

Robert Rauschenberg Foundation
Hunter College MA in Art History

The Black Mountain College Family Tree: Photography, Nature, and the Family Unit in Rauschenberg's *A Birthday Picture for Hermine*

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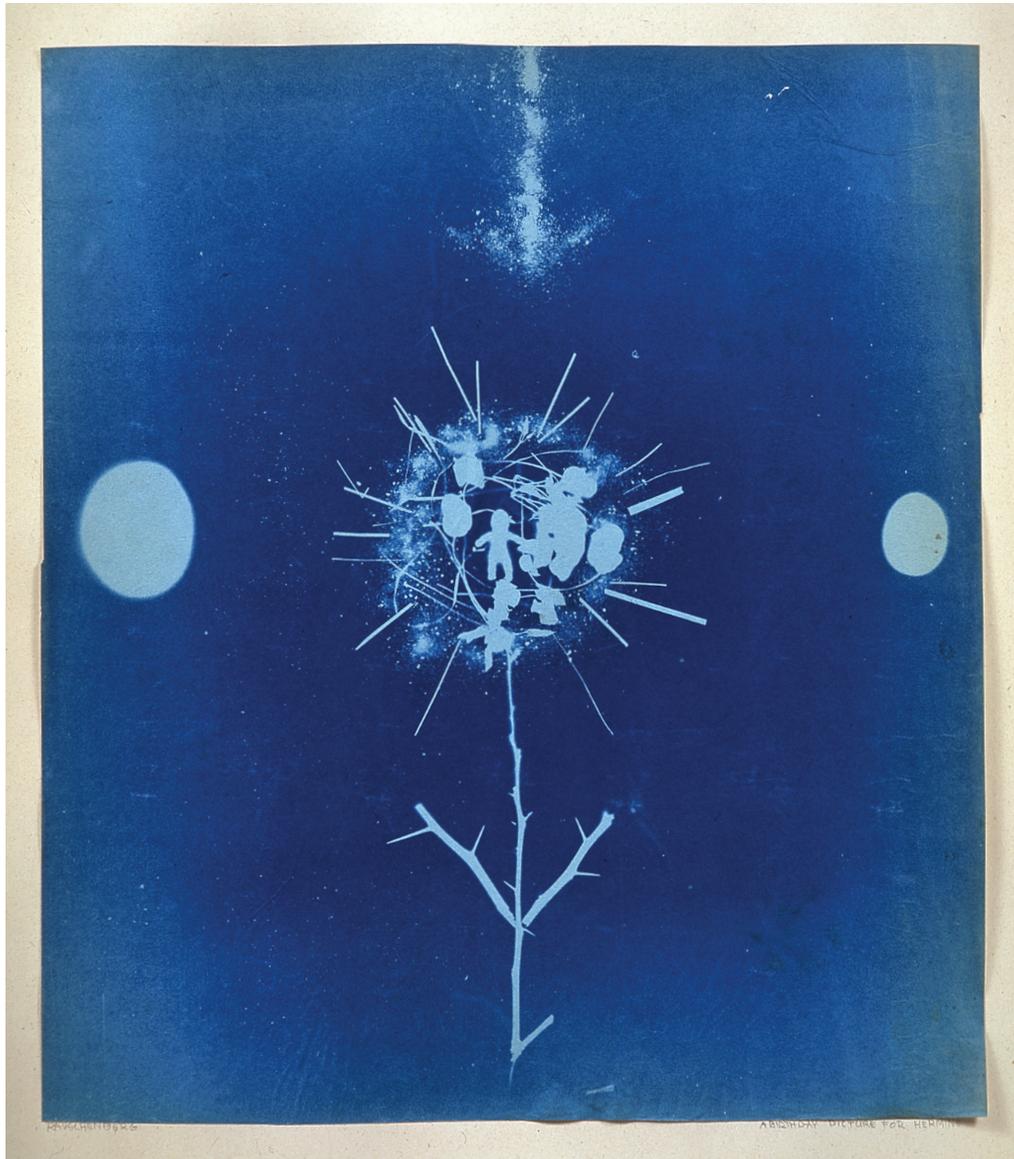


fig. 1

Robert Rauschenberg, *A Birthday Picture for Hermine*, 1952

Cyanotype mounted on paper

18 × 16 inches (45.7 × 40.6 cm), image size; 28 × 21 7/8 inches (71.1 × 55.6 cm), sheet size

