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Crossing Over: Rauschenberg, Kafka, and the Boundaries of Imagination

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Abstract: How do we make sense of something we don't recognise? This topic raises an important background question: how do we recognise or come to imaginatively experience the subject that a work of art or fiction presents to us? When philosophers address this topic they often assume that the act of experiencing or recognising something through that work is directly under a reader or viewer's control. The imaginative act, they tell us, is something that a viewer or reader does with the material presented by a given work. This limits the scope of what we might fail to recognise to cases of ambiguity or under-determination. I suggest that this approach ignores the way in which some works of art or fiction puzzle us not because their content is ambiguous but because they frustrate the imaginative act itself. They do this by making it difficult to navigate the imaginary space a fictional object might occupy. To develop this claim, I closely examine several works by Robert Rauschenberg and Franz Kafka and suggest that they undermine the common assumption that the activity of imaginatively engaging a work of fiction is under our control. I conclude by suggesting some implications this lack of control might have for two prominent debates related to the activity of recognising or experiencing something through an engagement with a work of fiction.

The question 'How do we make sense of something we don't recognise?' raises an important background question: what can we fail to recognise when we

encounter a work of art? At least two types of failure can be found in recent discussions among philosophers. First, we can fail to recognise what an artwork depicts. Standard cases of a failure to recognise the content of an artwork include certain forms of abstraction as well as cases involving various types of ambiguity or under-determination. Philosophical discussions about content failure have been important to the development of resemblance theories of pictorial representation since they rely on a recognition that images resemble the objects they depict.¹

Next, we can fail to recognise that something counts as a work of art. Standard cases of a failure to recognise something's status as a work of art include cases, such as Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* or John Cage's *4'33'*, where something that is commonly recognised as art appears to be physically indistinguishable from something that is not. Philosophical discussions about status failure have been important to the development of institutional theories of art because they rely on the role such recognitions play in various functions of the art world.²

In this paper, I identify and explore a third way in which we can fail to recognise something about a work of art. In these cases, we may not fail to recognise the content of a work of art and we may not fail to recognise its status as art. Rather, we fail to recognise the boundaries of the fictional worlds depicted by these works. They puzzle us not because their content is ambiguous or because their status is unclear but because they frustrate the terms on which we engage them. They do this by making it difficult to navigate the boundary between a work of art and the image or fictional world that work realises.

To explore this suggestion, I examine several works by Robert Rauschenberg and Franz Kafka that continue to puzzle critics. I argue that works like Rauschenberg's *22 the Lilly White* and *Erased DeKooning* puzzle viewers because they manipulate the boundaries of the picture plane and works like Kafka's parable 'On Parables' puzzle readers because they manipulate the boundaries of a narrative world. I will explain how Rauschenberg and Kafka used formal features of their mediums to frustrate our ability to recognise the limits of picture planes and narrative worlds, respectively, and I will argue that this implies that the boundary between fiction and non-fiction maps onto formal features of a work of art rather than a distinction between what is actually the case and what is only imagined. I will conclude by identifying some implications this has for discussions about literary cognitivism and our emotional engagement with fictions.

I. ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG AND THE PICTURE PLANE

Many philosophers are familiar with Rauschenberg's work through Arthur Danto's discussion of so-called 'indiscernibles'.³ Looking at works like *Monogram* and *Bed*, works that involve a goat garlanded with a tire and a bed,

respectively.⁴ Danto asks how we might identify something as a work of art if it is physically indistinguishable from other objects that we do not recognise as art. Given his interest in the relationship between found objects and painted images, Rauschenberg's broad body of work provides a clear way to explore Danto's question. What I want to focus on here, however, is not the question of how we distinguish art from non-art, but rather the artistic means by which Rauschenberg explores that difference. I want to explore, in other words, the way that Rauschenberg uses traditional painting techniques to prevent viewers from engaging in a successful act of representational seeing. In brief, I will argue that the surfaces of many of his artworks are visually opaque, in the sense that they lack a clear picture plane, because they present a viewer with a set of conflicting cues that make it impossible to see or recognise an image in them.

