



# Black Painting (with Asheville Citizen)

James Boaden

Ambling along Fifth Avenue in 1957, through the fur coats and firm set hairstyles, the yelping lap dogs and the heady scent of Youth Dew, you spy a beautiful forest: slender trunks viewed from ground level plunge into soft moss and dark swamp. At the bottom of the image unseen lights pick out sparkling forms, which as you get closer, reveal themselves as earrings and a necklace studded with diamonds. The image is magical; the jewels are gifts from sprites or pixies, left for the delight of a fairy princess. Further along the busy street another image appears, a tiny tree by a low wall, in front of which more jewels pour from a tiny well, again borrowed from the pages of a nursery book. The windows of Tiffany & Co. were never the place for an aggressive commercial come-on; such charming storytelling was always more their style. The brainchild of display director Gene Moore, the tableaux were created by the mysterious hands of Matson Jones, the pseudonym for the partnership of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg.<sup>1</sup> This particular store window display shows the pair's dexterity with ideal, pastoral storytelling and its persuasive power over the wealthy.

Thomas Crow has suggested that the fine art practice of Johns in particular bears a striking relationship to the aesthetic of American folk art that was beginning to find institutional support in the 1950s and to posit a distinctly non-metropolitan style.<sup>2</sup> Yet whilst embracing a non-professional style, both artists on the surface seem to eschew pastoral themes in their practice as 'fine' artists – perhaps eager to disassociate themselves from the kind of easy effects associated with work that takes the countryside or the natural world as its subject. Early works by Robert Rauschenberg, however, suggest rural and non-metropolitan preoccupations that have rarely been discussed in the copious literature on the artist. In the monochrome 'black paintings', made in the early 1950s, we may be able to discern a very different relationship to rural life than the idyll conjured in the windows of Tiffany's. To look at the work in this way allows us new routes into Rauschenberg's practice and provokes broader questions about the history of collage.

During the 1950s the complex experiments in abstraction carried out by the abstract expressionist painters were often subsumed into the category of nature. The sculptor David Smith perhaps described this process most succinctly in 1955 when he wrote,

To talk of nature as the artist's subject has been more the preoccupation of those who do not like to look at art but need easily recognizable objects to

**Detail of Arthur Rothstein,  
Negroes at Gees Bend,  
Alabama, 1937 (plate 6).**

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talk about. ... The demand for nature usually boils down to the fact that what is wanted are echoes instead of invention.<sup>3</sup>

In 1968, the critic Leo Steinberg read Robert Rauschenberg's art as an antidote to this absorption of abstraction into landscape. Steinberg declared that Rauschenberg's work introduced a new axis for painting, the flat bed picture plane.<sup>4</sup> As opposed to the vertical address of traditional painting which corresponds to 'the erect human posture', the top as the head, the lower edge the feet, the flatbed has more in common with maps, plans or rugs; objects that could be hung on the wall but still would have a horizontal 'psychic address'.<sup>5</sup> Examples included the flat bed of the printing press or the bulletin board, in fact 'any receptor surface on which objects are scattered, on which data is entered, on which information may be received, printed, impressed – whether coherently or in confusion'.<sup>6</sup> Steinberg viewed this as a move from nature to culture which radically questioned earlier advanced painting – that of Pollock and



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**I Martha Holmes, Lee Krasner  
and Jackson Pollock, 1949.  
Photo: ©Time/Life and Getty  
Pictures London.**

his 'colour field' followers in particular. He writes, 'Pollock's drip paintings can not escape being read as thickets; [Morris] Louis' *Veils* acknowledge the same gravitational force to which our being in nature is subject.'<sup>7</sup>

Collage of course is the mode through which Steinberg's argument operates. Peter Bürger has written of the ability of collage to disrupt the unity of the 'organic work of art':

The man made organic work of art that pretends to be like nature projects an image of reconciliation of man and nature. According to [Theodor] Adorno, it is the characteristic of the non-organic work using the principle of montage that it no longer creates the semblance of reconciliation.<sup>8</sup>

Walter Benjamin's analysis of collage and montage effects as analogous to the way we view the city in a state of distraction is perhaps paradigmatic.<sup>9</sup> The fact that mechanical reproduction allowed modernity's products to reach far beyond the sphere of the city is rarely mentioned. Sites considered peripheral to the stride into the modern, such as rural areas, need to be addressed in our analysis of the relationship between technology and cultural change. Signifiers of modern mass culture placed in a rural context may highlight, not the dominant, industrial culture's triumph, but rather its failure to reach the places it was needed most.

The work of Robert Rauschenberg is frequently viewed as a product of the city of New York in which (for the most part) it was made.<sup>10</sup> Rauschenberg, like his contemporary Jasper Johns, was brought up and educated in America's Southern states during the Depression – far from New York City. Both artists displayed an ambivalent stance towards their background in the earliest years of their careers – but both would return to the South in later life. It is important to acknowledge this background not so much as a motivating factor for making the work but as a factor in its reception.

To put Rauschenberg's early work into context, we might begin by considering the role of the landscape in the work and personae of the abstract expressionist painters with whom he was first exhibiting in the early 1950s. T. J. Clark has dismissed accounts of abstract expressionism that have emphasized triumph, angst and the political uses of painting as a 'weapon of the cold war', in favour of a view of the work through an idea of the 'vulgar': using showy, bravura paint effects in wildly contrasting block colours in a direct and open appeal to enliven the outlook of its bourgeois viewers.<sup>11</sup> Critical to Clark's argument is the use made of landscape metaphors, demonstrating the short distance between the celebration of an abundant agrarian nation in the regionalist styles of American painters of the 1930s and the advanced painting of the abstract expressionists. The sentiments conveyed by Grant Wood, John Steuart Curry and Thomas Hart Benton can be seen as less at odds with abstract expressionism than communicated in a different language. As the abstract expressionists began to gain support, the image of a lone farmer up against the elements became an impossible vision – the Depression and mechanization had seen to that – yet the frontier experience persisted in painters' 'vulgarization' of the sublime.

The appeal of the perpetual frontier image to the market is obvious. It reflected notions of 'America' that had gained currency again after the Depression. It was the nation's natural resources that would put the economy of the world to rights in the wake of the 1939–45 war. It was the 'American' character that had pulled them ever upwards through hard times and finally left the nation at the forefront of economic

2 Wilfred Zogbaum, *Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner in East Hampton, New York, c. 1949*. Photographic contact sheet, 26 × 15 cm. Washington, DC: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner Papers, c. 1905–1984). © ARS, NY and DACS, London 2010.

and political power. For most American citizens the immediate post-war years were a time of conformity to a system of highly normative values of containment within the family, the home, and the nation; however, through their pioneering avant-garde painters older ideas of freedom from restraint could be exercised, safely, in fantasy. Clark establishes the class basis for this strategy, 'Abstract expressionism ... is the style of a certain petty bourgeoisie's aspiration to aristocracy, to a totalising cultural power.'<sup>12</sup> Using an illustration of a work by Hans Hofmann hanging in a bourgeois interior, Clark points out how this appeal is made manifest:

Its colours have to reek of nature – of the worst kind of Woolworth forest-glade-with-waterfall-and-thunderstorm-brewing. Its title should turn the knife in the wound. For what it shows is the world its users inhabit in their heart of hearts. It is a picture of interiors, of the visceral-cum-spiritual upholstery of the rich.<sup>13</sup>

Clark shows how the 'vulgar' in this sense differs from an appeal to the popular or the low, and defines its basis in the market. He states that the painters did not aim to pander to a market because they themselves belonged to the same class formation: '[Hofmann] could not have painted their interiors if they were not his interior too.'<sup>14</sup>

Hofmann was not the only painter to reference the expansive landscapes of the United States. Dore Ashton recalls conversations with Clyfford Still in which he recounted his farming experiences in North Dakota, when 'my arms have been bloody to the elbow shucking wheat.'<sup>15</sup> Barnett Newman's call to arms, 'The sublime is now', also conjures up images of the epic landscapes of the Hudson River school.<sup>16</sup> The attitudes range from quiet pastoral to romantic agrarian to epic sublime, few of them moving beyond commonly held fantasies.<sup>17</sup>

Perhaps the most vivid and enduring example of the exploitation of the pastoral and the sublime impulse in the art of the abstract expressionists comes from the life and work of Jackson Pollock. Pollock's move from New York City to Springs in East Hampton is often cited as a decisive break in his career.<sup>18</sup> Accounts of Pollock's life, such as Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith's 1989 biography, have used metaphor as a way to wrap Pollock in his natural surroundings and make it part of him, true to his own dictum 'I am nature'.<sup>19</sup> The narrative is established for us: Pollock in New York drinks and fights; moves out to Springs and is tamed by nature. The move to Springs heralds a new season, a new spring, a season of rejuvenation; he finds nature and in turn finds his muse. We are forever haunted by images of the artist amongst the grass, building sculptures from pebbles on the stony beach or tending to his pet crow, Caw-Caw.

