 × 13 ¾ inches (23 × 34.9 cm). Courtesy The Andrea Frank Foundation and Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York.

as far as to say that his work has "always been journalistic, even the most abstract paintings."[8] Two years later he affirmed, "I'm more interested in being a reporter than in being an aesthete."[9] Though hyperbolic, this statement reflects Rauschenberg's broader tendency to infuse his art with the contemporary moment, usually by incorporating images appropriated from current newspapers and magazines.

Rauschenberg's grandiose, if earnest, aspiration to photograph the entire country did not emerge from a vacuum. It can be understood within a long tradition of photographic expeditions, particularly the private and government-funded surveys of the American West in the 1860s and 1870s, and later the Farm Security Administration's efforts to enlist photographers to document the lives of ordinary Americans during the Great Depression (fig. 1).[10] From 1955 to 1956, only a few years after Rauschenberg conceived and abandoned his idea, the Swiss-born, American photographer Robert Frank traveled across the United States compiling pictures for his book, *The Americans* (fig. 2). Branden Joseph has noted the concept's similarity to a project Harry Callahan undertook in the late 1940s—"[Callahan's] series of photographs of the ground documented inch by inch taken in Chicago."[11]

Callahan, along with Aaron Siskind, was invited to teach at Black Mountain College in the summer of 1951 by the school's photography instructor, Hazel Larsen Archer.[12] According to Mary Lynn Kotz, Rauschenberg first shared his "inch by inch" idea with Archer, an important mentor whose early influence is often overshadowed by that of the more famous Josef Albers.[13] Though Anni and Josef Albers described him as being "undisciplined," "sloppy," and an "erratic worker," Rauschenberg was also recognized as an eager and dedicated learner.[14] In his report card for the fall 1951 photography course, Archer listed his laboratory hours as "many - indefinite," and she remembered spending considerable "one-on-one" time with the young artist.[15] It was Archer, in fact, who encouraged her students to crop within the camera, by framing the image in the viewfinder before taking the picture, and to print the "full negative," an approach Rauschenberg faithfully employed.[16] He once declared: "I don't crop. Photography is like diamond cutting. If you miss you miss."[17] Emphasizing this aspect of his photographic practice, Rauschenberg typically printed images with the black borders of the negative frame.

Rauschenberg often affirmed the importance of his foundational education in photography. Even though he had decided to pursue painting, as he stated, "the paintings started using photographs. I've never stopped being a photographer."[18] What may have been the artist's first Combine, Untitled (ca. 1953; detail page 20) aptly features an actual camera bellows.[19] From the mid-1960s on, Rauschenberg took pictures only intermittently, but he enthusiastically returned to photography in 1979 to create a set for Trisha Brown's *Glacial Decoy*, her first dance for the proscenium.[20] Brown's choreography directed four women to continuously "slide" across the stage—in sheer white dresses, also designed by Rauschenberg—creating the effect of a never-ending cycle of dancers. Not wanting to "get caught with a static set," Rauschenberg designed one that is as active as the dancers and suggests a similar sense of progression and continuity.[21] For this commission, he took "about three thousand photographs" in and around Fort Myers, Florida, from which he culled 161 black-and-white images to create an ever-shifting backdrop.[22] Projected onto four large screens that spanned the back of the stage, the images advanced at four-second intervals from stage right to left, following the paths of the dancers (fig. 3). The whirring and clicking slide projectors provided the only soundtrack.

Setting the path for much of his later work, this pivotal collaboration reinvigorated Rauschenberg's interest in photography: "I became addicted again. It has heightened my desire to look."[23] Forgoing the broad view for the detail, Rauschenberg trained his camera on the overlooked, what was hidden in plain sight and often fleeting, paying particular attention to the abstract play of light and shadow. Largely void of people, the photographs instead document facades, signs, window displays, and murals, along with other subjects favored by the artist, including livestock, vehicles, textiles, and a miscellany of discarded consumer objects. More than stand-alone images, these photographs provided Rauschenberg with a personal archive to build upon and use in future works—what he referred to as a "repertoire of possible images" and more wryly called "fertilizer."[24] Images associated with this fruitful project are found throughout the metal paintings, including *Monday (Night Shade)* and *Litercy (Phantom)* (plates 14 and 23).[25] In subsequent years, Rauschenberg's photographs replaced those previously appropriated from mass-media print sources, shifting the frame of reference in his paintings from the public realm of shared culture to one more defined by the artist's personal experiences.

fig. 3

Trisha Brown Dance Company's Glacial Decoy (1979) with set, costumes, and lighting by Robert Rauschenberg. Photo: Babette Mangolte. Pictured left to right: Trisha Brown, Nina Lundborg, and Lisa Kraus.



The photographs taken for *Glacial Decoy* also marked the beginning of a new project, *In + Out City Limits*, for which the artist revisited his earlier intention to document America, but this time city by city instead of inch by inch. From 1979 to 1981, Rauschenberg traveled to various locales, producing photographic surveys that were part travelogue and part enigmatic portraits of urban and suburban environs. In 1982–83, this project unofficially expanded to include international locations when he made trips to China, Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Japan, which yielded a wealth of images and would in turn form the basis of his seven-year Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange (ROCI) tour.[26] The *Night Shades* and *Phantoms* are entirely composed of pictures taken under the auspices of *Glacial Decoy*, *In + Out City Limits*, and ROCI; they would not exist without these projects and the associated travels.