Rauschenberg's exploration of these visual cues can be clearly seen in works as early as *22 the Lily White* (ca. 1950) where he works the surface of a painting in ways that make it impossible to construe the marks into any sort of image or expression.⁵ He eliminates the painting's capacity to provide a 'window' through which we experience a painted subject. He accomplishes this by painting a sequence of rough lines that provide conflicting indications of what counts as figure and what counts as ground and by inscribing numbers and symbols onto the canvas in a variety of conflicting orientations, which removes any sense of up or down. Doing this achieves what might be called a visually opaque surface, in the sense that the conflicting visual cues deprive a viewer of the experience of a picture plane, or a point of convergence between the gaze of a viewer and the object depicted by a picture, a point that is usually experienced as coextensive with the surface of the painting. By frustrating the emergence of a picture plane, the viewer struggles to achieve a visual experience of a subject depicted by a painting.

While clearly an early work, *22 the Lily White* raises a problem or issue that Rauschenberg explores in a wide range of other works throughout his career. Later, in more familiar works, like *Canyon*, *Bed*, and *Monogram*, Rauschenberg experiments more explicitly with the boundary between objects and images.⁶ Once again, I would argue, he experiments with the boundary between found objects and imagery by marking the objects with paint in a manner that resembles the application of paint found in works by abstract expressionists and, in the case of *Canyon* and *Bed*, by playing off the traditional orientation of a painting. In these works, Rauschenberg gives a central role to the visual language of painting. He pushes real objects into the imaginative world of visual make-believe through the use of cues drawn from the tradition of representational painting while simultaneously pulling them back into the world of real objects through his use of unaltered, or partially altered, found objects. The surface of the painting in *Canyon*, therefore, can be viewed as both a window through which one views an image or as some sort of vertical table on which one might place an object.

This feature of *Canyon* becomes clearer when we place it alongside *Monogram*, a work in which Rauschenberg lays a painted canvas out horizontally and positions a goat garlanded with a tire on top, effectively using the ‘painting’ as a plinth. This choice neatly reverses the choice he makes in *Bed*, where the sheets are incorporated into a framed canvas that is hung vertically on a wall. In all of these so-called ‘combines’, the sculptural features accomplish the same thing Rauschenberg accomplished in *22 the Lily White*. They typically frustrate the viewer’s effort to experience or imagine a picture plane through which a subject might be seen. Once again, the work provides a viewer with a conflicting set of indicators or cues, which frustrate a viewer’s effort to engage in the act of experiencing any sort of image. *22 the Lily White* does this by providing the viewer a conflicting set of visual cues drawn from the medium of painting. His later combines do this by conflating and combining the cues we conventionally find in painting and sculpture.

Given this background, I will turn now to a work that puzzles many critics: *Erased de Kooning*.⁷ In this work, Rauschenberg displays a drawing by the artist Willem de Kooning that he has methodically and laboriously erased. I think we should see this work as continuous with the earlier works, where Rauschenberg pushed found objects across the boundary separating objects from images. *Erased de Kooning* simply begins that same activity from the other side of the picture plane. He is, we might say, simply working in the other direction. He is taking an art work, in this case a drawing by a well-known artist, and using an eraser, a common drafting technique, to pull the image it contains back into the world of real objects. The image or drawing has been turned back into a sheet of paper and the representational content has been made to coincide once again with the real surface of the paper.

It is important to add that this transformation was accomplished by using a technique commonly associated with de Kooning, who often used an eraser as though it were a palate knife, pushing and pulling his thickly drawn graphite and charcoal lines. Indeed, it is central to my interpretation of this work that Rauschenberg does not simply offer a piece of paper under the title *Erased de Kooning*. The work is not, strictly speaking, a work of conceptual art, but a work that explores the visual devices that enable a piece to explore the boundaries of a picture plane. On my account, therefore, the remnants of the original drawing are central to the work and it is important that Rauschenberg’s erased drawing started as another’s work of art, one composed of charcoal, crayon, and pencil. The process of taking a work of art out of existence has been built into the paper through the process of erasure. The original picture plane remains as a ghost, but a ghost that enables a viewer to witness the act described by the work’s title. It is central to my interpretation that the faint remainder of the original image counts simultaneously as both a nearly indiscernible picture and as a trace of an act undertaken by the artist. The remnants of the original work by de Kooning, in this way, prevent the act of erasure from simply being an act of vandalism

or a work of purely conceptual art. The visual cues that remain from the act of erasure are essential to the work's success and clearly connects it to the combines.