Private collection, New York

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There was much to celebrate during the summer of 1952 at Black Mountain College. The avant-garde art school near Asheville, North Carolina, was the site of innovative student work and performance pieces that would eventually enter the art-historical canon. Yet one occasion marked by festivities that summer was not of clear artistic importance at the time: Hermine, the daughter of painter and then-visiting professor Jack Tworkov, celebrated her thirteenth birthday. On this occasion a promising young artist and student of Tworkov, named Robert Rauschenberg, gave Hermine a small gift in the form of a cyanotype or blueprint filled with natural imagery.

Created through exposure to ultraviolet light, Rauschenberg's *A Birthday Picture for Hermine* (1952; fig. 1) depicts white and light-blue silhouettes of plant life, natural detritus, and everyday trinkets set against a vivid blue background. Likely due to the fact that this was a gift, information on the blueprint is scant, and discussions regarding the work have mostly occurred in the context of the general artistic output of Black Mountain College during its peak years of the late 1940s and early 1950s. Despite its general reception to date, the blueprint is not merely an art-historical curiosity but rather an object worthy of study, since it can help us better understand the restless invention that guided Rauschenberg at this pivotal point in his career. *A Birthday Picture for Hermine* marks a significant—if perhaps overlooked—moment in his oeuvre, and my research aims to discuss this work as representative of the visual language and intense relationships (both romantic and familial) that marked Rauschenberg's art in an early moment of his prolific career.

When Rauschenberg created the cyanotype for Hermine (Ford, née Tworkov) that summer, the young artist was at a crossroads in his artistic and personal lives. Months before, Rauschenberg and his wife and frequent artistic collaborator Susan Weil had divorced. During their three-year marriage, Rauschenberg and Weil's artistic practices overlapped, and she introduced him to the blueprinting method used to create *A Birthday Picture for Hermine*. The young artists had met in Paris at the Académie Julian during the summer of 1948 and began making multiple collaborative projects while pursuing individual paths in the arts. That fall Weil and Rauschenberg left Paris and reunited at Black Mountain College, a cutting-edge school at the edge of the Appalachian Mountains.¹ The school's community-driven teaching practices were inspired by the Bauhaus School in Dessau, Germany, where artist and Black

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Mountain College professor Josef Albers had previously taught before he left Germany in the early 1930s.² Under the instruction of Albers and others, Rauschenberg and Weil learned from their professors' intense "sensory-based, combinative material exercises" and coursework.³

Rauschenberg and Weil left Black Mountain College in 1949.⁴ The couple retreated to the Weil family residence in Outer Island, Connecticut, where Weil taught Rauschenberg how to create blueprints using sunlight, a photographic method that Weil's grandmother taught her when she was a child.⁵ They then relocated to New York that same year, and both began studying at the Art Students League, since Rauschenberg's subsidies from the GI Bill were dependent on his enrollment in an educational institution.⁶ In the city, they began to experiment more with blueprinting techniques. The method's relative ease and low material cost made it an affordable and quick way to create art, allowing the two artists to incorporate blueprinting into their artistic and commercial projects. To supplement the funding they received from the GI Bill, Rauschenberg and Weil pursued commercial work that included blueprints for the



fig. 2

Robert Rauschenberg and Susan Weil, *Female Figure*, ca. 1950. Cyanotype, 104 $\frac{5}{8}$ × 35 $\frac{7}{8}$ inches (265.7 × 91.1 cm). Robert Rauschenberg Foundation.