The metal paintings were by no means the first in which Rauschenberg incorporated his own imagery. Though Rauschenberg took photographs from the outset of his career, it was not until the silkscreen paintings of 1962–64 that his own images became a consistent and integral element in his work.[27] Around the same time as Andy Warhol, Rauschenberg realized the artistic potential of the silkscreen technique, a photo-reproduction process that was most commonly employed in the commercial and graphic arts.[28] Fabricators produced screens by stretching finely woven silk onto a rectangular frame, coating it with a light-sensitive emulsion, and developing a photographic transparency onto that surface.[29] Pushing viscous ink through the open weave of the silk with a squeegee creates a reverse image of the screen, a positive reproduction of the original photograph. Since silkscreens can be reused, like photographic negatives, the technique allowed Rauschenberg to repeat images within and between canvases. This process embodied Rauschenberg's concept of a photosensitized canvas, but, notably, it is the screen and not the canvas that is photosensitive.[30]

Rauschenberg began his silkscreen paintings in October 1962, initially restricting himself to a grayscale palette as he learned the intricacies of a new method.[31] Though these works merged elements of painting, photography, and printmaking, it can be argued that they were primarily concerned with the photographic.[32] This is especially evident with the black-and-white silkscreen paintings, since their tonality alone brings to mind photography, particularly the images distributed via television and newspaper at the time.[33] In this sense, paint and silkscreen ink were applied to achieve a photographic aesthetic. In a 1964 review, Max Kozloff wrote that in *Crocus* (1962), "paint apes the photographic process, and richly 'pictorializes' it."[34] Rauschenberg learned to command the silkscreen technique very quickly, and his confidence enabled him to exploit various technical elements of the process to accentuate the act of picture making itself, experimenting with scale, repetition, reversals, erasure, and printing effects.[35]

Rauschenberg's most monumental silkscreen painting, *Barge* (1962–63; fig. 4), illustrates his employment of repetition and seriality, as well as his broader concern with the photographic.[36] Over thirty feet wide, this panoramic canvas is so vast and densely composed that every image in this epic work, including an American rocket, football players, and the knotted off-ramps of an expressway, can be found in at least one other silkscreen painting.[37] *Barge* also includes duplicated imagery within its composition: a satellite antenna and a birdcage appear twice, while a General Electric flood lamp is screened four times across the top. The painting's iconography also underscores Rauschenberg's sensitivity to picture making. In addition to the flood lamp, which would have been used in photography studios, *Barge* prominently features a light-reflecting umbrella and an image of the New York Hilton Hotel under construction, which strongly resembles a contact sheet of negatives.[38] Rauschenberg further

fig. 4

Robert Rauschenberg, *Barge*, 1962–63. Oil and silkscreen ink on canvas, 79 ⅞ × 386 inches (202.9 × 980.4 cm). Guggenheim Bilbao Museum, Spain, and Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

cements the thematic connection between these images by screening them onto other small, tightly focused paintings, including Untitled (1963; fig. 5).

In *Express* (1963; fig. 6), a composition animated by allusions to motion, a time-lapse photograph of a nude woman descending a staircase pays homage to the chronophotography of Étienne-Jules Marey (and more overtly to Marcel Duchamp's famous 1912 painting, *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*), while a series of racehorses evoke Eadweard Muybridge's stop-motion photographs. But the horse and rider sequence only suggests motion and temporal progression: in fact, Rauschenberg simply repeated the same image four times along the left-hand edge of the canvas. He was well aware that even though the camera was able to capture reality, it could also deceive. *Express* features other still images of dynamic subjects—a sailboat, tires, rappelling soldiers, and the artist's own picture of dancers from the Merce Cunningham Dance Company—emphasizing another contradiction: photography's ability to portray movement by arresting time.[39]

Though Rauschenberg composed his black-and-white silkscreen paintings with images culled primarily from magazines and newspapers, he also incorporated those taken with his own camera. A Polaroid Rauschenberg took from his studio roof—a skyline of silhouetted water towers—is a constant presence in these paintings and a subtle autobiographical reference (fig. 7). He also produced screens from quotidian pictures: a potted plant, a drinking glass, stairs, and the front end of a freight truck.[40] As the artist later recalled, he intentionally took photographs of generic subjects to counterbalance the loaded content of the more predominant popular imagery:

> When I lived on Broadway, I would go out to the middle of Union Square and take Polaroids to have made into silkscreens. I needed some very simple images, like perhaps a glass of water, or a piece of string, or the bathroom floor with a roll of toilet paper on it. They didn't need to have any immediate emotional content. I needed them to dull the social implications, to neutralize the calamities that were going on in the outside world.[41]

At the same time, Rauschenberg acknowledged that these "simple images" were not so passive, admitting that even a glass of water came preloaded with associations and "psychological implications."[42] Clearly, the artist's picture of a glass of water, which appears in over a dozen silkscreen paintings, wasn't a

fig. 5

Robert Rauschenberg, Untitled, 1963. Oil and silkscreen ink on canvas, 36 × 25 inches (91.4 × 63.5 cm). The Sonnabend Collection and Antonio Homem.



fig. 6

Robert Rauschenberg, *Express*, 1963. Oil and silkscreen ink on canvas, 72 × 120 inches (182.9 × 304.8 cm). Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid.

snapshot taken in passing but instead a well-composed and professionally staged photograph that played an integral, if understated, role in the silkscreen paintings series.