The proof of Pollock's triumphant embrace of nature, so it is said, is found in the paintings themselves, the newfound strength of the two series completed during 1946, his first year at Springs: *Accabonac Creek* and *Sounds in the Grass*. Both series evoke the new locale in their titles: the creek that could be viewed from the house and the high grasses that surrounded it: *The Water Bull*, *Bird Effort* and *Constellation*; *Croaking Movement*, *Eyes in the Heat* and *Earth Worms*, the titles chosen by Pollock animate biomorphic works that pre-date the abstraction of the drip paintings. Of those later drip works which were not given numerical titles by Pollock, few avoid connotations of the natural world that surrounded the artist during the period of their making; *Lavender Mist: Number 1*, the title suggested by Clement Greenberg, and *Autumn Rhythm: Number 30* (both 1950) lock those giant canvases into the woodlands and fields that surround the house at Springs.

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That others proposed the titles for these works may suggest that those around the artist were attempting to tame his practice into 'easily recognizable objects', to borrow Smith's term. However, Pollock and his wife, the painter Lee Krasner, were at least partly complicit in establishing this reading in pictures taken by a number of photographers of the couple 'at home', which play out rural themes, ranging from the sublime to the pastoral. In 1949 Martha Holmes had ventured to the Pollock house hoping to capture something of the painter's domestic situation for the *Life* article that famously asked, 'Is he the greatest living painter in the United States?'<sup>20</sup> In one image, Pollock and Krasner are shown walking through the grasslands that surrounded the house with their dog Gyp (plate 1). A low perspective allows the landscape to dwarf them, the visibly pruned tree that frames the image takes on the aspect of a threatening claw hanging over their heads. Nature here presents the same sublime face evoked by the storytellers of the old west in their endless retelling of the American tale of endurance against the force of the land and her elements – a tale that had preoccupied Pollock in a series of paintings from the mid to late 1930s including his painting of covered wagons, *Going West* (1934–38). Pollock's Wyoming background sealed his image as a cowboy, the Yankee myth of westward expansion seen as a parallel to the finding of new artistic forms, the blank canvas an analogue for the 'untouched' land of the west.

A more gentle, idealized image of pastoral living is seen very clearly in the photographs taken of the couple in 1950 by the sculptor Wilfred Zogbaum (plate 2). Again the view is low, shovels, ploughs, and watering cans signify work, the dog, a shared responsibility in the absence of a child. Clutched in Krasner's hands is a posy of flowers, fragile blossoms in a hard environment. The pair are compositionally united by the apex of the building that stands behind them, the door of which stands open and indicates from whence the couple have come. The images look like naïve paintings of a house and garden drawn from memory rather than any real picture of daily life. The reason for this is that the building in the background is far too small to be the marital home that the composition implies; and of course it is not, it is Pollock's studio, the barn in the grounds of the larger house. It isn't the only time Pollock and Krasner evoke what Gaston Bachelard has called 'the hut dream'.<sup>21</sup> Hans Namuth also depicted the couple emerging from the barn, an abandoned plough prominent in the lower right hand corner. It would not be becoming for the cowboy to have moved from the city to the rocking chair perched on the beautifully painted porch of the dwelling that can be seen in more private snaps. These public images show Pollock as the pioneer, at one with nature, the Pollock we feel we deserve. In the context of mass rural exodus following more than a decade of extreme poverty these images can only look 'vulgar'.<sup>22</sup>

In contrast the later work of Robert Rauschenberg (and other artists critically branded together under the heading of neo-dada) was almost always read as a product of the city.<sup>23</sup> Yet many of Rauschenberg's important early works were made at Black Mountain College outside Asheville in North Carolina. This was a very different landscape – culturally and physically – to the North-Eastern hideaways favoured by the abstract expressionist painters. Black Mountain College was founded in 1933 as a liberal college teaching a wide variety of subjects. In the summer of 1944 the rector, Josef Albers, initiated a summer school on art and design at the college. Rauschenberg first enrolled in 1948 and studied there off and on until 1952.

While the themes of group participation and experimental learning that characterized the teaching of Black Mountain have been the focus of a number of recent studies and exhibitions, the fact that the college itself was based far from the

**3 Robert Rauschenberg, *Untitled (Interior of an Old Carriage)*, 1949. Photographic print, 25.7 × 24.4 cm. Private Collection. © Estate of Robert Rauschenberg; DACS, London/VAGA, New York 2010.**

major artistic centres of the time in the woods of a relatively small southern town has been seen as an irrelevance.<sup>24</sup> One need, however, only look at the photographs that Rauschenberg was making at the college to see how much the textures of local life meant to him at this time. During his first visit to the college in 1949 he photographed the buildings and the surrounding area. One of those photographs was acquired by Edward Steichen in 1952 for the Museum of Modern Art collection. *Untitled (Interior of an Old Carriage)*, taken in Lafayette, Louisiana, shows the frontal view of the ancient, dark, carriage (plate 3). The photographer emphasizes its symmetry and the pattern of light on the padded back of its seat, all techniques characteristic of modernist images by the likes of Walker Evans and Charles Sheeler – retaining the modernist taste for that which was gracefully outmoded. Returning to Black Mountain in the summer

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of 1951, Rauschenberg extended his photographic output, travelling in 1952 with the Southern painter Cy Twombly to New Orleans to photograph cemeteries and to Charleston, South Carolina, where his camera focused on architectural details.<sup>25</sup>

During the summer of 1951, Aaron Siskind and Harry Callahan were invited from the Institute of Design in Chicago to teach at Black Mountain.<sup>26</sup> Hazel-Frieda Larsen, the photographer employed by the faculty who had taught Rauschenberg during his first visit in 1949, had extolled the virtues of Siskind's practice. Siskind and Callahan had developed a successful teaching partnership in Chicago that encouraged experimentation and intuition whilst retaining technical purity.<sup>27</sup> Siskind's own practice at this time emphasized the personal, psychological effects of details from everyday life, and focused on photography's ability to speak for its maker – in tune with the thinking of the abstract expressionist painters.<sup>28</sup> Siskind's career can be split into two; starting out with the Photo League in New York he developed several