window displays of the department store Bonwit Teller. Shortly after, the couple's blueprints were documented in an April 1951 *Life* magazine feature, and weeks later, their blueprint *Female Figure* (ca. 1950; originally titled *Blueprint: Photogram for Mural Decoration*) was exhibited in the Museum of Modern Art's (MoMA) *Abstraction in Photography* show (May 2–July 4, 1951), which was curated by the institution's influential director of photography Edward Steichen (fig. 2).⁷ Rauschenberg's first solo exhibition in New York was at Betty Parsons Gallery (*Paintings by Bob Rauschenberg*, May 14–June 2, 1951), which ran concurrently with Steichen's MoMA show. A few short weeks later on July 16, Rauschenberg and Weil's son Christopher was born. In between his exhibitions and Christopher's birth, Rauschenberg intermittently lived at Black Mountain College.⁸ Weil and Christopher joined him in North Carolina but, following what Weil called an "uncomfortable" summer, the couple decided to end their marriage in early fall of that year. In oral histories, Weil states that Rauschenberg's ambition and intimate relationship with fellow Black Mountain College resident Cy Twombly to be the reasons for divorce.⁹

Rauschenberg and Weil's divorce led to a period of rootlessness for Rauschenberg. He spent the next year living and working between New York and Black Mountain College while intermittently traveling with Twombly.¹⁰ In hindsight, the summer of 1952 at Black Mountain College would prove to be an important moment not only for Rauschenberg and the school but also for the entire

ecosystem of American art. During this summer, the influential composer John Cage organized *Theater Piece No. 1* at Black Mountain College—often referred to as the first Happening—in which Rauschenberg participated.¹¹ Additionally, Cage premiered his composition *4'33"* at Maverick Concert Hall, Woodstock, New York, in August 1952, and Rauschenberg's Black Mountain College exhibition *Paintings by Robert Rauschenberg* opened on August 10, 1952.¹²

Arguably the most important moment in the creation of *A Birthday Picture for Hermine* (herein abbreviated to *Birthday Picture*) was the arrival to Black Mountain College of Tworkov, along with his wife Wally and their two daughters, Helen and Hermine, during the summer of 1952. Tworkov, a well-established Abstract Expressionist painter who Rauschenberg had previously met through their involvement in New York's thriving downtown arts scene, was now a teaching artist at Black Mountain College and a mentor to Rauschenberg.¹³ They worked closely together, and Rauschenberg soon became acquainted with the entire Tworkov family. When Hermine turned thirteen that summer, the students threw her a small birthday party: artist Dorothea Rockburne gave her a painted box and hair ribbon, and Rauschenberg gave her the blueprint. *Birthday Picture* has remained in private hands; thus the blueprint has a limited exhibition history. It was included in the 2011 exhibition *Jack Tworkov: Accident of Choice, The Artist at Black Mountain College, 1952*, at the Black Mountain College Museum and Arts Center and in the 2015 traveling exhibition *Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College, 1933–1957* at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, and the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio.

In comparison to the maximalism that would define Rauschenberg's better-known Combines (1954–64) and later transfer work, *Birthday Picture* is an elegant and minimal composition with blueprinted shapes that suggest flora, fauna, everyday trinkets, and natural detritus. In the simplest compositional terms, the cyanotype is rectangular in shape with four unequal sides that vary in length from roughly sixteen to nineteen inches. There are two colors in the work: differing shades of blue (a result of exposure to light) and bluish off-white (the areas of the blueprint paper covered by objects during light exposure); the deepest shades of blue are concentrated in the center of the work and fade to a slightly lighter blue around the edges of the piece. On the left and right side of the composition, there are two oval forms: the left oval is bigger with a fading left edge, and the right oval is smaller and more clearly defined. According to an informal appraisal of Rauschenberg's early blueprints by Joshua Chuang, Associate Director and Senior Curator of Photography at the New York Public Library, the muddled edge of similar blueprint forms is likely the result of the original object's elevated or rounded edge, allowing for either some unaccounted exposure to light or a purposeful effort to create a softened edge during the blueprinting process.¹⁴ At the top edge of the sheet are three particulate line segments with irregular edges. The two smaller line segments connect at an angle with the longest line segment; together, the three lines create a downward-pointing arrow that appears speckled on the page. At the center of the composition, there is a circular form that includes a variety of small objects (described below) with linear fragments surrounding it. Additionally, line segments that resemble thorny stems appear from the bottom edge to the central circular group of the composition.