Combining his own images with those sourced from current events, popular culture, and art history, Rauschenberg's silkscreen paintings presciently captured the effect of what was at the time a relatively new way of seeing the world—as if filtered primarily through images. He elaborated on this perceptual condition in "Random Order," a photo-essay published in 1963 in the short-lived *Location* magazine.[43] The handwritten text the artist scrawled across a central photomontage of his recent Polaroids articulated the photographic themes he concurrently explored in the silkscreen paintings: mainly vision, depth, and illusion.[44] Next to an image of his partially opened studio window, Rauschenberg wrote: "A dirty or foggy window makes what is outside appear to be projected on to [*sic*] the window plane."[45] The photograph juxtaposes the flattening opacity of a dirty window with the perceptual depth made visible by opening that same window (fig. 8). To the right of this image, the artist wrote of such depth as "an air filled sense of volume" that "can be compressed and flattened to the extent that a brush load of paint can hold it to a picture surface."[46] These statements and the accompanying photographs represented Rauschenberg's emerging thoughts on how photography—a tool used to flatten actual depth—could merge with painting—a medium traditionally used to create the illusion of depth from actual flatness.

fig. 7

Polaroid of water towers used as source material, ca.1963. Photo: Robert Rauschenberg. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation.

With the silkscreen paintings, Rauschenberg successfully conflated these seemingly contradictory mediums through a third—printmaking—providing a foundation for much of his later work. Though this synthesis—the apparent integration of the photographic image into the painterly surface—would become a core element of his photosensitization project, he soon recognized the limitations of the static canvas support. Influenced by his work in dance and performance, he increasingly opted to screen images onto translucent and reflective surfaces that changed with time and were responsive to viewers and environmental conditions.[47] Previously, with select Combines, Rauschenberg employed mirrors to "get the room into the picture" and counteract the "fixedness of a painting."[48] He further pursued this phenomenological reality with various silkscreen projects: initially with mirrored Plexiglas in *Soundings* (1968) and *Carnal Clocks* (1969), and later with reflective metal panels.[49]

In 1985, with the *Copperheads* from *ROCI CHILE*, Rauschenberg began producing silkscreen paintings on copper, and later on, aluminum, brass, bronze, and steel as well. These "metal paintings," as the artist called them, expanded the photosensitized surface to include reflectivity, adding an additional layer of indexicality. Discussing the highly reflective *Shiners* (1986–93) in a 1987 interview with Barbara Rose, he said, "I don't want the piece to stop on the wall. And it has to somehow *document* what's going on in the room and be flexible enough to *respond*. At the point when it becomes static, it doesn't work any longer."[50] In the same interview, Rauschenberg talked about his desire to expand the purview of a photosensitized canvas to an entire room: "There's still a project that I have in mind where the walls will *absorb* whatever images appear in that room."[51] In other words, the surfaces—and spaces—themselves were meant to absorb, document, and respond. Rauschenberg intended these works to be as sensitive to the room as photographic paper is to light.

First and foremost, the metal panels were surfaces for images, whether fixed or transient, and the *Night Shades* and *Phantoms* are unique among the metal paintings for their parallels with the artist's initial silkscreen paintings on canvas. Produced in the spring and summer of 1991, shortly after the Whitney Museum's comprehensive exhibition, *The Silkscreen Paintings, 1962–64*, perhaps it is no coincidence that the two series mark both a return to the limited grayscale palette Rauschenberg employed in his earliest silkscreen paintings as well as a pronounced departure from the colorful chaos of his other metal paintings. Like his silkscreen paintings on canvas, the *Night Shades* and *Phantoms* are "images compiled of images" that engage even more acutely with the photographic in both iconography and facture.[52] Crucially, they are also composed solely of Rauschenberg's own pictures, closely tying them to his photographic eye.

Though works like *Holiday Ruse* and *Heroes/Sheroes* (both *Night Shades*) feature compositions as dense as *Barge*, the *Night Shades* and *Phantoms* frequently present suggestively sparse compositions with just two or

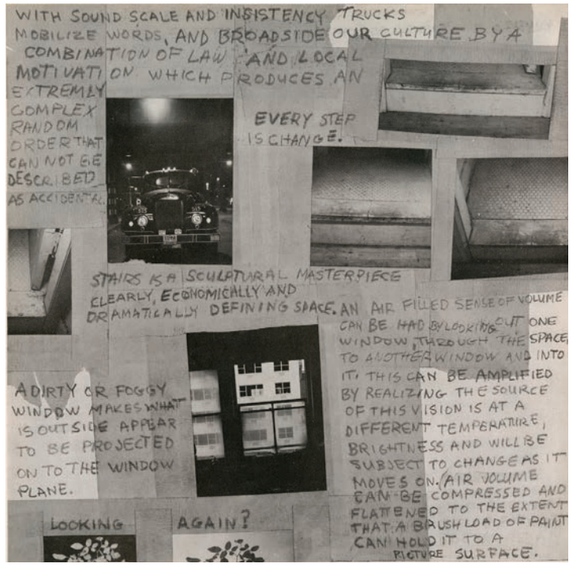


fig. 8

Detail of Robert Rauschenberg's *Random Order* (1963) reproduced in *Location* magazine, vol. 1, no. 1 (Spring 1963). Robert Rauschenberg Foundation.