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**4 Aaron Siskind, *Jerome 21, Arizona*, 1949. Photographic print, 50.8 × 40.6cm, New York: Robert Mann Gallery. ©The Aaron Siskind Foundation. Photo: Robert Mann Gallery.**

documentary projects in the 1930s including *The Harlem Document* (1937–38) and *Dead End: The Bowery* (1937). In the mid-1940s Siskind began experimenting with a more graphic, abstracted style in photographs he took at Martha's Vineyard, which he described as having 'a meaning basic to my life'.<sup>29</sup> This is usually read as a moment of total rejection of social content in favour of a personal abstraction, a reading underlined by the exhibition of his prints alongside abstract expressionist paintings in the famous show of Ninth Street artists in the spring of 1951 (plate 4).<sup>30</sup> When compared to contemporaries like the Californian Minor White, however – whose theories of photography's personal, poetic qualities are akin to Siskind's – the true nature of his abstraction becomes clear. In contrast to White's transcendentalist use of natural form – the seagull soiled rocks of Point Lobos or the striations of cracking ice – Siskind's work shows the waste of capitalist society and expresses the desperation for meaning in a world of objects that are slowly falling apart; the flaked paint, broken rope and chalked lettering bring home a frustration of narrative meaning. This aesthetic has much in common with the broken, glyphic, vocabularies that began to appear in abstract paintings such as those of Cy Twombly and Jean Dubuffet, which echoed the moral and psychic confusion that accompanied the end of the 1939–45 war. Siskind's work can be seen as occupying a middle ground between the positions of autonomist abstraction and socially informed realism. Robert Motherwell and Ben Shahn fiercely argued during the 1951 summer session at Black Mountain over these two poles of artistic intention; the grey area developed by Siskind was clearly appealing to a young artist like Rauschenberg.<sup>31</sup>

One may also see the influence of Siskind's photographic practice on Rauschenberg's paintings of this period. The crumpled surfaces of the black paintings the artist embarked on at Black Mountain utilize the same vocabulary as Siskind's much smaller prints: the splintered paint and torn paper seen in those photographs of walls and posters appear in works like *Untitled Black Painting* (c. 1951).<sup>32</sup> By virtue of their large size these early paintings become like walls themselves, a reading that is borne out in the photographs Rauschenberg took of them whilst at Black Mountain where they are framed in stone doorways (plate 5).<sup>33</sup> Their texture was created by using paper as a primer for the canvas, thin paper that was pulled and broken by the glossy paints that tightened on the surfaces as they dried in some places and pooled to saturation in others. Other works showed newspaper columns emerging through thinner, inky, paint surfaces. In contrast to the monochrome *White Paintings*, which the artist painted using a roller the same year, which have the look of a floating screen on which shadows are projected: the black paintings assert their materiality.

*If I could do it I'd do no writing at all here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and of excrement. Booksellers would consider it quite a novelty; critics would murmur, yes but is it art; and I could trust a majority of you would use it as a parlor game.*<sup>34</sup> (James Agee, 1941)

Rather than seeing a celebration of the commodity in the work of the artists of Rauschenberg's generation, Thomas Crow has instead seen them as expressing a frustrated desire for goods linked to the artists' Depression-era childhoods.<sup>35</sup> The rural effects of the depression are remembered perhaps most forcefully through the photographs taken by the Farm Securities Administration in the 1930s and early 1940s. Photographers such as Arthur Rothstein, Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans worked under the auspices of the New Deal to document its work in rehabilitating

5 Robert Rauschenberg, 'Black Paintings' at Black Mountain College, 1952. Private Collection. © Estate of Robert Rauschenberg; DACS, London/VAGA, New York 2010.

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farm land and resettling migrant workers following years where crop prices suffered from drought, insect infestation and the knock-on effect of the financial downturn. These images of hardship stand as an antidote to rural fantasy and the culture industry's vision of plentiful country living.<sup>36</sup>

From the perspective of the architectural reading of the black paintings provided by Siskind's photographs, the meaning of Rauschenberg's project is dramatically altered. The crumbling surface of the works that evoke an outmoded decrepit environment may in the South allude to somewhere specific. Conspicuous amongst the FSA archives are images of the interiors of cabins inhabited by rural workers; illuminated by the photographer's flash bulbs, the walls of these soot-covered dwellings are covered with newsprint. In the minds of his earliest viewers, Rauschenberg's black paintings may have called to mind the poverty and thrift of many Southerners through their use of poor materials. This is not to suggest that Rauschenberg was creating a copy of these environments, but rather that it may have been possible for his audience to have recognized Southern poverty in their very materials. The FSA photographs allow us a glimpse of personal poverty, into the Southern landscape known since the artist's childhood – he was born in northern Texas, close to the Louisiana border – and into his early career, which took him through South Carolina, Louisiana and into the mountains of North Carolina. During these early years (from 1948 until 1954 when he settled in New York) Rauschenberg was travelling back and forth from the South a great deal, no doubt strengthening his consciousness of regional differences.<sup>37</sup>

Many of the FSA images show how newspaper was used to stop drafts in shacks built from bare boards nailed to a timber frame (plate 6). The pages that cover these walls were probably refuse, procured from the stores that peppered the agricultural landscape of the South and which form another major feature of the FSA files. In the cotton growing regions of the South the shacks inhabited by sharecroppers and tenant farmers were based on buildings constructed to house slaves in the ante-bellum plantations. Slave huts were usually built behind or beside 'the big house' and were constructed from logs and mortar. Following the civil war when many slaves became sharecroppers – in a system that from this end of the century looks little different to that of the ante-bellum era – they moved these huts onto the plots where they worked. By the end of the first decade of the twentieth century these shacks had been replaced by the dwellings made familiar by the FSA – the unglazed windows and un-insulated walls a hangover from nineteenth-century wisdom about bad air and the spread of disease. With no other insulation available, newspaper was the solution; it covered walls and ceilings, and in the 1920s when most of the cabins were glazed rather than shuttered, it filled up holes in broken windows. The shacks – alongside other abandoned buildings like general stores, cotton ginneries and, of course, the neo-classical plantation houses – became common features of the landscape of the Southern states and acted as material reminders of servitude.

Arthur Rothstein took some of the most effective photographs showing newspaper as a wall covering in Gees Bend, Alabama in 1937. One of the most often reproduced images from that trip, *Artelia Bendolph*, utilizes what Rothstein has termed

**6 Arthur Rothstein, *Negroes at Gees Bend, Alabama. Descendants of slaves of the Pettway plantation. They are still living very primitively.*, 1937. Washington, DC: Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA-OWI Collection (reproduction number LC-DIG-fsa-8b35939 DLC).**





7 Arthur Rothstein, *Artelia Bendolph*, 1937. Washington, DC: Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA-OWI Collection (reproduction number LC-DIG-fsa-8b35942 DLC).

the ‘third effect’ whereby ‘two contrasting images of the same subject’ are brought together to ‘create a new meaning’ (plate 7).<sup>38</sup> The comparison of a newspaper image of a glamorous, white woman with the beautiful black girl accentuates the contrast between the culture industry and life as lived on the plantation. It is ironic then that Roy Stryker – who ran the FSA’s photography section – offered Rothstein the trip as a chance to ‘do a swell story; one that *LIFE* will grab’.<sup>39</sup> Other photographs from the era show images of film stars gazing out from the mantle shelf and cars crossing the walls, images of modernity outside the grasp of these workers. Artelia Bendolph’s cabin was a slave hut, left over from before the civil war when the plantation had been run by Mark Pettway, who gave his surname to his slaves so that many of the inhabitants of Gees Bend still retain it. Reports in the written files emphasize the simple life led by the community; a 1937 report remarked, ‘truly these are primitive people, living together in this tribal like settlement far away from civilisation in their habits and manner of living.’<sup>40</sup> The use of newspaper on the walls – paradoxically, as it is the only symbol of modernity – signifies this ‘primitive’ way of life.