The specific objects that Rauschenberg used in printing these blueprints are unknown. Although there are a few recognizable elements, including the small infant sculpture or trinket at the very center of the composition, most objects are difficult to clearly identify. In the exhibition catalogue for *Leap Before You Look*, art historian Jeffrey Saletnik asserts in his essay that Rauschenberg used “small, thorned branches, blades of grass, petals, sand, and a small figurine to construct a flowerlike form that creates an image on light-sensitive paper.”¹⁵ While there is no way to verify this statement, visual evidence and close research can support Saletnik’s argument for the inclusion of some of these materials.

It is possible that the arrow at the top edge of *Birthday Picture* and the ghostly wisps in the flowerlike central form were made with sand, as Saletnik suggests. The small particulate matter that created the imprints on the blueprint, however, appears to be a very fine grain, perhaps even finer than sand. To further understand Rauschenberg’s process in making this work, I made a blueprint of my own, experimenting with various granular materials.¹⁶ Instead of sand, I tried exposing table salt and then sugar to make an arrow formation on light-sensitive paper. Although the light-sensitive paper would need to be exposed to ultraviolet light for a longer period of time in order to achieve the vivid contrast of Rauschenberg’s cyanotype, my blueprint showed that a fine-grained particulate—salt, sugar, or sand—could have produced an effect similar to the original print.

The small infant figurine at the center of the blueprint is nearly unmistakable, but the exact provenance of the figure is unknown. One possible explanation lies in Rauschenberg and Twombly’s romantic relationship. During their spring break in 1952, they traveled to Cuba and several cities in the southern United States, including New Orleans.¹⁷ Spring in New Orleans is a festive time of year owing to the weeks-long Mardi Gras celebrations integral to Louisiana, Cajun/Creole, and southern Gulf Coast cultural and religious practices. In the early 1950s, a now-beloved Mardi Gras tradition became a part of celebrations: the baby in the king cake. Fava beans or other trinkets have long been hidden in the Mardi Gras pastry, but in the 1950s, the popular McKenzie’s bakery started to bake a small plastic infant figurine into its mass-produced king cakes in lieu of the traditional bean.¹⁸ While there are other possible explanations for the identity of the figurine, it seems very possible that it is a memento from his spring trip to New Orleans that Rauschenberg still had readily accessible when he made the blueprint for Hermine’s July birthday.

When Weil first introduced Rauschenberg to the blueprinting of her youth, the artists exposed the light-sensitive paper to sunlight and later shifted to artificial sunlamp bulbs.¹⁹ The exact exposure method with which Rauschenberg made *Birthday Picture* is not documented, and because of this, it is up for debate whether he used sunlight or ultraviolet lighting to create the blueprint. In an article for *Hyperallergic*, Jason Andrew, the archivist and manager for the Jack Twombly Estate, describes the blueprint as a “solar print,” implying that Rauschenberg made his exposure with the sun.²⁰ The exhibition catalogue for *Leap Before You Look* also refers to *Birthday Picture* as a solar print.²¹

After directly examining *Birthday Picture*, I am inclined to suggest that the blueprint was made with artificial light in a darkroom or another type of windowless studio based on the vibrancy

of the blue and the crisp edges on certain silhouettes. For the blueprints created with artificial lightbulbs in their apartment, Rauschenberg and Weil were able to control light exposure, sometimes even shielding various portions of the blueprint from all light. This is evident in *Female Figure*, where light is directed in such a way that a halo develops around the figure's head through the contrast of light blue and dark blue. Although the different shades of blue are not markedly different in *Birthday Picture* as they are in *Female Figure*, the seemingly intentional differentiation in tones is visual evidence that Rauschenberg may have had a level of control over light exposure that would suggest an artificial light source. Additionally, the unpredictable nature of the outdoors would not have been ideal given the small, lightweight objects and materials that Rauschenberg was using. The lightness of the materials, specifically the particulate matter, would have made them vulnerable to wind; any shift in placement of elements during exposure would have produced less crisp lines and more variations in color.