three images apiece. *Night Shades* such as *Pins*, *Portal* (see page 17, fig. 5), and *Palm Sunday* (plate 4) are single-image works, rarities in Rauschenberg's oeuvre. On the one hand, the sparseness forcefully directs the viewer to zoom in on the images, as with *Time Scan (Phantom)* (plate 18); on the other, it reserves space for reflected objects to enter the work, as in *Litercy (Phantom)* and *Driveway Detour (Night Shade)* (plates 23 and 13). In the most minimal *Phantoms*, which include *Litercy*, the porous images confound clear demarcations between positive and negative space, while in *Night Shades* like *Southern Hemisphere* and *Vanities* (plate 3), the artist's gestural application of corrosive tarnish activates the gaps between screened images. In many cases, Rauschenberg used images that frame other images—advertisements, signage, windows, and displays of art—to create the effect of a more densely composed collage. At the bottom register of *Path (Night Shade)*, blinds printed with two pictures partially shutter a storefront, dividing the source image into three sections; what first appears to be a patchwork of several photographs is revealed to be one containing multiple frames (plate 7).

This strategy of enclosing images within images, which echoes an effect of Rauschenberg's earlier silkscreens on canvas, is similarly evident in the "fine art photographs" he produced between 1979 and 1991: a decorative statuette of Botticelli's windswept Venus set against thrift store paintings (fig. 9); the window display of a photography studio (plate 38); and paintings stacked up for sale by a street vendor.[53] With his camera, Rauschenberg also honed in on the ways in which reflections distort, refract, and complicate vision, effects that were made actual in the *Phantoms* and select *Night Shades*. In *Boston, Massachusetts* (1980), two curved mirrors obstruct the view through a storefront window, instead providing a warped funhouse reflection of the surrounding city block (plate 31). Other examples include: the ornate mirror in *Vanities (Night Shade)*, which hovers ghostlike in a washed-out Odessa interior (plate 3); a photograph of a darkened New York bedroom partially illuminated by reflected light (plate 37); and a distant reflection of the artist and his assistant, Terry Van Brunt, hidden within a multilayered view through a barbershop window (fig. 10).

In these two series, Rauschenberg also employed photographic techniques originally explored in his 1960s silkscreens, mainly mirroring, reversals, doubling, repetition, and obfuscation. In

fig. 9

Robert Rauschenberg, *New York City*, from *In + Out City Limits: New York City*, 1981. Gelatin silver print, 19 × 13 inches (48.3 × 33 cm). Robert Rauschenberg Foundation.

fig. 10

Robert Rauschenberg, *Boston, Massachusetts*, from *In + Out City Limits: Boston*, 1980. Gelatin silver print, 13 × 19 inches (33 × 48.3 cm). Robert Rauschenberg Foundation.

*Botanical Vaudeville (Phantom)*, Rauschenberg repeatedly screened an image of a single tree: two are flipped on a horizontal axis to create a mirroring effect; a third image is screened across that horizon, adding to the optical confusion (plate 17). *Monday (Night Shade)* makes prominent use of a photograph from *Glacial Decoy*: an image of a white towel hanging against the night sky (plate 26). In the painting, the photograph appears three times at two different scales: first, Rauschenberg screened it in clear resist, then he made a partial impression with white silkscreen ink and then printed a smaller screen in black ink on top, creating the solarized effect of a black towel that "casts" a white shadow (plate 14). A comparison of Rauschenberg's original photograph with his later painting reveals the complex transformations the artist performed when transferring his matter-of-fact pictures into the evocative realm of painting.

With his silkscreen paintings on canvas, Rauschenberg veiled images in a variety of ways: by layering screens and intentionally printing them poorly; through erasure and by smearing paint and ink with a turpentine-soaked rag; and by painting over them with washes, splatters, and scribbled brushstrokes. He employed some of these tactics in the *Night Shades* and, to a lesser extent, the *Phantoms*, but here Rauschenberg primarily used chemical corrosion and reflectivity to visually obfuscate his own imagery.

Rauschenberg's process with these metal paintings was varied and experimental but he largely produced the *Night Shades* by "painting" with an oxidizing tarnish—a selenious acid marketed as Aluma Black.[54] To produce the more brooding paintings, Rauschenberg used the corrosive tarnish to create a darkened ground, over which he silkscreened his photographs with black acrylic medium. In those more pertinent to this discussion, Rauschenberg applied the tarnish over images that had already been silkscreened with a clear synthetic varnish onto brushed or mirrored aluminum.[55] The varnish acted as a "resist" layer, protecting the screened areas of aluminum from the blackening effects of the acid and producing an image in negative. According to Lawrence Voytek, one of Rauschenberg's assistants at the time, Aluma Black immediately darkened the surface when applied at full strength.[56] To create tonal shades of gray, Rauschenberg diluted the tarnish with water and applied it loosely with rags or mops, which accounts for the paint-like drips and splatters that appear throughout the series. In this way, Rauschenberg was able to paint with acid. Once satisfied with the piece, and the degree of patination achieved, Rauschenberg hosed the paintings down with water to stop the chemical process and "fix" the images.