Freudian psychoanalysis suggests that newspaper was linked to dirt and the most ‘primitive’ of sexual drives.<sup>41</sup> One of the major fault lines in representations of the poor opened up along the axis of cleanliness. James Agee, for example, in his documentary account of three tenant families entitled *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (written in 1939, published in 1941) repeatedly emphasizes the cleanliness of Allie Mae Burroughs’ house.<sup>42</sup> Agee’s description is mirrored by Walker Evans’

photographs for the text, which depict the cabin's spartan aspect and clean corners (plate 8).<sup>43</sup> Drying cutlery, cloths and sweeping brushes pepper the images. One of the most striking features of these pictures, however, is the use Evans makes of the boards that form the dwelling's walls. Evans' characteristic graphic flair is taken to new heights in the portraits taken with the boards as background. Agee writes an extended description of these surfaces:

Each texture in the wood, like those of bone, is distinct in the eye like a razor ... each seam and split; and each slight warping; each random knot and knothole: and in each board as lovely a music as a contour map and as unique as a thumbprint, its grain, which was its living strength ... and this, more poor and plain than bone, more naked and noble than sternest Doric, more rich and more varied than watered silk, is the fabric ... of a house.<sup>44</sup>



**8 Walker Evans, *Corner of Kitchen in Floyd Burroughs' Cabin, Hale County, Alabama, 1936.* Washington, DC: Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA-OWI Collection (reproduction number LC-DIG-fsa-8c52871).**

Agee reads spirituality into the bare boards in an echo of the transcendentalism of writers like Emerson and Thoreau. Spirituality is one with cleanliness, and so the clean become the deserving poor. James Curtis has shown that Evans moved objects in the homes of his hosts when he thought the scene too cluttered – changes made in order to ‘show the order and beauty that he believed lay beneath the surface of their poverty’.<sup>45</sup> Those who reside in their own muck and chaos can only be pitied. Even though Agee was under no illusions about the ‘vulgarity’ of his own situation as a slumming ‘spy’, and though he made his discomfort clear throughout the text, he regularly falls into the kind of prose quoted above, which like the compositions of Evans’ images aims to perform a troubling redemptive act upon his subjects. Robert Rauschenberg, brought up in a house dominated by the puritanical faith of the Church of Christ, was aware of the traditional equation of cleanliness with godliness, whiteness with spiritual purity.<sup>46</sup> He made this explicit in a letter describing his *White Paintings* to Betty Parsons in 1951: ‘They are large white (1 white as 1 God) canvases ... presented with the innocence of a virgin.’<sup>47</sup>

Agee and Evans appeal to what Gaston Bachelard has termed the ‘hut dream’.<sup>48</sup> Bachelard explains that the sense of ‘belonging’ in one’s home stems from our ability to daydream in that space, to daydream of refuge, which he reads as analogous to dreaming of ‘the hut’ – the most basic form of dwelling.<sup>49</sup> In its freedom from ‘city cares’, he explains, ‘the hut can receive none of the riches of the world. It possesses the felicity of intense poverty; indeed it is one of the glories of poverty: as destitution increases it gives rise to absolute refuge.’<sup>50</sup> The viewpoint is both naive and reactionary, but widely shared and strongly appealed to in Evans’ images. But the idea of the hut as some kind of ideal spiritual dwelling could not be sustained in the context of America’s Southern states, where far from symbolizing the homely it stood for many for displacement.

The dirty, newspaper-covered dwellings that are alluded to in Rauschenberg’s early black paintings were written out of Agee and Evans’ book, just as black sharecroppers had been. Just how unusual Evans’ subjects were is rarely mentioned in histories of his Hale County project. However, Charles Aitken has pointed out that seventy-two percent of the residents of Hale County were black, as were the majority of tenant farmers. Yet *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is the story of three white families. This was both the result of the reluctance of black farmers to be photographed and of the project’s origin as a story for *Fortune* magazine, whose editors requested that they focus on white farmers, since the ‘situation’ of blacks ‘was of little interest to the magazine’s readers’.<sup>51</sup> The contrast between the Rothstein photographs detailed earlier, alongside many others, and those taken by Evans in Hale County hardly needs detailing. The ‘newspaper’ images taken for the FSA display abject poverty, which, linked to the debased psychological value of printed matter, stands for a lowliness equated with poor black people, distinctly at odds with Evans and Agee’s ‘deserving poor’.

In contrast, Margaret Bourke-White and Erskine Caldwell’s photo-illustrated book, *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937), dramatizes the problems within the delicate racial balance of the South (plate 9).<sup>52</sup> Caldwell set out in the early 1930s to write a fictionalized cyclorama of the South, in order to educate the world outside about the region’s problems. The first book, which earned him instant acclaim, was *Tobacco Road* (1932), the coarse, tragic account of a family of Southern sharecroppers.<sup>53</sup> Born in White Oak, Georgia, Caldwell was knowledgeable about the agriculture and economics of the South to a far greater degree than Agee, and so made an expert guide for the northern Bourke-White during their tour of the region. Caldwell’s



MONTGOMERY, ALABAMA. "Of course I wouldn't let them plaster signs all over my house, but it's different with those shacks the niggers live in."



JOHNS, MISSISSIPPI. "My husband done took himself away last year, and the chickens whipped me out of all my corn."

9 Page Spread from Margaret Bourke-White and Erskine Caldwell, *You Have Seen Their Faces*, New York: Viking Press, 1936. © Estate of Margaret Bourke-White/Licensed by VAGA, New York. Photo: Thomas Scutt.

text for *You Have Seen Their Faces* lets us know that it is cheap black labour that still fills the landowner's pockets, and that, if it's bad for the white tenant, it's worse for the black sharecropper. Bourke-White – who had worked as a photographer for *Fortune* – took photographs that have often been criticized as sensationalist, the visual correlative to texts like Caldwell's grotesque *Tobacco Road*.<sup>54</sup> However, their depiction of race relations in the South is backed up by contemporary accounts and statistics. She consistently uses the newsprint backdrop as a canvas on which to show disease, loneliness and ageing. One plate in particular, about halfway through the second set of images, deserves mention. As a parallel to the newspaper insulation inside, workers often protected their dwellings from the outside, using cardboard or enamel signage which was presumably given to them by advertisers. Caldwell made up appropriate captions for the photographs, and for an image of two such huts wrote: 'MONTGOMERY, ALABAMA. "Of course I wouldn't let them plaster signs all over my house, but it's different with those shacks the niggers live in."' <sup>55</sup> We must trust Caldwell's judgement in conveying his 'own conceptions of the sentiments of the individuals portrayed' if we are to take the equation of subordination to mass culture and race seriously; and I think we must do so in order to understand these photographs and to read Rauschenberg's black paintings.<sup>56</sup>

Created in North Carolina, the black paintings like the *Night Blooming* series before them, are part of the environment of that place, both the Black Mountain College campus and the Southern states.<sup>57</sup> Black Mountain was by no means the cotton South – during the 1930s the nearby town of Asheville had actually increased production of the local crop, tobacco, whilst the cotton mills were increasingly productive. The mountain farmers, however, were extremely poor and their stone



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dwelling surrounding the college may have reminded Rauschenberg of cabins he had seen elsewhere in the South.<sup>58</sup> The college was based on a site dominated by Lawrence Kocher's Studies Building, a simple modernist structure that stretched along the length of the campus lake. However, the building's sharp lines were unusual at Black Mountain. Built on the site of a former girls' school it incorporated older buildings, including stone cottages and outbuildings. Notable amongst the new buildings constructed on the site are Paul Beidler's music practice room and Paul Williams' Minimal House, both of which were constructed from a sensitive blend of modern materials and local stone. By far the most traditional new building was the Quiet House, built in memory of Bobbie and Ted Dreier's son Mark, who had died during the time of the college's construction. The Quiet House, photographed inside by Rauschenberg in 1949, was the embodiment of Bachelard's 'hut dream', a place of refuge with thick stone walls. From its very beginnings Black Mountain had been a Utopian dream, not too far from that of the writers of the Agrarian movement; its living spaces bore out this romanticism and formed a stark contrast to those in the surrounding agricultural landscape.<sup>59</sup>

Racial segregation in Asheville was as firm as in any other region of the South. In 1955 twenty-three percent of the town's population were black, but black people still had no right to share public transport, school rooms or adjacent cinema seats with whites.<sup>60</sup> By the time Rauschenberg enrolled at Black Mountain in 1949, debates surrounding racial integration that had split the school in 1944 had largely subsided. The outcome of those debates, chronicled by Martin Duberman in his book on the college, was the eventual entry of black students and teachers in 1947.<sup>61</sup> The numbers were few. Although the initial fears of arson and violence from the local town of Asheville proved unfounded, the black students experienced isolation in the town and found it difficult, as Duberman explains, to learn

10 Robert Rauschenberg, *Untitled [Matte Black Painting with 'Asheville Citizen']*, 1952. Oil and newspaper on two canvases, 183.5 × 72.4cm (overall). New York: The Museum of Modern Art. © Estate of Robert Rauschenberg; DACS, London/VAGA, New York 2010. Photo: The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence.

