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Robert Rauschenberg holding a blueprint by Susan Weil and himself in their West Ninety-Fifth Street apartment, New York, 1951. Photo: Wallace Kirkland.

# LOST AND FOUND

MICHAEL LOBEL ON SUSAN WEIL AND ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG'S BLUEPRINTS

WRITING IN THESE PAGES IN 1972, the critic Leo Steinberg famously heralded the radical rupture instigated by ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG's art. Rauschenberg's "picture planes," dense accumulations of things and images, dispensed with the transcendent weightlessness of modernist painting and instead evoked the quotidian material of studio floors and detritus, streams of data and imprinted information. As art historian Branden W. Joseph would later write, this is work that "views history in terms of an archive."

And so scholar MICHAEL LOBEL's recent discovery of a cache of photographic negatives from 1951 in the University of Illinois at Chicago library archive provides an apt sequel to the story: Published here in *Artforum* for the very first time, these images feature Rauschenberg and his then wife and collaborator, SUSAN WEIL, demonstrating their process of making the legendary blueprints—direct cyanotype impressions of bodies and things—on the floor of the one-room apartment they shared in New York. Lobel explores this seminal episode in the young artists' lives and its striking implications for their future work, teasing a rich history out of the smallest details of these "lost"—and newly found—pictures.











Model posing for a blueprint in Robert Rauschenberg and Susan Weil's West Ninety-Fifth Street apartment, New York, 1951. Photo: Wallace Kirkland.



Spread from *Life* 30, no. 15 (April 9, 1951). Speaking of Pictures. Teaser reads: "Blueprint paper, sun lamp, a nude produce some vaporous fantasies."



IT IS AN UNFORGETTABLE PORTRAIT of the artist as a young man: A tousle-haired Robert Rauschenberg, in rolled-up shirtsleeves and paint-spattered jeans, stands barefoot amid a body of work, selections from a group of blueprints—primitive photograms—that he and Susan Weil, then his wife, produced collaboratively from about 1949 to 1951. The photograph captures myriad details that speak to the couple's creative process and ambitions in their early years living in New York and foreshadows artistic breakthroughs yet to come. Although the picture was taken more than six decades ago and appears to be an iconic image of the artist, this is in fact the first time it has ever been published. Until now it has sat undiscovered, along with several dozen other negatives, in an archive in Chicago.

The story goes something like this: In 1951, as Weil recounted to me, Rauschenberg—then twenty-five—visited the offices of *Life* magazine to drum up interest in the couple's work. Staff photographer Wallace Kirkland was dispatched to their tiny one-room apartment on the Upper West Side (they shared a kitchen and bathroom with a neighbor) to document their process. The fruits of that shoot, along with an accompanying unsigned, short text, appeared in the magazine's April 9 issue; several black-and-white photos of Weil and Rauschenberg at work were reproduced alongside some of the resulting blueprint pictures in a three-page spread. In Weil's telling, after Kirkland left the apartment, she and Rauschenberg had a dinner of cereal because it was all they could afford.

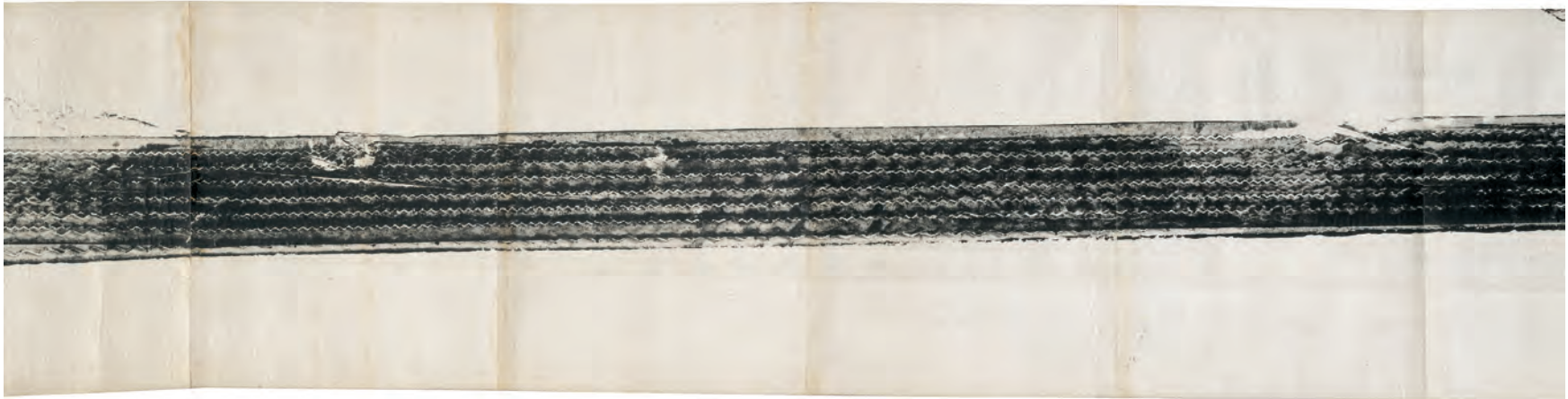
As must have been his habit as a professional photographer, Kirkland kept hold of the negatives from

that day. But here's where things get complicated: At some point, Kirkland's archives were split in two, with a portion sent to the Wisconsin Historical Society in Madison and the remainder consigned to the University of Illinois at Chicago library. While the Wisconsin photos have long been known—some were reproduced in the catalogue for an exhibition of Rauschenberg's early works curated by Walter Hopps for the Menil Collection in Houston in the early 1990s—the trove in Chicago got buried, filed under the generic heading "Nudes" (not surprisingly, since two nude models appear in a good number of the photographs). Which is why they went unidentified for so long.