This wet-on-wet process evokes photographic production, specifically the development of negatives and prints in chemical baths. The fluid quality of Rauschenberg's method materializes in the apparent liquidity of works like *Hollyhock Party* and *Hydro* (plates 2 and 6). Because screened images only became visible where tarnish was applied, the chemical reaction created the effect of images developed directly from the artist's gestural marks on the aluminum surface. Voytek described the production of the similarly tarnished *Borealis* paintings as akin to "watching a photograph develop in a darkroom."[57] Art historian Armin Zweite responded similarly to the *Night Shades*: "We get the impression that we are looking at a photographic image which not only underwent multiple exposures but also suffered additional damage during its development."[58] The effect of the image being "developed" by the artist's marks is most evident in the emphatically gestural *Driveway Detour* and *Party-Bird* (plates 13 and 1). Close inspection of the winding curve that cuts through the latter, one of the more picturesque *Night Shades*, reveals the faint traces of the screened photograph (plate 40), evidence of how Rauschenberg selectively applied the tarnish, often leaving sections of a screened image untouched or "undeveloped." Nearly invisible, such passages anticipate the ghostly effect of the *Phantoms*.



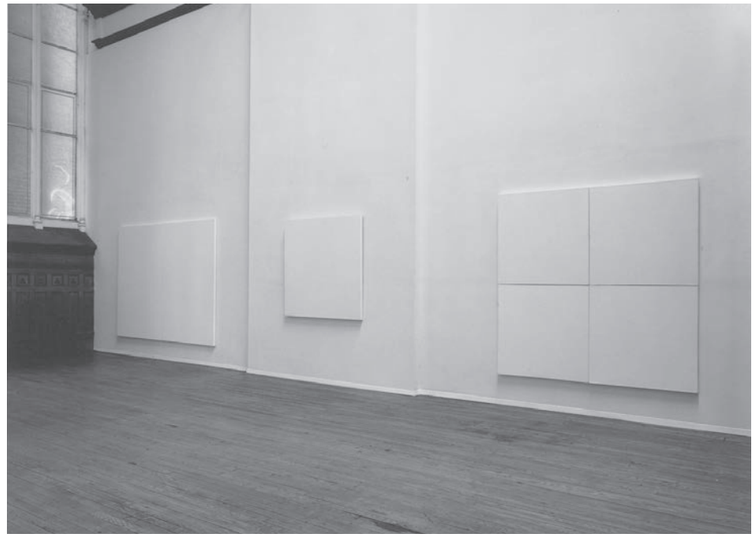

fig. 11

Installation view of Robert Rauschenberg's *White Painting [two panel]* (1951), *White Painting* (1951), and *White Painting [four panel]* (1951) in the Chapel, 381 Lafayette Street, 1991. Photo: Dorothy Zeidman. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation.

A more limited series of eighteen silkscreens on anodized mirrored aluminum, the *Phantoms* began by chance.[59] Such creative happenstance was not unusual for an artist who "collaborated" with his materials and often pushed the limits of their intended use. In a typically fortuitous moment of experimentation, Rauschenberg attempted to apply tarnish to anodized aluminum, unaware that the pretreated metal was resistant to chemical reactions. The result was a spectral image that barely registered, which naturally appealed to the artist's interest in veiling and obfuscation—he liked how difficult they were to see.[60] Though the *Phantoms* appear monochromatic, one can discern subtle tints of color from certain angles and depending on the light, which Rauschenberg achieved by dyeing the varnish. For *Stone Lady Radial*, he imbued each of the three impressions with a different pale tone, while *Marsh Haven* was tinted so strongly that it more closely resembles a *Night Shade* (plate 24). Occasionally, Rauschenberg applied gestural passages of the dyed varnish in the margins of a *Phantom*, effectively "framing" his screened images. Regardless of the subtle touches, the images are overpowered by what the surface itself reflects. As with the tarnished panels, the support plays as integral a role as the imagery printed upon it.

With their restrained aesthetic and unabashed reflectivity, the *Phantoms* momentarily register their changing environment, operating similarly to Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* (fig. 11).[61] When John Cage famously referred to those pristine monochromes as "airports for the lights, shadows, and particles," he also cited the artist's early incorporation of reflective surfaces as another tactic used to introduce transience and contingency into his work: "Changing what is seen by means of what is happening."[62] What happens in the *Phantoms*, as well as the mirrored *Night Shades*, is that the artist makes viewers aware of the physical and temporal aspects of looking: straining to remove their own reflection from the picture; moving around a work, as if a sculpture, to discover hidden images and subtle tints of color; getting close to distinguish between screens; and taking time to witness their transformation under changing light. Rauschenberg often encouraged his audience to become active participants and here, in front

of these mirrored images, viewers perform the act of looking while becoming part of the image itself. Moreover, analogous to the experience of having one's picture taken, these reflective paintings make one aware of the knowing gaze, the awareness of looking while being looked at.