11 Robert Rauschenberg, *Untitled [Black Painting on Paper]*, c. 1952. Ink, enamel, and gouache on tracing paper and newspaper on cardboard, 128.3 × 147.3 cm. Private Collection. © Estate of Robert Rauschenberg. DACS; London/VAGA, New York 2010.

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in an environment built on white, urban values.<sup>62</sup> Attempts to attract more black students failed as racial tensions in the South continued to grow. Rauschenberg's works, however, reference not the climax of tension but the everyday monotony and relentlessness of segregation. Sometime in 1952 Rauschenberg stopped spreading the paint so thickly on the black paintings and the paper ground was revealed. *Untitled [Matte Black Painting with 'Asheville Citizen']* (1952) was the breakthrough work (plate 10). Here the sports and small ads from the local paper were pasted onto the work's surface, its contents free to be read; far from cubist collage's oscillation of figure and ground, the newsprint is the painting's subject. Rauschenberg told John Cage that 'as the paintings changed the printed material became as much of a subject as the paint (I began using newsprint in my work) causing changes of focus: A third palette.'<sup>63</sup>

The small ads that make up the surface of *Untitled [Matte Black Painting with 'Asheville Citizen']* have segregated content.<sup>64</sup> In amongst the small print of notices declaring 'help wanted', 'position wanted', 'for rent', 'for sale', 'personals', can be found the bitter taste of segregation; a housing scheme 'for colored', for instance, is advertised at much higher rents than those for whites, a not uncommon form of exploitation

of those who found it difficult to find homes which were not chained to jobs.<sup>65</sup> The details lock the painting into its Southern genesis, just as I believe the ragged surfaces of the later black paintings ally them to the sharecroppers' huts.

Across the surface of those paintings the viewer sees time and again the real estate pages of a variety of different newspapers, the high prices mocking the lowly support and, in my reading, the tenant shacks (plate 11).<sup>66</sup> Their miserable surfaces, fragments of real life, are a sharp contrast with the overblown rhetoric of abstract expressionism. In 1953 the black paintings were finally exhibited in New York in the dark underground space of the Stable Gallery; there, contrasting with the pristine surfaces of the *White Paintings* and blending in with the gallery's rough walls, they seemed at home. Taking the works to the North, displaying their wounds to the complacent rich, perhaps among them absentee landlords who had left the South to its own devices many years previously. Outside a small avant-garde circle of friends barely a work sold. The repellent surfaces would deny them viewers for many years.

To read the black paintings in this way flies against the artist's own statements about the works. There is very little contemporary critical writing on the paintings, unsurprising given Rauschenberg's status as a young painter exhibiting at the newly opened Stable Gallery. The black paintings were also remarkably conventional compared to the *White Paintings* with which they were shown. In an interview with Dorothy Seckler in 1965 Rauschenberg reflected on the black works and offered some flavour of their initial reception:

And there had been a lot of critics who shared the idea with a lot of the public that they couldn't see black as color or as pigment, but they immediately moved into associations and the associations were always of destroyed newspapers, of burned newspapers. And that began to bother me. Because I think that I'm never sure of what the impulse is psychologically. I don't mess around with my subconscious. I mean I try to keep wide awake. And if I see in the superficial subconscious relationships that I'm familiar with, clichés of association, I change the picture.<sup>67</sup>

It is unsurprising that both critics and 'the public' viewed the works in these terms. At Black Mountain College, Dorothea Rockburne had been told by Franz Kline 'You were meant to work in colour. You're not black and white. I have had a tragic life and I am black and white.'<sup>68</sup> Perhaps only Clement Greenberg would have said so plainly that the preoccupation with black and white in the canvases of those years was solely due to a concern with modernist issues of tone and depth.<sup>69</sup> The unconventional materials included in Rauschenberg's works linked them firmly to the heavily textured surfaces of much European painting (that of Jean Dubuffet in particular), which was arriving in New York to much acclaim – works which were critically associated with the scarred walls of occupied France.<sup>70</sup>

*The museum . . . is spread across the surface of every Rauschenberg work.*<sup>71</sup> (Douglas Crimp, 1980)

The works which immediately followed the black paintings continued to evoke spaces for dwelling – although these spaces were closer to home – closer to the non-metropolitan houses that people from Rauschenberg's own social background occupied. That the earliest combines and the red paintings that immediately precede them evoke the domestic is a commonplace of the critical writing. The printed fabric

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**12 Robert Rauschenberg, *Red Interior*, 1954. Oil, fabric, and newspaper on canvas with plastic, wood, metal, porcelain pulley, pebbles, and string, 141.3 × 154.9 × 6.7cm. Los Angeles: Collection of David Geffen. © Estate of Robert Rauschenberg; DACS, London/VAGA, New York 2010.**

that is the surface of *Hymnal* (1955), the lace that borders *Charlene* (1954), the polka dots of the epically scaled *Yoicks* of the same year, and of course the quilt that forms the piece entitled *Bed* (1955), have all been read in such a way.<sup>72</sup> These works reference the domestic sphere, yet at the same time through gestural paintwork they estrange it in equal measure. Nicholas Calas wrote in 1959, ‘when in Rauschenberg’s *The Parlor*, a plane of faded red velvet is set against a glossy red paper, the velvet bleeds and the gloss coagulates. Instead of the hushed past, the evoked image is disembowled’ (plate 12).<sup>73</sup> Alan Solomon’s text for the retrospective exhibition held at the Jewish Museum, New York, in 1964 remarks that ‘the patches of cloth used for collage recall the country kitchen and attic, fabrics which might be used for house dresses, doilies, lace or India prints.’<sup>74</sup> Lisa Wainwright has written of how ‘they seem stripped from the décor of an old house and reek with the nostalgia of attic trunks or family scrapbooks’, but admits that they can only be ‘an arranged sign for such paraphernalia’.<sup>75</sup> This could almost be a description of museum display; the object arranged as a sign for a person or place.

By the time Rauschenberg was in New York, the honeycomb of period rooms that featured in both the Brooklyn and Metropolitan museums was long established. These spaces had been ripped out of the heart of Pennsylvania homesteads, Southern plantation houses and Colonial mansions, spaces that had made 'America' and could represent their inhabitants. Each of those spaces was an anaesthetized version of the past; like a plan view of a dwelling they represented the contours but not the essence, for the museum's rational archive disallowed that kind of presence. No matter how nonchalant the placement of clothing or half finished tapestries, the space was dead – as Adorno famously remarked, 'Museum and Mausoleum are connected by more than phonetic association.'<sup>76</sup>

The way people really lived, and continued to live, in small Southern towns like Port Arthur, Texas, where Rauschenberg grew up, was seemingly of little interest to the museum-going public. Yet if the museum can be said to hold the artefacts of our past, the material markers of the origins of a supposed collective national subjectivity, then Rauschenberg was keen to insert his own regional point of origin. Wanda Corn has investigated the way in which the earliest period room displays emphasized aspects of the 'practical, austere, pristine, classical' which could be found in a diverse range of objects that came to signify 'America': folk art, clipper ships, seventeenth-century furniture.<sup>77</sup> Corn traces the way that the museum's eagerness to define 'American' values through objects was translated into the paintings Charles Sheeler made depicting his home in South Salem, New York in the early 1930s.<sup>78</sup> When we look at Sheeler's *Americana* (1931) in the Metropolitan Museum in New York, it seems the reflection of a number of pastoral assumptions that are still made in the American period rooms nearby. Whilst the spaces of the pioneers of the East Coast are celebrated as 'ordinary' American people (opposed to the robber barons' salons which abut them), they are also powerfully presented as the pinnacle of a set of values that are alien and impossible to many living in the United States today.