Once again, what is important here is not just that Rauschenberg plays with the boundary between objects and images, pushing objects back and forth across that boundary, but that he explores it by deploying a set of artistic techniques that act as cues to trigger and inform the stance that a viewer will take toward these works. This suggests that representational seeing involves a response to medium or genre-specific cues or indicators that are imbedded in a given work. This is what enables Rauschenberg to paint a visually opaque work, such as *22 the Lily White*, which resists any effort on the part of the viewer to experience a picture plane and this is what enables him to explore the boundaries between objects and images or between the real surface of the painting and the image that surface reveals, which is what we see in works such as *Erased de Kooning*, *Monogram*, *Bed*, and *Canyon*.

Various painting techniques and various conventions of sculpture and painting enable Rauschenberg to work in both directions, pushing found objects into realm of imagery and pulling images back into the world of objects. I will argue now that a similar set of moves can be found in literary works by turning to Kafka's 'On Parables'.⁸

II. FRANZ KAFKA AND NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Kafka's parable 'On Parables' addresses the complaint that fiction can be too far removed from ordinary life to provide meaningful insights. He addresses this concern in much the same way that Rauschenberg explored the boundaries between images and objects. He does this by leading the reader through several sudden shifts in perspective, switching between moves made within the parable, meta-statements about how those moves might be understood, and a final statement about how those meta-statements might be understood. Here is the parable.

Many complain that the words of the wise are always merely parables and of no use in daily life, which is the only life we have. When the sage says: 'Go over,' he does not mean that we should cross to some actual place, which we could do anyhow if the labor were worth it; he means some fabulous yonder, something unknown to us, something too that he cannot designate more precisely, and therefore cannot help us here in the very least. All these parables really set out to say merely that the incomprehensible is incomprehensible, and we know that already. But the cares we have to struggle with every day: that is a different matter.

Concerning this a man once said: Why such reluctance? If you only followed the parables you yourselves would become parables and with that rid of all your daily cares.

Another said: I bet that is also a parable.

The first said: You have won.

The second said: But unfortunately only in parable.

The first said: No, in reality: in parable you have lost.⁹

Kafka opens with the complaint that parables do not address the struggle of ordinary life. He then introduces the first shift in perspective through a speaker who observes that by following a parable, features of the fictional world can become features of the actual world. There is, however, an interesting ambiguity in this statement. The speaker might mean that by applying their lessons our lives will come to resemble the descriptions offered by the parables. Alternatively, the speaker might mean that we can avoid the problems of ordinary life by escaping into the world of fiction and viewing our life as a work of fiction or parable. Do we follow a parable by making our life conform to the fiction, or by seeing our life as some sort of fiction? We will see in a moment that this ambiguity is one of the parable's central devices.

The second speaker responds by pointing out that this claim may itself be understood as a parable. This invites a fresh perspective on his statement and the intentions behind it. It also invites us to resume a fictional stance, since it asks us to view the first speaker's comment about parables as a parable in itself. The response also introduces the second main element in the puzzle: the question of self-reference. Can the first speaker's claim be applied to itself?

The first speaker responds by admitting defeat, which returns us to a non-fictional stance by joining the critic in the actual world. The critic, however, recognises this may only be a debater's trick. The first speaker might admit defeat, but understand that defeat as a further parable. Hoping to preempt that move, the second speaker responds that he may only have won in parable.

In the final line, however, the first speaker uses this defensive strategy against the critic by claiming that it might be the other way around. When it comes to taking up a perspective, the move used by the second speaker is always available and we can now ask whether his own meta-statement about the first speaker's defeat should be seen as a parable or as a statement about parables.

As we work out the debate between these two speakers, we find an inherent instability created by the question of whether something should be understood as a parable and the fact that we can ask this question of any answer we might offer to that question. How, for example, should we understand the final line of the parable? Is this a further parable or have we finally hit bottom? There is no determinate answer to this question because nothing in that parable fixes the perspective we should take toward its content. At any point in the game, we can ask if a statement is itself a parable. The fictional perspective is always available and so it is never under any individual's direct control, either the author's or the reader's.