Composed of photographs and informed by the medium's aesthetics and conditions, these mercurial paintings nevertheless draw attention to something that is not photographable: our embodied perception as spectators. Rauschenberg's conception of responsive photographic environments drew a parallel between the reflective and the photosensitive. Yet, in these metal paintings there is an implicit tension between the transient quality of the reflected imagery and the photographic stills affixed to the surface. The reflectivity of these works enables them to transcend their status as static objects, changing their appearance according to the contingencies of the viewer and the surrounding space. Rauschenberg's photographs, on the other hand, firmly root the imagery in his own experiences and photographic sensibility.

The indexical aspects of both series, along with the chemical "development" of imagery perceived in the *Night Shades*, exemplify Rauschenberg's career-long exploration of the photographic. As reflective paintings that evoke photosensitive surfaces, they bring the room into the picture, both literally and figuratively. An installation of these metal paintings begins to resemble the project Rauschenberg envisioned in 1987 but never executed: a room of images that absorb, document, and respond.[63] Such a room is an environment in constant flux, making manifest Rauschenberg's adage that "looking also had to happen in time."[64] What we see when looking at a *Night Shade* or *Phantom* is only one of many possible images, and it will never be the same image twice.

## ENDNOTES

1 *The Silkscreen Paintings, 1962–64* was on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, from December 7, 1990 to March 17, 1991; the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., presented *Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange* (*ROCI*) from May 12 to September 2, 1991; and *Robert Rauschenberg: The Early 1950s* opened at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C., on June 15, 1991, before traveling to several venues.

2 Although Rauschenberg first experimented with photosensitized surfaces when he began producing cyanotypes with Susan Weil in 1949, those photograms lacked the concrete referents of pictures. Later, Rauschenberg attempted to create the effect of photosensitization with screenprinted works, such as *Soundings* and *Solstice* (both 1968), that respond to their surroundings and directly engage spectators.

3 Rauschenberg interviewed by Billy Klüver in March 1963, in *On Record* (New York: Experiments in Art and Technology, 1981), p. 45. See also Barbara Rose, *Rauschenberg* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987), pp. 56, 77, and 110.

4 While he primarily used a Rolleiflex camera at Black Mountain College, Rauschenberg experimented with a pinhole camera: a scaled down, makeshift model of a camera obscura. Susan Davidson and David White, preface, to *Robert Rauschenberg: Photographs, 1949–1962* (New York: D.A.P., 2011), p. 10.

5 Alexander Wolcott and John Johnson produced a daguerreotype portrait with their patented "mirror-camera" in New York on October 7, 1839. Later, in their portrait studio, they used a system of mirrors, which were installed on the exterior of the building and within their portrait studio, to maximize the available light and reduce exposure time. Sarah Kate Gillespie, *The Early American Daguerreotype* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), pp. 17, 31, 102.

6 For Rauschenberg's early photography, see Walter Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg: The Early 1950s*, exh. cat. (Houston: Menil Collection, 1991); and Davidson and White, eds., *Photographs, 1949–1962*.



7 Rauschenberg quoted in Alain Sayag, "Interview with Robert Rauschenberg," January 9, 1981, in *Robert Rauschenberg, Photographs* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), np; and in Rose, *Rauschenberg*, p. 75.

8 Rauschenberg quoted in Sayag, "Interview with Robert Rauschenberg," np.

9 Rauschenberg quoted in Paul Raedeke, "Interview with Rauschenberg," *Photo Metro* 2, no. 13 (October 1983): p. 17.

10 Walker Evans's photographs of regional architecture, roadside billboards, signage, and storefront displays are particularly evocative of the vernacular images Rauschenberg took on his own documentary travels.

11 Branden W. Joseph, "The Gap and the Frame," *October* 117 (Summer 2006): p. 62n39.

12 Née Hazel-Frieda Larsen.

13 Mary Lynn Kotz, *Rauschenberg, Art and Life* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2004): p. 74. Walter Hopps noted Archer's influence: "Rauschenberg acknowledges a particular debt to the photographer and teacher Hazel-Frieda Larsen. She was a rigorous but nurturing teacher with whom he developed an empathetic relationship, as opposed to the abrasive one with Albers." Hopps, *The Early 1950s*, p. 24.

14 Rauschenberg's report cards, 1948–49 and 1951–52, Black Mountain College 1933–56, Original Records of the School, State Archives of North Carolina, Asheville, NC.

15 Ibid.; David Vaughan, "Motion Studies: Hazel Larsen Archer at Black Mountain College," *Aperture* 179 (Summer 2005): p. 28. Though Archer began teaching at Black Mountain in 1949, Rauschenberg did not enroll in her two-term course on photography until September 1951, after Anni and Josef Albers had left the College.

16 Vaughan, "Motion Studies," p. 25. Andrew Oates, a former student of Archer's, recalled that she "always wanted us to use the full negative when printing a photograph, and encouraged us to *design* an image when looking through the camera lens."

17 Rauschenberg quoted in Sayag, "Interview with Robert Rauschenberg," np. Two years later he stated, "My risk at being traditional in taking pictures is the gamble of hitting on that precise moment without cropping, without collage, without any tricks." Rauschenberg quoted in Raedeke, "Interview with Rauschenberg," p. 16.

18 Rauschenberg quoted in Rose, *Rauschenberg*, p. 75.

19 Joseph, "The Gap and the Frame," p. 57; Nicholas Cullinan, "To Exist in Passing Time," in *Robert Rauschenberg: Photographs, 1949–1962* (New York: D.A.P., 2011), p. 14.