Early Rauschenberg combines like *Charlene* and *Collection* (1954) are huge, clumsy works – on the scale of Claude Monet's *Nymphs* or Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm* they nevertheless decline to transform into the optical space that criticism then valued in those canvases. Their size is aimed at the museum, which they allow Rauschenberg a parasitic place within, feeding off the idea of the museum and gently mocking it. Douglas Crimp has suggested that the surfaces of Rauschenberg's work can carry heterogeneous objects in the same manner as the museum's archive.<sup>79</sup> Crimp concentrates on the silkscreen works of the early 1960s, allying their use of photography with André Malraux's similarly photographic concept of the museum without walls.<sup>80</sup> Photography, however, is not the only way of admitting fragments of the real world into the museum, fragments of objects that retain the marks of their use 'will do'. *Charlene* in its scale seems like a wall from a period room in a fun house (plate 13). One imagines the flattened umbrella springing into life and twirling around while the lights beneath it flash, the distorted mirror below only adding to the effect. In amongst the madness, however, are touches of home: the lace that borders each side of the work, the hand-made T-shirt, the comic strips and Sunday papers, the crude reproductions of art works, and, most blatant of all, the fake gas lamp set on its sill. Each of those motifs is a sign of the everyday life dismissed by the museum.

Rather than showing the viewer the finest items from the past, an early strategy for the building of period rooms, Rauschenberg makes do with what he can find. In the opening chapter of *You Have Seen Their Faces* Erskine Caldwell defined the South in the following terms:

13 Robert Rauschenberg, *Charlene*, 1954. Oil, charcoal, paper, fabric, newspaper, wood, plastic, mirror, and metal on four Homosote panels, mounted on wood with electric light, 226.1 × 284.5 × 8.9 cm (overall). Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum. © Estate of Robert Rauschenberg; DACS, London/VAGA, New York 2010. Photo: Courtesy of the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

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The South has always been shoved around like a country cousin. It buys mill ends and wears hand-me-downs. It sits at a second hand table and is fed short-rations. It is the place where the ordinary will do, where the makeshift is good enough.<sup>81</sup>

The incorporation of hand-made clothes into works like *Charlene* and *Canyon* (1959) recall the outfits skilfully made by mothers 'making do' across the United States. On a number of occasions Rauschenberg has remarked that he learnt collage by observing his mother's thrift.<sup>82</sup> Nowhere though is the theme of 'making do' more evident than in *Bed*. The quilt that provides the support for this work is itself a symbol of frugality, a blanket made from the leftover scraps of old clothes, it is testimony to the skill involved in 'making do'. Calvin Tomkins, drawing on extensive interviews conducted with the artist in 1962, recounts the tale of the work's genesis:

He simply woke up one morning with the desire to paint but nothing to paint on and no money to buy canvas. His eye fell on the quilt at the foot of his bed ... He made a stretcher for the quilt, just as though it was a canvas, and started to paint.<sup>83</sup>

Although one should be wary of taking such a convenient anecdote too seriously, the work itself communicates the need to get by with what you have at hand. The museum is not the site of 'making do'. The very term 'museum quality' tells us enough to know that Southern thrift is not the stuff of institutional collections.

Rauschenberg's habit of smuggling the forgotten or unwanted into his work is entirely consistent with some of his more radical gestures of those years. In two works from 1955, *Short Circuit* and ---- or *Self Made Retrospective*, the artist explicitly plays the role of curator. The first example uses tiny pieces by Johns, Susan Weil and Ray Johnson as part of its surface, bringing them into the Stable Gallery that had rejected the artists' work.<sup>84</sup> The second, we are told, consisted of miniature versions of earlier pieces displayed together in a box-like construction, work that had previously been

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14 Andy Warhol, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 1962. Silkscreen ink, spray paint, and pencil on linen, 208.3 × 208.3 cm. New York: Collection of Samuel and Ronnie Heyman. © The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/DACS, London 2010.

neglected and in some cases lost or destroyed.<sup>85</sup> Reflecting the strategy Marcel Duchamp had used in 1941 to create his own miniature retrospective the *Boîte-en-Valise*, this is an aggressive insertion of the artist's work into a structure that had earlier ignored him.

From the late 1950s the materials utilized in Rauschenberg's combines began to change significantly. The autobiographical material – such as family photographs and the drawings of ex-lovers – that had previously appeared across the surface of the works was the first to disappear; soon after, the aged fabrics that in the words of Alan Solomon referred to 'life back home, and not to the metropolitan environment in which he was working' followed them.<sup>86</sup> More generic street junk began to appear, and the swathes of paint that had previously emphasized elements within the assembled material began to dominate the surface of the works. In 1960 he

embarked on the large-scale project to illustrate Dante's *Inferno*. Here he used the most impersonal of materials – the pages of mass circulation magazines – in order to achieve a unified surface very different from the eclecticism of the combines. This move towards a unified medium that could contain a cacophony of different visual material provided the route to silkscreening, which he took up in 1962 and never entirely abandoned.

It is noteworthy that Rauschenberg's silkscreen technique was borrowed directly from the work of Andy Warhol, an artist who was engaged in a process of re-writing his own past and expunging it from the surface of his works.<sup>87</sup> It is also notable that Warhol was perhaps the sole commentator to notice the links between Rauschenberg's practice and the Depression-era South. It was apparently during a visit Rauschenberg and Illeana Sonnabend paid to Warhol's home on Lexington Avenue that the idea for a portrait of Rauschenberg was first discussed.<sup>88</sup> *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (plate 14) and related works such as *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men (Rauschenberg Family)* are unusual in Warhol's portraiture. The former depicts serially repeated images of Robert Rauschenberg along the bottom in two rows forming a loose grid of sometimes overlapping images – in this part it bears comparison to contemporaneous works such as *Liz as Cleopatra* (1962) and points towards the arrangement of imagery in the earliest 'Death and Disaster' paintings that break from the rigid grid of serial portraits in the well-known *Marilyn Diptych* (1962) or *Elvis* (1962). The photograph chosen for the silkscreen (which was used again in *Texan (Portrait Robert Rauschenberg)* of the following year) shows the artist from the chest upwards wearing a heavy outdoor coat with his gaze raised skywards – the very image of a proud American pioneer. Above the images of the artist is a row of smaller pictures of the artist's sister and his ex-wife taken by Rauschenberg in the early 1950s. Above this is the group portrait of Rauschenberg's family standing in a line before a row of wooden houses, a photograph that has been compared by Nan Rosenthal to Walker Evans' *Sharecropper's Family, Hale County Alabama* (1936). The photograph forms the imagery for the related painting *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men (Rauschenberg Family)* in the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.<sup>89</sup>

Like the rest of the artist's production, Warhol's paintings of Rauschenberg and his family are ambiguous gestures. It is possible to read them as a joke between two artists who transcended their provincial, working-class backgrounds by making it in New York City. Alternatively, they can be read as a reminder of what had been eradicated from Rauschenberg's combines – similar photographs to those used as Warhol's source can be found in early combines such as *Small Rebus* (1956) and *Untitled (With White Shoes)* (1954). The works suggest, however, that we as viewers should ask very different questions of both Rauschenberg's work and his public artistic persona than those which have preoccupied recent commentators. Thomas Crow has demonstrated that at the time in which the institutional place of Rauschenberg's work beside that of Jasper Johns and Cy Twombly was established, there was a concentrated effort to present art that could be considered truly 'American' in spirit and content.<sup>90</sup> The folk and outsider practices that were championed by Alfred Barr from within the art institutions of the city were works that would bind together a nation which as the decade wore on would find itself once again radically split along lines of race and class. By concentrating on the non-urban aspects of Rauschenberg's practice, and in particular their Southern inflection, we might come to the conclusion that there are still no 'United' States.