What is the lesson of Kafka's parable? The complaint that parables cannot reveal something about the actual world is premised on an assumption that the distinction between parables and ordinary life is clear, distinct, and immediately apparent. It relies on the claim that fictional worlds are removed from the actual one. Kafka responds by manipulating our perspective through a short parable. That manipulation reminds us that the boundary between fact and fiction may be no more fixed than the stance or perspective we assume.

This reading of Kafka's parable 'On Parables' has several interesting implications. First, it reveals something about the literary genre of parables. If parables communicate lessons, why doesn't the author simply state the lesson? Is there anything beyond aesthetic merit to communicating a lesson through a parable?

On the reading I have offered, parables allow Kafka to avoid an important paradox of self-reference. If the point that Kafka hopes to make in this parable is that a sentence or claim can be understood in either fictional or non-fictional terms, it would be odd for him to simply state this claim because such a statement would tell us that any sentence, including that one, can be understood from either perspective. By turning his claim into a parable and having a character ask whether the lesson applies to itself, he invites the reader to approach the topic in a way that counts as an instance of the lesson he hopes to communicate through that parable. This avoids the paradox of self-reference because the focus of the parable is the reflection it engenders and not the content of the lessons that are gained through that reflection.

This observation also applies to several other Kafka short stories, so 'On Parables' provides one answer to the question why he doesn't just state the lessons he hopes to communicate. For example, in 'Under the Law' Kafka warns us of the frightening power of authority and mindless bureaucracy. Merely stating or proclaiming this lesson would feed the very mindset that perpetuates mindless bureaucracy Kafka is decrying, since accepting an explicit statement of this claim would amount to an instance of accepting a claim on the basis of authority. By imbedding his warning in a story, Kafka forces the reader to think through the question and so the parable fights against the very forces that it warns the reader against. This shows us one way in which a parable might have practical, as opposed to merely aesthetic, value and so Kafka's 'On Parables' provides one response to the complaint that parables do not address ordinary life.

One philosophical lesson we can learn from Kafka's 'On Parables', therefore, is that narrative perspective is inherently flexible at least in part because a writer can manipulate a reader's perspective through subtle clues and various devices found in a literary genre or form. Authors, in this way, do not simply provide content that we might view as part of a fictional world; they guide the terms of the perspective we take on that content. Sometimes this

guidance is open and explicit, as it is when an author makes a general social observation. In other cases, the perspective we assume is guided in more subtle or sophisticated ways.

This perspectival flexibility is a basic feature of our experience of narrative fiction. Even the most omniscient of narrators, such as those found in works by Flaubert and Tolstoy, continually balance an apparent neutrality that pulls a reader toward the artifice or construction of a narrative against descriptions that subtly blend with a character's perspective. Other writers, such as Jane Austen, openly blend a narrator's voice more intimately with the minds of the characters they describe, engaging in what is sometimes called 'free indirect style'. As a result of such shifts, readers must navigate the space that is created between a perspective that is internal to the diegetic or narrative world and one that stands outside it.

Our constant navigation of this blended space is a basic feature of our experience of a narrative. We inhabit an omniscient or external view as well as a partial or internal view on the events found in the narrative, often at the same time. We are constantly attempting, therefore, to reconcile an author's perceptions, insights, and language with the various character's perceptions, insights, and language. The language of the narrative is constantly slipping between the language of individual characters, the language of the author's voice, and the language found in the world the author and reader inhabit. Kafka's manipulation of a reader's perspective in his 'On Parables', therefore, is simply a more sophisticated manipulation of the cues and devices that enable us to navigate the shifts in language, perception, and insight found in nearly any narrative experience.

We find something similar in drama and its central device of dramatic irony. As witnesses to the action on stage, we are constantly navigating the discrepancy between our understanding and awareness, and the understanding and awareness of the characters on stage. Our knowledge intrudes upon our experience of the world realised onstage and so good playwrights, like good authors, are keenly aware of how they can shift the tensions and harmonies that result from the relationship between the audience and the characters. Indeed, as Tzachi Zamir carefully argues, philosophers commonly neglect the ethical significance in drama of various three-way relationships among actors, characters, and audience members.¹⁰ This fact about drama may also explain why metalepsis, or cases in which elements of the actual world occupied by the audience intrude into the narrative or diegetic world being acted out onstage and visa versa, play such an important role in so many plays. I will return to this suggestion below.

