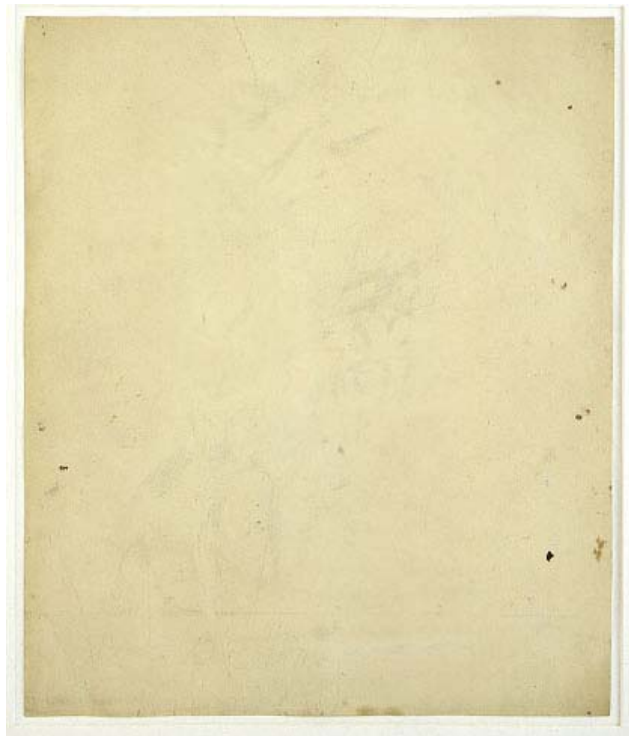


In reading Derrida, I was struck by how his ideas seem to have much in common with early works by the pop artist Robert Rauschenberg. Even though Rauschenberg's work dates about 15 years prior to Derrida's publications, they seem to profit from being read in a Derridean manner, and indeed seem to presage many of Derrida's ideas (that is, if people looked at Rauschenberg in that way back then).

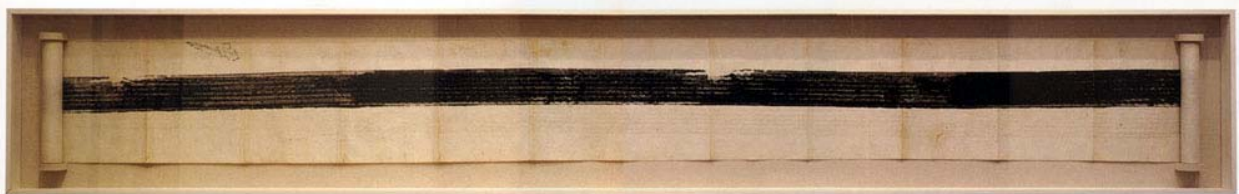


Rauschenberg, *Erased De Kooning*, 1953



Rauschenberg, *Erased De Kooning*, 1953

Rauschenberg had his first one-man show at the Stable Gallery in New York in 1953. To me, each work in the show, or category of works there, seem to presage Derrida's ideas of "différance" and the trace. The most infamous work there was the "Erased De Kooning," where he took a drawing from the famous Abstract Expressionist Willem de Kooning and totally erased it. (De Kooning knew what Rauschenberg was going to do, and fully agreed to the plan.) I see Derrida's ideas of the object being defined only by what came before it and after it would seem to apply here. The work's "meaning" only begins to take shape by what had been there before, and by Rauschenberg's activity, which itself is only apparent from what is now missing. (Rauschenberg said it took him 3 weeks to erase the work, and that he was experimenting with the idea that every drawing was an amalgam of pencil & erasure, and so why not make a work that was entirely erasure.)



Rauschenberg & John Cage, *Tire Print*, 1953

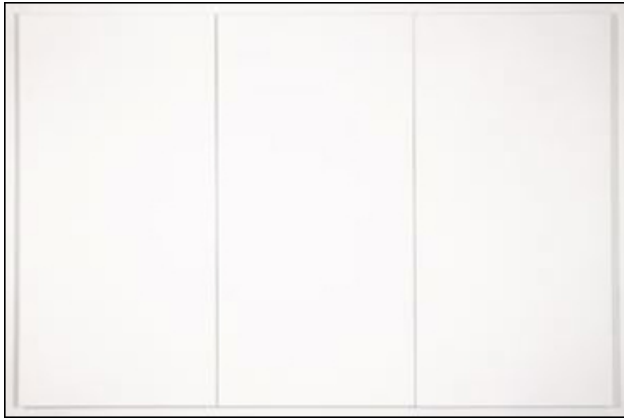
Another infamous work from the 1953 show was "Tire Print." The work, on 20 sheets of paper glued together to form a 23 foot scroll, was made as the composer John Cage drove a Model A Ford (and what would Derrida say about using the Model "A"?) very slowly while Rauschenberg kept applying fresh paint to the tire. Again it seems like Rauschenberg is expanding on the idea that the work of art exists as a present record of previous "presents," a "past" that is itself recurring or revolving, like the rubber tire.