Birthday Picture is also notable for its connection to earlier photographic experiments, the practice of photography at Black Mountain College, and Rauschenberg's particular photographic efforts. Whether intentional on the part of the artist or not, the floral forms seen in *Birthday Picture* bear stylistic and formal similarities to some of the earliest photographic experiments in England during the nineteenth century. The cyanotype—the technical term that most closely describes Rauschenberg-style blueprints—was developed in 1842 by Sir John Herschel. Published between 1843 and 1844, shortly after Herschel's discovery, the *Photographs of British Algae*, by scientific hobbyist Anna Atkins, is considered to be an early landmark in photographic practice.²² Atkins highlights the rich contrast between the deep, vivid blues and off-whites of the cyanotype for the purpose of recording the intricacies of plant life on the British coast. As with most early applications of cyanotypes, Atkins's purpose was primarily scientific and practical in nature, but these photographs have a number of aesthetic similarities with Rauschenberg's artistic versions of the cyanotype through their crisp lines and subject matter.

In the late 1940s, photography quickly became integral to the artistic innovations at Black Mountain College, both in teaching and in Rauschenberg's artistic output. In the final years of Albers's tenure at Black Mountain College, photographer Hazel Larsen Archer became the school's first full-time instructor of photography in 1949, following her time as a student at the college in the mid-1940s.²³ Archer's photographs were wonderfully realized images of Asheville's landscape and the movements of the human body; Rauschenberg, Weil, dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham, and others were her models. During his years as a student at Black Mountain College, Rauschenberg studied with Archer, and these lessons resulted in photographs, such as *Postcard Self-Portrait, Black Mountain (I)* (1952; fig. 3), seemingly in conversation with Archer's explorations of portraiture and the human form.²⁴ Archer was also present for some of Rauschenberg's blueprint experimentations at Black Mountain College. As noted by Hermine in 2011, she fondly remembers seeing Archer and Rauschenberg make what she refers to as a "solargram" on the front lawn of Archer's house near campus.²⁵

In addition to his more experimental photography, Rauschenberg practiced his skills by photographing daily life at Black Mountain College, including portrayals of various figures in the close-knit community. He took numerous pictures of Tworkov working and painting in his



fig. 3

Robert Rauschenberg, *Postcard Self-Portrait, Black Mountain (I)*, 1952. Gelatin silver print, 5 $\frac{5}{8}$ \times 3 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches (14.3 \times 8.3 cm).



fig. 4

Robert Rauschenberg, *Untitled [Hermine Tworkov, Asheville, North Carolina]*, 1952. Gelatin silver print. Private collection.



fig. 5

Robert Rauschenberg, *'Topher*, 1952. Gelatin silver print, 15 \times 15 inches (38.1 \times 38.1 cm).

studio, but most pertinent to my investigation is a small series of portraits Rauschenberg made of the Tworkov sisters in the summer of 1952, which Rauschenberg discussed with Tworkov in their correspondence following their respective stints at Black Mountain.²⁶ One of these photographs, *Untitled [Hermine Tworkov, Asheville, North Carolina]*, features Hermine in profile, revealing her left side (fig. 4). She is sitting in front of foliage, trees, and grass, and the contrast between the background and her form creates a silhouette that approximates the “equalization of figure (body) and ground (nature)” seen in the *Birthday Picture* blueprint.²⁷

Birthday Picture can also be discussed within the context of his then-complex relationship with his infant son as a result of his recent divorce from Weil. The portrait of Hermine, along with Rauschenberg's portrait of Christopher as a baby—*'Topher* (1952)—can be considered indirectly in conversation with the *Birthday Picture* blueprint (fig. 5). Like his photograph of Hermine, *'Topher* features the subject's profile set against a nature scene of rocks and leaves. Even if Christopher's reaching gesture is more active than Hermine's more rigid seated pose, the

contrast between Christopher and his natural background creates a crisp outlining effect of the figure in the same manner that the plant life highlights Hermine's form in Rauschenberg's photograph of her. The formal similarities between these two photographs and the shared imagery with the *Birthday Picture* blueprint may allude to not only Rauschenberg's new role as a father but also Tworkov's experiences of fatherhood as interpreted by his young student.