Notes

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- 1 Throughout 1956 and 1957 Johns and Rauschenberg completed approximately seven sets of windows for Bonwit Teller and Tiffany's under the direction of Gene Moore. See Gene Moore and Jay Hyams, *My Time at Tiffany's*, New York, 1990, 70–1, 227.
- 2 Thomas Crow, 'Southern boys go to Europe: Rauschenberg, Twombly and Johns in the 1950s', in Stephanie Barron, ed., *Jasper Johns to Jeff Koons: Four Decades of Art from the Broad Collections*, Los Angeles, CA, 2001, 45–61, esp. 46–51; see also Thomas Crow, 'The simple life: Pastoralism and the persistence of genre in recent art' (1993), in *Modern Art and the Common Culture*, New Haven, 1996, 181–2.
- 3 David Smith, 'The artist and nature' (1955), in Garnett McCoy, ed., *David Smith*, London, 1973, 116.
- 4 Leo Steinberg, 'Other criteria', in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art*, Chicago, IL, 1972, 82–91.
- 5 Steinberg, 'Other criteria', 82 and 84.
- 6 Steinberg, 'Other criteria', 84.
- 7 Steinberg, 'Other criteria', 84.
- 8 Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw, Minneapolis, MN, 1984, 78.
- 9 Walter Benjamin, 'The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility (second version)' (1936), Harry Zohn and Edmund Jephcott trans., Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings eds, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings: Volume 3 1935–1938*, Cambridge, MA, 2002, 118–22.
- 10 See for example, Robert S. Mattison, *Robert Rauschenberg: Breaking Boundaries*, New Haven, 2003, 41–104; Joshua Shannon, *The Disappearance of Objects: New York Art and the Rise of the Postmodern City*, New Haven, 2009, 93–148.
- 11 T. J. Clark, 'In defence of abstract expressionism', *October*, 69, Summer 1994, 23–48. The benchmarks of the three earlier approaches are Irving Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting*, New York, 1970; Harold Rosenberg, 'The American action painters' (1952), in David and Cecile Shapiro, eds, *Abstract Expressionism: A Critical Record*, Cambridge, 1990, 75–85; Eva Cockcroft, 'Abstract expressionism: Weapon of the cold war' (1974), in Francis Francina, ed., *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, London, 1985, 125–34.
- 12 Clark, 'In defence of abstract expressionism', 43.
- 13 Clark, 'In defence of abstract expressionism', 43.
- 14 Clark, 'In defence of abstract expressionism', 45.
- 15 Dore Ashton, *The New York School, A Cultural Reckoning*, Berkeley, CA, 1972, 34.
- 16 Barnett Newman, 'The sublime is now' (1948), in Shapiro and Shapiro, *Abstract Expressionism: A Critical Record*, 325–8.
- 17 An exception within this generation may be found in David Smith who actually lived and worked in the agricultural areas of upstate New York, incorporating tools into his work.
- 18 Steven Naifeh and Gregory White-Smith, *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga*, London, 1989, 506–33, addresses this moment in Pollock's life under the heading 'Starting Over'.
- 19 Lee Krasner recalled this phrase as uttered to Hans Hofmann. Bruce Glasner, 'Jackson Pollock: An interview with Lee Krasner', *Arts Magazine*, 41: 6, April 1967, 38.
- 20 Author unattributed, 'Jackson Pollock: Is he the greatest painter in the United States?', *Life*, 8 August 1949, unpaginated.
- 21 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (1958), trans. Maria Jolas, Boston, MA, 1994 [1964], 32.
- 22 The photographers officially worked for the historical section of the programme, which was initially called the Resettlement Agency until 1937 when following a change in the law it became the FSA. Distinctions will not be made between photographs made for the two agencies but will follow the Library of Congress's method of referring to them all as FSA photographs. For an account of the organization's founding see Maren Stange, *Symbols of Ideal Life*, Cambridge, 1989, 89–133.
- 23 See Joshua Shannon, *The Disappearance of Objects*, passim.
- 24 Vincent Katz, *Black Mountain College: Experiment in Art*, Cambridge, MA, 2003; Mary Emma Harris et al., *Starting at Zero: Black Mountain College*, Bristol, 2005; Achim Borchardt-Hume, ed., *Albers and Moholy-Nagy: From the Bauhaus to the New World*, London, 2006; Eva Diaz, 'The ethics of perception: Josef Albers in the United States', *Art Bulletin*, 90: 2, June 2008.
- 25 Joan Young and Susan Davidson, 'Chronology', in *Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective*, New York, 1997, 552.
- 26 Mary Emma Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain College*, Cambridge, MA, 1987, 160.
- 27 For details of Callahan and Siskind's teaching methods and the division of labour within their pedagogic practice, see *The Art Institute of Chicago, Taken by Design: Photographs From the Institute of Design, 1937–1971*, Chicago, IL, 2002, 70–91, esp. 72–4, 81–5.
- 28 Walter Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg: The Early 1950s*, Houston, TX, 1991, 23.
- 29 Aaron Siskind, 'In 1943 and 1944 a great change took place' (statement edited from an interview with J. Stephany from 1963 by P. Thompson first published in 1978) in Beaumont Newhall, ed., *Photography: Essays and Images*, New York, 1980, 304–6; for Siskind's history within the Photo League and the turn within that milieu, following government blacklisting, towards a more abstract style see Lili Corbus-Bezner, *Photography and Politics in America From the New Deal into the Cold War*, Baltimore, MD, 1999, 16–121.
- 30 See for example, Jonathan Green, *American Photography: A Critical History 1945 to the Present*, New York, 1984, 53–67.
- 31 Vincent Katz, 'Black Mountain College: Experiment in art', in *Black Mountain College: Experiment in Art*, 91–4.
- 32 This is also noted in Branden Joseph, 'The gap and the frame', *October*, 117, Summer 2006, 58–9.
- 33 See William Kaizen, 'Framed space: Allan Kaprow and the spread of painting', *Grey Room*, 13, Fall 2003, 90–1.
- 34 James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Boston, MA, 2001 [1941, rev. 1960], 10.
- 35 Thomas Crow, 'The children's hour', *Artforum*, 30: 4, December 1991, 84–8.
- 36 For a comparison of mass culture and the FSA images see James Guimond, *American Photography and the American Dream*, Chapel Hill, NC, 1991, 104–9.
- 37 See Young and Davidson, 'Chronology', 550–2.
- 38 Rothstein quoted in Guimond, *American Photography and the American Dream*, 291, fn. 6.
- 39 Rothstein quoted in Carl Fleischhauer and Beverly W. Brannan, eds, *Documenting America 1935–1943*, Berkeley, CA, 1988, 147.
- 40 Fleischhauer and Brannan, *Documenting America*, 147. From Resettlement Administration report, 21 May 1937, written records of the FSA, Historical Section, Washington Section Collection, Library of Congress. 'Newspaper' images are noticeably absent from Marion Post-Walcott's pictures taken after the FSA's rehabilitation project at Gees Bend even though the buildings Rothstein photographed can still be seen in the background. This project is detailed in Charles S. Aitken, *The Cotton Plantation South since the Civil War*, Baltimore, MD, 1998, 161.
- 41 Ernest Jones, 'Anal-erotic character traits' (1918), in *Papers on Psycho-Analysis*, London, 1950, 413–37. Helen Molesworth has used this text to analyse Rauschenberg's early output in 'Before Bed', *October*, 63, Winter 1993, 68–82. This approach is also taken in Jonathan Weinberg, 'Its in the can: Jasper Johns and the anal society', *Gender*, 1, Spring 1988, 40–56. Both texts reference the use of newspaper grounds in the painters' oeuvre.
- 42 Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.
- 43 These images are by no means characteristic of Evans' style or subjects; 'newspaper images' are among the most powerful pictures taken by the photographer during his time with the FSA, most famously the pictures taken in 1935 in West Virginia in the home of a coal miner, see Figure 21 and Plate 50 in Metropolitan Museum of Art, Walker Evans, 2000. There are shots within *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* that do emphasize vernacular and mass cultural wall coverings, most obviously the image of Mrs Frank Tingle's fireplace bedecked in calendars, biblical prints and photographs, see Agee's description 152–3.
- 44 Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 125.