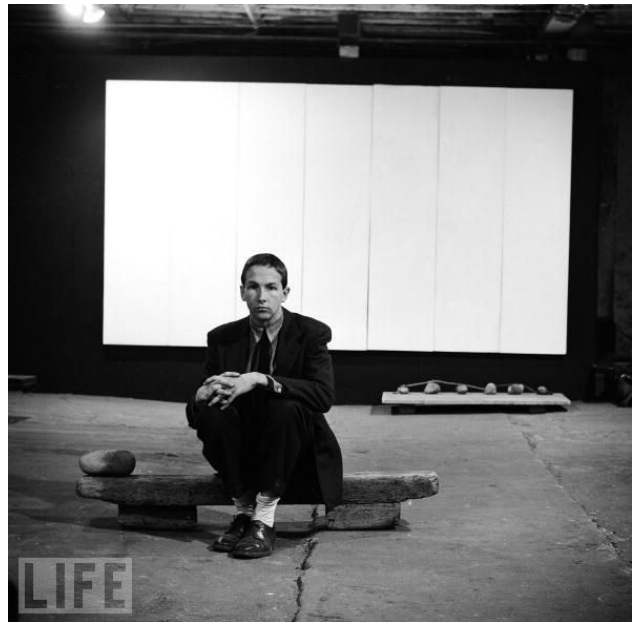
Rauschenberg, *Sue Weil*, 1950



Two other kinds of work appeared in the 1953 show. The first were a series of cyanotypes, a type of photograph. Rauschenberg treated large sheets of paper with light-sensitive chemicals that darken to cyan when exposed to light. He then had people pose on the sheets as he held lamps to expose the sheet. What is left is again a trace of a previous presence. The “object” only exists because of those other things that had been around it; alternatively, the “present” work is a trace of past “present events,” which are now gone. It’s also worth noting that Rauschenberg is also pushing the degree to which the artist’s touch, the sign of authorship, is necessary for the “text.”

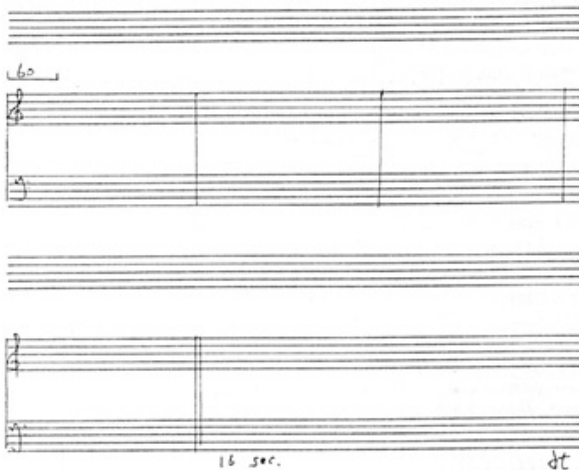


Rauschenberg, *White Painting (3 Panel)*, 1951



Rauschenberg at the Stable Gallery, 1953

The other category of work from the 1953 show were the “White Paintings,” a series of pure white canvases from 1951, some hung alone, others paired, or in groups of 3, 4, 5 or 7. Other artists had done similar things (e.g. Malevich in the ‘10s and ‘20s), but what Rauschenberg said he was interested in was the fact that the “composition” of the canvas had very little to do with what he did as an artist. Rather, each composition was determined by the lighting, and by the coming and going of the people in the room. In other words, if meaning is generated by what is seen on the work of art, then the “meaning” of these works was in a constant state of flux, and wholly dependant upon differences from the world around it.



John Cage, *4'33\"/>*



John Neff performing Cage's *4'33\"/>*

It is worthwhile noting here that his collaborator on “Tire Print,” the composer John Cage, wrote a piece for single piano called “4 minutes 33 seconds” (*4'33\"/>*



Rauschenberg, *Bed*, 1955

The viewer profits well from reading Rauschenberg's subsequent series of works, the "Combines," in a Derridean fashion as well. His "Bed" was made from his own bedding -- a pillow, sheet, & quilt (note that the blanket is made by another artisan) -- that he scribbled with pencil & splashed with paint. Again Rauschenberg is interested in the traces of human activity, how the object is formed by its connections to different objects.



Rauschenberg, *Monogram*, 1955-59

His most notorious work from the Combine series, "Monogram," constructs meaning based on Rauschenberg's past "presents/presence". Here a painted tire (note that the paint is white, not black) is threaded around the abdomen of a stuffed angora goat, whose face has also been painted. While those objects, plus the elements that make up the floorboard, all have (or had) meaning in different contexts, in "Monogram" they take on a totally different meanings, some dependent on their differences from each other, others dependent on their differences from their past meanings.

While Rauschenberg predates Derrida, I think that the ways in which the artist constructs meaning take on particular poignancy when analyzed with a Derridean methodology.