20 Rauschenberg used his own photographs in several projects around the late 1960s: *Revolver* (1967), *Solstice* (1968), *Soundings* (1968), *Carnal Clocks* (1969), *Stoned Moon Book* (1970), and *Syn-Tex* (1970). Conceived expressly for the theatrical stage, as opposed to her earlier site-specific performances, *Glacial Decoy* had its world premiere at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, on May 7, 1979. It was first performed in New York at the Marymount Manhattan Theatre on June 20, 1979.

21 Rauschenberg quoted in Don Shewey, "We Collaborated by Postcards," *Theatre Crafts* 18, no. 4 (1984).

22 Trisha Brown, "Collaboration: Life and Death in the Aesthetic Zone," in *Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective*, eds. Walter Hopps and Susan Davidson, exh. cat. (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1997), p. 269. Brown writes that 620 *slides* were used, but an inventory in the artist's archives lists 161 *images*. If something around 150 to 160 images were used across four projectors that would have resulted in a total of over 600 slides.

23 Rauschenberg quoted in Sayag, "Interview with Robert Rauschenberg," np. Rauschenberg's return to photography might also have been influenced by a lawsuit filed against him for copyright infringement in this period. Gay Morris, "When Artists Use Photographs," *ARTnews* 80, no. 1 (Jan. 1981): pp. 102–06.

24 Rauschenberg quoted in Brown, "Collaboration," p. 274n3, and Sayag, "Interview with Robert Rauschenberg," np.

25 Rauschenberg more immediately mined his *Glacial Decoy* photographs to create two related series of prints with Universal Limited Art Editions (ULAE), the *Glacial Decoy Series* (1979–80), which included five etchings and four lithographs, and *The Razorback Bunch* (1980–82) photoetchings. Esther Sparks, *Universal Limited Art Editions—A History and Catalogue: The First Twenty-Five Years* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 1989), pp. 462–66.

26 Rauschenberg discusses the development of ROCI from *In + Out* in Raedeke, "Interview with Rauschenberg," p. 17. Rauschenberg later returned to the host cities to mount an exhibition of the associated *In + Out City Limits* photographs. Similarly, his ROCI exhibitions featured installations of the photographs captured in that country, as well as those from visits to other countries on the ROCI tour.

27 Rauschenberg created his first photolithographs in the spring of 1962—an important precedent for merging painting, photography, and printmaking—but he did not include his own photography in his prints

until after he started the silkscreen paintings. Their "[b]ig influence on paintings" was acknowledged by the artist in his whorl of text featured on the central panel of the large-scale, three-panel lithograph *Autobiography* (1968). The text was reprinted in Calvin Tomkins, *Off the Wall: Robert Rauschenberg and the Art World of Our Time* (New York: Doubleday, 1980), pp. 304–05.

28 Andy Warhol, who would have been familiar with the technique from his work as a commercial illustrator, started painting with silkscreens around August 1962. After inquiring about the process and visiting Warhol's studio on September 18, 1962, Rauschenberg quickly took up the technique himself. Richard Meyer, "'An Invitation, Not a Command': Silk-screen Paintings," in *Robert Rauschenberg*, eds. Leah Dickerman and Achim Borchardt-Hume, exh. cat. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2017), p. 193.

29 Roni Feinstein details the silkscreen process in Feinstein, *Robert Rauschenberg: The Silkscreen Paintings, 1962–64*, exh. cat. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1990), p. 41.

30 Editorial comments made to Rosalind Krauss in 1997 suggest that Rauschenberg considered his transfer drawings—referred to here as "photo drawings"—an unsatisfactory attempt to "photosensitize grounds" because they were "limited in scale and color" by their technical process. Krauss, "Perpetual Inventory," in *Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective*, eds. Walter Hopps and Susan Davidson, exh. cat. (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1997), p. 212.

31 Between 1962 and 1963, Rauschenberg created approximately forty, largely black-and-white, silkscreen paintings (some transitional works had patches of color). In June of 1963, he switched to working exclusively in color, creating forty more paintings.

32 Nicholas Cullinan frames Rauschenberg's entire artistic output as photographic. See Cullinan, "To Exist in Passing Time," pp. 13–40. Rosalind Krauss and Branden Joseph pursue similar concerns in their own writing.

33 Roni Feinstein, "Random Order: The First Fifteen Years of Robert Rauschenberg's Art, 1949–1964" (Ph.D. dissertation, Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, 1990), p. 390. Feinstein also notes that Rauschenberg has long preferred black-and-white photography as well.

34 Max Kozloff, "The Many Colorations of Black and White," *Artforum* 2, no. 8 (Feb 1964), p. 24.

35 It was largely the ability to achieve such photographic effects that led Rauschenberg to exchange the solvent transfer process used in the Dante drawings (1958–60) for the silkscreen technique.

36 For an informative and detailed essay on *Barge*, see Susan Davidson, "Robert Rauschenberg," *Guggenheim Museum Bilbao Collection* (Bilbao, Spain: Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, 2009), pp. 90–97.

37 The rocket, for example, appears in *Glider*, *Payload*, and *Overcast I* (all 1962). Rauschenberg worked on as many as eight silkscreen paintings at a time, enabling him to easily print one image onto several canvases. Rauschenberg, interviewed by David Sylvester, August 1964, published in Sylvester, *Interviews with American Artists* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 140–41.