We find a similar negotiation of the boundary between features of a work of art and features of an image or fictional world realised by that work in the case of painting since our experience of a painting always balances paying attention to physical features of the work, such as brushwork, as well as features of the images they depict. That is to say that when we encounter

paintings, we constantly navigate between seeing the paint as a trace of the act of painting and seeing an image through the marks found on the surface of the canvas. This negotiation is a basic, though easily overlooked, feature of nearly any experience of visual art, a feature that is also responsible for the puzzling works I have explored in this paper. These works puzzle us not only because their content is ambiguous or because their status as artworks is unclear but also because these works frustrate the terms on which we engage them. They do this by making it difficult to navigate the boundary between a work of art and the image or fictional world that work realises. In the final section of this paper I will identify at least two implications this has for the philosophy of art.

III. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The first goal of this paper has been to defend the view that in addition to the occasional inability to recognise the content depicted by a work of art or a narrative fiction and in addition to the occasional inability to recognise something's status as a work of art, it is also possible to find it difficult to recognise the boundary between a work of art and the image or fictional world that is realised by that work. In several works by Rauschenberg we saw how an artist can deploy various techniques to explore the limits and even the presence of a picture plane. In a work by Kafka we saw how a writer can use the cues commonly associated with narrative perspective to make it difficult to recognise who is speaking within the boundaries of the fictional world and who is speaking from outside those boundaries. With both sets of works we find that the boundary or limits of a fictional world or image is partly created through the use of artistic techniques that govern our imaginative engagement with a work.

That observation introduced the second goal of this paper, namely, to show that these puzzling cases arise when a work offers us conflicting cues for how to read or view some elements of the work in question. This observation highlights the fact that whether we experience a feature of a work as internal to the image or world it realises or as a feature of the world we inhabit as a reader, viewer, painter, or author is partly determined by formal features or devices found in that work.

This suggests that the common distinction between features of a work and features of the fictional world that a work realises does not map onto the distinction between what is real and what is imagined. It suggests that this distinction is less a function of reference than a function of form. I will conclude by developing this suggestion in two ways. First, I will explain how the cases we have examined bear on discussions about our emotional engagement with fiction. Next, I will explain how they bear on discussions about the cognitive value of art and fiction.

What we have seen in the works of Kafka and Rauschenberg can help explain why some fictions are so engaging or absorbing and why they can seem so real. My thought here is this. If the conditions of our engagement with a work are not directly under our control then we are likely to experience the characters and actions we encounter through that work as having an independent life of their own. For if we do not fully control the terms of engagement with a work of fiction as a reader or viewer, then our encounter with the imaginary worlds realised through those works will be, at least in part, beyond our immediate control, which replicates a basic feature of our experience of objects in the actual world. As a result, at least in some cases, we can experience an imaginary world as having some of the force and vivacity that we commonly associate with our experience of the real world.

I think this is an important addition to discussions about the status of the emotions we experience as part of such an encounter. Notice, for example, how this goes well beyond Kendall Walton's suggestion that what makes fictional characters or events feel alive or objective is the fact that the reader or viewer does not control the content of her experience.¹¹ It may be just as important that we also do not completely control the boundary between works of fiction and fictional worlds.

I propose that this is precisely why Shakespeare and so many other playwrights and filmmakers often break the fourth wall of theater and film. Doing so startles an audience into recognising that they are not fully in control of the imaginative act of experiencing the play. Metaleptic lapses, like these, can make a play or a book feel more alive or more real and they can make a play feel that much closer to magic. In some cases this might be a simple trick. I have in mind here, for example, Peter Pan's instructions at the end of the play to revive Tinkerbell by clapping to show you believe in fairies. In other cases such a device can integrate more profoundly with the themes or dynamics present in that work. I have in mind here, for example, the famous epilogue delivered by Puck at the end of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in the character of the actor who plays him. What could be a more fitting ending for a play about magic and the boundaries of the pretence of theatre?