The interactions between Tworkov—who Andrew writes was seen by his peers as a quiet “family man”—and Rauschenberg during the summer of 1952, and the close relationship that they maintained afterwards, suggest that Rauschenberg found a place for himself within the Tworkov family unit.²⁸ The Jack Tworkov Papers at the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, feature correspondence between Rauschenberg and Tworkov following their time at Black Mountain College and document intimate exchanges regarding studio concerns, updates on Rauschenberg and Twombly's travels, and Rauschenberg's well wishes for Wally and the Tworkov sisters.²⁹ Rauschenberg's attachment to the fatherly Tworkov and his kindness to Tworkov's daughter Hermine is bittersweet in light of Rauschenberg's relationship with his son Christopher. Although in interviews, Rauschenberg's son notes that he and his father had “a great relationship,” Rauschenberg was not necessarily present as a father figure in his son's early life.³⁰ With this in mind, the blueprint birthday gift may be understood as a small token of Rauschenberg's admiration not only for Hermine but also for the close father-child relationship that may have eluded Rauschenberg and his son.

The context and intent of Rauschenberg's *Birthday Picture* separates the blueprint from most of Rauschenberg's oeuvre, but the work reflects the human connections central to the young artist's practice at this point in his life. Rauschenberg's blueprinting during the 1950s was a practice marked by its element of paradoxical intimacy—at once a practice with commercial intentions and a marker of the important role romantic partnerships played throughout his artistic career. The vast majority of extant Rauschenberg blueprints are the result of collaborations with his romantic partners at the time: Weil from 1949 until the time of their divorce in the early fall of 1951 and Jasper Johns during the mid-1950s.

Following the collapse of Rauschenberg and Weil's marriage and his brief romance with Twombly, Rauschenberg began a nearly decade-long relationship with Johns in 1953.³¹ During their union, Rauschenberg and Johns supplemented their income with blueprint window decorations, just as Rauschenberg did while he was married to Weil. They worked under the pseudonym “Matson Jones” to conceal their commercial pursuits and likely their relationship, considering their dislike of what was considered base, economically motivated work and the art world's homophobia.

Birthday Picture is one of the few extant and only publicly exhibited blueprint works made outside of Rauschenberg's relationships with either Weil or Johns.³² The relative rarity of blueprints created by Rauschenberg alone makes the collaborative aspect of his blueprinting all the more notable in comparison. For Rauschenberg, the practice was associated with community, romantic love, and family ties. At the time that this blueprint was created, Rauschenberg was grappling with the fallout of his divorce with Weil, a separation that marked the end not only of their romantic partnership but also their artistic collaboration. The blueprints

Rauschenberg created with Weil, and those he would later create with Johns, signify these close partnerships, and in the absence of these bonds, he attaches himself to the chosen family he found in the Tworkov family. Thus, *Birthday Picture* represents the bond Rauschenberg felt with the Tworkovs as his definitions of family, romantic partnership, and fatherhood were shifting at an intense pace.

This piece exists as a simple human gesture at a precarious moment in Rauschenberg's life—the emotional implications of that alone makes *Birthday Picture* an important work to study. *Birthday Picture*, in conjunction with the context of Black Mountain College and Rauschenberg's collaborative approach to his work, comes to represent the importance of love and connection that not only influenced Rauschenberg's blueprinting but his career as a whole. No longer able to be dismissed as a Black Mountain College curio, *A Birthday Picture for Hermine* is an important work connected to the aesthetics and exploration through collaboration that guided Rauschenberg's decades-long artistic practice—made all the more vital through the human connections that surround this piece's creation.