38 The forty-seven-floor Hilton opened in midtown on June 1963. A year earlier Rauschenberg created his first lithograph, *Abby's Bird* (1962) for the hotel. Even Mariner 2—the Venus probe, which was launched in 1962 and appears in the painting next to Diego Velázquez's "Rokeby Venus"—was a recording device, a kind of infrared camera.

39 The photograph of the Cunningham dancers also appears in *Scanning*, *Round Trip I*, and Untitled (all 1963). Another image of a dancer is included just to the right of that picture. It has been described as an image of Merce Cunningham but it may more likely be an image of Robert Morris, performing his *Arizona* piece at the Judson Memorial Church in 1963. Not only does the figure resemble Morris more closely than Cunningham, a proof print from the screen of this image was later included in Rauschenberg's *Fossil for Bob Morris* (1965).

40 All but the image of the drinking glass were included in *Random Order* (1963). In a typical act of doubling, Rauschenberg actually used two different photos of glasses in the silkscreen paintings: the one referenced here—which was used in the black-and-white paintings—and another that was taken against wooden floorboards and used in the color paintings.

41 Rauschenberg quoted in Rose, *Rauschenberg*, p. 74.

42 Rauschenberg quoted in Sylvester, *Interviews with American Artists*, p. 134.

43 Robert Rauschenberg, "Random Order," *Location* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1963): pp. 27–31.

44 In addition to the tape-mounted Polaroids, four of which were used throughout the silkscreen painting series (1962–64), Rauschenberg's contribution included reproductions of *Sun Dog* and *Renascence* (both 1962), and a photograph captioned "View from the artist's studio."

45 Rauschenberg, "Random Order," p. 28.

46 Ibid.



47 In 1966, three years after Rauschenberg began choreographing his own dances, he told John Gruen, "My relationship to dance is … directly responsible for my new interest in the spectator's active role." Quoted in Nancy Spector, "Rauschenberg and Performance, 1963–67," in *Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective*, eds. Walter Hopps and Susan Davidson, exh. cat. (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1997), p. 233. He later told Don Shewey, "I've always attempted to bring art into real time—like performance—where it will change because of someone's presence." Shewey, "We Collaborated by Postcards."

48 Rauschenberg quoted in Klüver, *On Record*, p. 45. He later told Barbara Rose, "I used mirrors so that the room would become part of the painting." Rose, *Rauschenberg*, p. 56. Combines that feature reflective surfaces include *Charlene* and *Minutae* (both 1954), but Rauschenberg embedded mirrors into paintings such as *Stone, Stone, Stone* and *Untitled* (both ca. 1951) as early as his debut show at Betty Parsons Gallery.

49 Around the same time, Rauschenberg also silkscreened images onto transparent Plexiglas with the *Revolver* series (1966) and *Solstice* (1968). In fact, two works from his initial series of silkscreen paintings featured images printed onto transparent plastic panels: *Overcast III* and *Dry Cell* (both 1963).

50 Rauschenberg quoted in Rose, *Rauschenberg*, p. 110 (emphasis added).

51 Ibid., p. 77 (emphasis added).

52 Charles F. Stuckey, "Rauschenberg's Everything, Everywhere Era," in *Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective*, eds. Walter Hopps and Susan Davidson, exh, cat, (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1997), p. 36.

53 During his lifetime, Rauschenberg designated certain images as "fine art photographs"—those that were to be exhibited as stand-alone artworks—as opposed to those used as source material for his work in other media. It was these images that were exhibited as part of *In + Out City Limits* and ROCI. The distinction did not prevent the artist from using some fine art photographs, or sometimes similar exposures, as source imagery as well.

54 At the time, Aluma Black was manufactured by Birchwood Casey; today it is primarily used to turn guns black.

55 Often, as with *Party Bird (Night Shade)*, the tarnish occupies the areas not covered by the varnish resist; in other words, the negative shapes within the image are colored black.

56 The Reminiscences of Lawrence Voytek, April 29, 30, and May 1, 2016. Robert Rauschenberg Oral History Project. Conducted in collaboration with INCITE/Columbia Center for Oral History Research. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, p. 80.

57 Ibid., p. 201.

58 Armin Zweite, "Phantoms und Nightshades," in *Robert Rauschenberg* (Dusseldorf: Kunstsammlung Nordrhein Westfalen, 1994), p. 179.

59 In comparison, Rauschenberg created forty-five *Night Shades*.

60 Voytek recounts the origins of the *Phantoms* in the The Reminiscences of Lawrence Voytek, p. 201.

61 Photographs in the artist's archives document an installation of the *White Paintings* in the Chapel, the artist's former studio at 381 Lafayette Street, in 1991, the same year he made the *Phantoms* and *Night Shades*.

62 John Cage, "On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and His Work [1961]," in *Silence: Lectures and Writings, 50th Anniversary Edition* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), p. 102.

63 As discussed on p. 28, and described by Rauschenberg in Rose, *Rauschenberg*, pp. 77, 110.

64 Gene R. Swenson, "Robert Rauschenberg Paints a Picture," *ARTnews* 62, no. 2 (April 1963), p. 45.