- 45 James Curtis, *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth: FSA Photography Reconsidered*, Philadelphia, PA, 1989, 24.
- 46 Young and Davidson, 'Chronology', 550.
- 47 Letter to Betty Parsons, 1952, reprinted in Mary Lynn Kotz, *Robert Rauschenberg: Art and Life*, New York, 1990, 78.
- 48 Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 31–7.
- 49 Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 30.
- 50 Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 32.
- 51 For the problems Evans experienced photographing black farmers see Agee's comments in the early chapters of *Famous Men*, 25, 29–31, 38–45. Aitken, *The Cotton Plantation South since the Civil War*, 121.
- 52 Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White, *You Have Seen Their Faces*, Athens, GA, 1995 [1937]. See also Jonathan Weinberg, 'Famous artists: Agee and Evans, Caldwell and Bourke-White', in *Ambition and Love in Modern American Art*, New Haven, 2001, 179–210.
- 53 Erskine Caldwell, *Tobacco Road*, London, 1970 [1932].
- 54 Paula Rabinowitz, *They Must Be Represented*, London, 1994, 70–1. The close correlation between Bourke-White's pictures and Caldwell's earlier novels is probably intentional; one of the writer's aims with the book was to prove to his critics and censors that his was an accurate portrayal. See Vicki Goldberg, *Margaret Bourke-White: A Biography*, London, 1986, 162–3.
- 55 Caldwell and Bourke-White, *You Have Seen Their Faces*, unpaginated, photograph section two. Caldwell's fictionalized captions are perhaps the most controversial aspect of the book, they have been accused of stirring up racial discord and mocking the subjects of the images; although the opinions expressed may only be ones the author imagines to be current, this at least allows us a way into seeing how these images could have been interpreted at the time.
- 56 Caldwell and Bourke-White, *You Have Seen Their Faces*, frontispiece.
- 57 *The Night Blooming* series, the earliest works completed at Black Mountain, were created by rubbing pigmented canvases onto the roads around the college. See Molesworth, 'Before Bed', 68.
- 58 Photographs from the Ozarks by Carl Mydans do, however, show us that newspaper-covered cabins did exist in mountain regions.
- 59 Robert Motherwell outlined the tensions between the college and the surrounding community in the oral history interview with Robert Motherwell, 24 November 1971—1 May 1974, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Tape 2, Side 1.
- 60 Asheville provided its black residents with more than many other Southern towns. In 1955 a guide book published by the State University tells us it had 'Negro schools' up to college age as well as a flourishing industrial sector managed largely by black business men. See B. P. Robinson, *The North Carolina Guide*, Chapel Hill, NC, 1955, 134–43.
- 61 Martin Duberman, *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community*, London, 1974, 173–84, 210–14.
- 62 Duberman, *Black Mountain*, 213.
- 63 Robert Rauschenberg quoted in John Cage, 'On Robert Rauschenberg, artist and his work', in John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings*, Middletown, CT, 1961, 99.
- 64 I am grateful to Mignon Nixon for first drawing my attention to this. Of the few analytical accounts of this work, Helen Molesworth's stands out as the most developed; her reading stresses the 'dailiness' of the sports and small ads section to back up her arguments focus on faecal signifiers. Molesworth, 'Before Bed', 70–1.
- 65 See *Asheville Citizen Classified Section*, Saturday 29 March 1952 as pasted to the surface of *Untitled [Matte Black Painting with 'Asheville Citizen']*. The other page on the canvas is the sports section from the *Asheville Citizen*, 3 August 1951, Hopps, *Rauschenberg: The Early 1950s*, 92.
- 66 The titles were designated by Walter Hopps for the purpose of categorization in 1991. Hopps, *Rauschenberg: The Early 1950s*.
- 67 Interview with Robert Rauschenberg, conducted by Dorothy Seckler, in New York, 21 December 1965, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Tape 1, Side 1.
- 68 Dorothea Rockburne quoted in Vincent Katz, 'Black Mountain College: Experiment in art', 190.
- 69 Greenberg discusses black and white painting as one of the 'conspicuous features' of abstract expressionist painting in the years before Rauschenberg began work on the black paintings, but sees this preoccupation in purely formal terms. Clement Greenberg, "'American-Type' Painting' (1955/1958) in *Art and Culture*, New York, 1961, 219, 220–1.
- 70 See Frances Morris, ed., *Paris Post-War: Art and Existentialism 1945–1955*, London, 1994, 80. See also, Sophie Berrebi, *The Outsider as Insider: Jean Dubuffet and the United States, 1945–1973*, unpublished PhD dissertation, Courtauld Institute of Art, London, 2002.
- 71 Douglas Crimp, 'On the museum's ruins', *October*, 13, Summer 1980, 56.
- 72 See Lisa Wainwright, 'Robert Rauschenberg's fabrics: Reconstructing domestic space', in Christopher Reed, ed., *Not at Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture*, London, 1996, 193–205. Wainwright discusses the issue of gender in the artist's appropriation of fabric, an issue of extreme importance in the reading of these works but one that space restricts me from addressing here.
- 73 Nicholas Calas, 'Heirs USA, art news' (1959), in *Art in the Age of Risk*, New York 1968, 22. The work Calas refers to is presumably *Red Interior*, 1954, which the writer must have seen in the artist's studio as it was not exhibited until 1963.
- 74 Wainwright, 'Robert Rauschenberg's fabrics', 194–5. See also Alan Solomon, 'Robert Rauschenberg', in *Robert Rauschenberg*, New York, 1963, unpaginated.
- 75 Wainwright, 'Robert Rauschenberg's fabrics', 195.
- 76 Theodor Adorno, 'Valéry Proust Museum', in *Prisms*, trans. and eds Shierry Weber and Samuel Weber, London, 1967, 173–86, esp. 173.
- 77 Wanda Corn, *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity*, Berkeley, CA, 2000, 308–14.
- 78 Corn, *The Great American Thing*, 293–337.
- 79 Crimp, 'On the museum's ruins', 56.
- 80 André Malraux, 'Museum without walls', in *The Voices of Silence*, New York, 1955, 13–131.
- 81 Caldwell and Bourke-White, *You Have Seen Their Faces*, 1.
- 82 Kotz, *Robert Rauschenberg: Art and Life*, 49.
- 83 Calvin Tomkins, *Ahead of the Game*, London, 1968 [1962], 203.
- 84 See Thomas Crow, *The Rise of the Sixties*, Cambridge, 1996, 15–16. The piece was entered into the *Fourth Annual Exhibition of Painting and Sculpture at the Stable Gallery*, New York. Rauschenberg had recommended the artists included in the work to the hanging committee but his suggestion was ignored.
- 85 The works featured included a red, a gold, a dirt and a black painting alongside two new pieces in the manner of old destroyed works, a canvas made to look like a work from his 1951 Betty Parsons show and a *White Lead Painting*; the original version of this work had been so large that the artist left it to an uncertain fate when he moved out of his loft. This remaking is particularly close to Martha Buskirk's reading of Duchamp's *Boîte-en-Valise*. Martha Buskirk, 'Thoroughly modern Marcel', *October*, 70, Fall 1994, 113–25. For a discussion of --- see Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg: The Early 1950s*, 159.
- 86 Solomon, 'Robert Rauschenberg', unpaginated.
- 87 See Gavin Butt, 'Dishing on the swish or the "inning" of Andy Warhol', in *Between You and Me: Queer Disclosures in the New York Art World*, Durham, NC, 2005, 106–35.
- 88 Phaidon Editors, ed., *Andy Warhol: 'Giant' Size*, London, 2006, 248.
- 89 Nan Rosenthal, 'Let us now praise famous men: Warhol as art director', in Gary Garrels, ed., *The Work of Andy Warhol, Dia Art Foundation Discussions in Contemporary Culture Number 3*, Seattle, WA, 1989, 48.
- 90 Crow, 'Southern boys go to Europe', 46–51.