ENDNOTES

- 1 The Reminiscences of Susan Weil, January 27, June 6, and September 10, 2004. *Robert Rauschenberg Oral History Project*. Conducted in collaboration with INCITE/Columbia Center for Oral History Research. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, p. 86.
- 2 JoAnn C. Ellert, "The Bauhaus and Black Mountain College," *The Journal of General Education* 24, no. 3 (October 1972), p. 144.
- 3 Jeffrey Saletnik, "Robert Rauschenberg: *Untitled (A Birthday Picture for Hermine)*," in *Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College, 1933–1957*, ed. Helen Anne Molesworth with Ruth Erickson, exh. cat. (New Haven: Yale University Press; Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 2015), p. 314.
- 4 The Reminiscences of Susan Weil, p. 12.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 17.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 148.
- 7 "Speaking of Pictures: Blueprint Paper, Sun Lamp, a Nude Produce Some Vaporious Fantasies," *Life* 30, no. 15 (April 9, 1951), pp. 22–24. Michael Lobel, "Lost and Found: Susan Weil and Robert Rauschenberg's Blueprints," *Artforum* 54, no. 6 (February 2016), p. 187.
- 8 Joan Young with Susan Davidson, "Chronology" in *Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective*, ed. Walter Hopps and Susan Davidson, exh. cat. (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1999), pp. 551–52.
- 9 The Reminiscences of Susan Weil, p. 15–17.
- 10 Young with Davidson, "Chronology," p. 552.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 Mary Emma Harris, "John Cage at Black Mountain College: A Preliminary Thinking," *The Journal of Black Mountain College Studies* 4 (2012), accessed August 30, 2021.
- 13 Jason Andrew, "The Untold Story of Rauschenberg's Earliest Champion," *Hyperallergic*, May 29, 2017, accessed August 30, 2021.

- 14 Joshua Chuang, Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Associate Director for Art, Prints, and Photographs and The Robert B. Menschel Senior Curator of Photography at the New York Public Library, in conversation with the author at the blueprint study day held at the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, New York, November 21, 2019.
- 15 Saletnik, "Robert Rauschenberg," p. 314.
- 16 Test blueprints were made at a workshop led by Christina Freeman, Adjunct Assistant Professor of Art and Technology Coordinator at Hunter College, CUNY, on October 16, 2019.
- 17 Young with Davidson, "Chronology," p. 552.
- 18 Eliza Barclay, "Is That a Plastic Baby Jesus in My Cake?," *National Public Radio*, February 17, 2012, accessed August 30, 2021.
- 19 The Reminiscences of Susan Weil, p. 89.
- 20 Andrew, "The Untold Story of Rauschenberg's Earliest Champion."
- 21 Saletnik, "Robert Rauschenberg," p. 315.
- 22 Hope Saska, "Anna Atkins: Photographs of British Algae," *Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Arts* 84, no. 1 (2010), p. 9.
- 23 Diana C. Stoll interviews Julie J. Thomson, "Learning to See: Photography at Black Mountain College," *Aperture Online*, February 22, 2017.
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- 25 "Interview of Hermine Ford [née Tworkov] for the Robert Rauschenberg Oral History Project," conducted by Karen Thomas, April 11, 2011. Interviews with Rauschenberg Friends and Associates, RRFA 08, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York, p. 5.
- 26 Letter, Robert Rauschenberg to Jack Tworkov, n.d., Jack Tworkov Papers, Series 2: Correspondence, Box 3, Folder 73: Rapeé, Jody-Retheré [forename illegible], 1951–1977, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
- 27 Saletnik, "Robert Rauschenberg," p. 314.
- 28 Andrew, "The Untold Story of Rauschenberg's Earliest Champion."
- 29 Letter, Robert Rauschenberg to Jack Tworkov, Wally Tworkov, Helen Tworkov, and Hermine Tworkov, n.d., Jack Tworkov Papers, Series 2: Correspondence, Box 3, Folder 73: Rapeé, Jody-Retheré [forename illegible], 1951–1977, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
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- 31 Jonathan D. Katz, "'Committing the Perfect Crime': Sexuality, Assemblage, and the Postmodern Turn in American Art," *Art Journal* 67, no. 1 (2008), p. 44.
- 32 Though there are few independent blueprint examples, a magazine article published in a 1952 issue of *Photo Arts*—the same year *Birthday Picture* was created—portrayed Rauschenberg's blueprinting as a solo endeavor. Ben Peters, "Rauschenberg: Blueprint Photographer," *Photo Arts* (Stamford, Conn) 2, no. 4 (Aug. 1952), pp. 216–21.