I suggest that this force and vivacity has important implications for debates over the reality or status of the emotions we can experience through our encounter with a fictional work. If the boundaries that define the space of an image or fictional world are partly a function of our response to cues found in the works because those cues guide our recognition of an image or a fictional world, then it makes sense to recognise that these emotions are at least structurally similar to those we feel toward other people and events, regardless of the fact that some of them exist in the reader's or viewer's world while others do not. Indeed, part of what we have learned is that we should not always be entirely confident as readers or viewers about where the line between the real and the imagined has been drawn for us and so we should expect that other

features of our experience, including our emotional responses or judgments, will be similarly forced to navigate that boundary.

A second set of implications relates to debates over the cognitive value of fiction. If the boundaries of a fictional world are determined, at least in part, by an artist's or author's use of various cues imbedded in the conventions of his or her medium, then the distinction between the imagined world and the world of the person doing the imagining may be more porous or at least less clear than we usually think. This has important implications for debates over the cognitive value of fiction.

I say that because much of the debate about cognitivism concerns an important dilemma facing anyone who defends the view that fiction can be the source of important insights into the actual world. On one horn of that dilemma we find philosophers, such as Peter Lamarque, who argue that fictions are too far removed from the activities of truth-seeking to have any clear or direct cognitive value because they fail to refer to the actual world.¹² On the other horn we find philosophers, such as John Gibson and Monroe Beardsley, who argue that if works of fiction can bear a direct relationship to the world, then the cognitive value of a given work starts to seem irrelevant to its literary or artistic merits, since it now looks like the actual world, and the readers and thinkers who inhabit it, are doing most of the work.¹³ We seem forced, in other words, to abandon either the claim that works of fiction can have cognitive value or that the cognitive value of a work of fiction plays a role in the literary merits of that work.

From what we have seen here, one reason for this impasse may well be the common tendency to regard the boundary between the imagined world and the world of the person doing the imagining in a fairly rigid way. But if that boundary between fiction and non-fiction is unclear and if it is partly determined by features of the fictional works in question, then we may be able to explain how a work of art or fiction can connect us to features of the world we inhabit as readers and viewers without thereby losing its claim to various distinctive literary or artistic merits. Part of the merits of some works may well be how they come to join those two worlds together and what that joint reveals about our relationship to the world. I hope, for example, to have pointed out just such a cognitively valuable connection in my analysis of Kafka's 'On Parables'.

These are just two possible implications of the account I have offered in this essay. I lack the room to investigate them fully here. My goal in this final section of the paper is simply to propose at least two ways in which several puzzling works by Rauschenberg and Kafka connect to a broader range of questions about our imaginative engagement with works of art and fiction.

What I find philosophically interesting about these works by Kafka and Rauschenberg is that they frustrate us by experimenting with the cues that guide our engagement with a painting or a work of fiction. The very fact

that artists and authors can do this shows us that the line separating works of fiction from the images or worlds they realise, is a function of various formal features of a given work and so the distinction between works and worlds or between fiction and non-fiction may map onto to questions about medium, genre, and form rather than questions about reference and truth. If that is true, then the question ‘How do we make sense of something we don’t recognise?’ can lead us to important questions about the complex relationship between images or fictional worlds and the paintings or works that realise them.

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NOTES

1. Blumson 2014.
2. Dickie 1997.
3. Danto 1964.
4. See Rauschenberg: *Monogram* and *Bed*.
5. Rauschenberg: *22 Lily White*.
6. Rauschenberg: *Canyon*.
7. Rauschenberg: *Erased de Kooning drawing*.
8. Other literary works that explore this theme include: Alberto Moravia’s *The Conformist*, Luigi Pirandello’s *Six Actors in Search of an Author*, and Phillip Roth’s *The Breast*, along with many others.
9. Franz Kafka 1995.
10. Zamir 2012.
11. Walton 1990, p. 42.
12. Lamarque and Olsen 1994.
13. Gibson 2007.

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URLS

Rauschenberg: *Monogram*:

<http://www.rauschenbergfoundation.org/art/artwork/monogram>

Rauschenberg: *Bed*:

<http://www.rauschenbergfoundation.org/art/artwork/bed>

Rauschenberg: *22 Lily White*:

<http://www.rauschenbergfoundation.org/art/artwork/22-lily-white>

Rauschenberg: *Canyon*:

<http://www.rauschenbergfoundation.org/art/artwork/canyon>

Rauschenberg: *Erased de Kooning drawing*:

<http://www.rauschenbergfoundation.org/art/artwork/erased-de-kooning-drawing>