If these photographs were intended to document a single series, they also offer substantial insight into broader circumstances, including Weil and Rauschenberg's approach to photography, to collaborative experimentation, and to the paintings they were both then making. Take, for instance, our first photo: Just visible in the left foreground, peeking out from a half-closed satchel, is the distinctive GE logo, no doubt the packaging for a bulb used in making the prints. At rear is a tall wicker basket that Weil explained was a convenient, compact storage space for the pair's rolled-up works. And laid down beneath the blueprint on the floor is a scattering of newspaper pages, which under magnification can be identified as belonging to the *New York Times* of February 16, 1951—offering a clue to the shoot's time frame. Another illuminating item, resting on the low table at right, is a copy of the 1951 *US Camera Annual*, suggesting that the pair were keeping up with current developments in the field of photography. Indeed, the

blueprints were a way of making cameraless photographs that could compete with the scale of contemporary painting (existing works from the series measure anywhere from five to almost nine feet high), yet still keep the cost of materials viable for two young artists living on a shoestring. (One of the captions accompanying the *Life* feature notes that the blueprints were "cheap to make," giving the cost—"about \$1.75"—of a ten-yard roll of paper.)

Weil and Rauschenberg met as art students in Paris, where they boarded at the same rooming house and skipped classes to visit museums together. Weil had already enrolled at Black Mountain College in North Carolina, and Rauschenberg followed suit, studying for the 1948–49 academic year and returning for stretches during 1951 and '52. Just prior to moving to New York City, they spent the summer of 1949 at the Weil family's vacation home on Outer Island, Connecticut, where Weil introduced Rauschenberg to the blueprint process—which she had learned in childhood—and where the two were married the following June. Over the course of several years, they used the technique to collaborate on a relatively extensive body of works. A model (sometimes one of the artists themselves) and elements including foliage, textiles, and common household objects were laid down on a sheet, which was exposed with an ultraviolet bulb. The image would then be developed, a process—including a water rinse and treatment with a darkening agent—illustrated in the *Life* spread by a shot of Rauschenberg perched on the edge of a tub, sponging down a wet print. In their de-skilled photographic technique, one-to-one scale, association with the plane of the floor, and the overall



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performative nature of the process, the blueprints laid the groundwork for years of experimentation by both artists.

The technique spans the length of Weil's career, appearing most recently in a series of cyanotype pieces she began making with the photographer José Betancourt in 2000. Rauschenberg would repeatedly adopt approaches that returned to the horizontal orientation and indexical imprinting of the blueprints, from his famed collaboration with John Cage on the 1953 *Automobile Tire Print* to his later transfer drawings and silk-screen works. In *Artforum* in 1972, Leo Steinberg used these very features of Rauschenberg's art to launch a pivotal critique of Clement Greenberg's formalist criticism, describing a major shift in painting that he identified, at the time, as "post-Modernist," and which treated the picture plane as a flatbed akin to "tabletops, studio floors, charts, bulletin boards—any receptor surface on which objects are scattered, on which data is entered, on which information may be received, printed, impressed."

The blueprint technique is also memorable for its wide range of reference: It looked to the past, not only to the cyanotype's presence in the early development of photography but to the veritable dawn of culture, in that it echoes the frequent appearance of simple outlines of the human form, specifically handprints, in Paleolithic cave paintings. At the same time, it was connected to the present, even at its most terrifying: Those silhouetted figures evoke the descriptions, as in John Hersey's famed 1946 *New Yorker* piece on Hiroshima, of human silhouettes burned onto walls and facades by the blast from the atom bomb.

In spite of their lasting effect on these two artists (and others, since Rauschenberg would go on to introduce Jasper Johns to the technique as well) and the blueprints' potential range of meanings, these works have, as a whole, been underinvestigated. Kirkland's photographs, and the story behind them, offer some evidence as to why: While the blueprints were produced over several years' time and seem to have numbered in the dozens, only a few survive. (The negatives provide images of nine or ten no-longer-extant works.) Another issue is the difficulty in determining their status as independent works of art. Some were indeed made to be exhibited; Edward Steichen included one in "Abstraction in Photography" at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which, like Rauschenberg's first one-man show at the Betty Parsons Gallery, opened a month after the *Life* spread came out. But some were made for publicity or commercial purposes, whether those in the Kirkland shots or others created for window displays at the Bonwit Teller department store, and likely later discarded.

One further obstacle to seeing these as worthy of extended consideration is that, at first blush, they look as if they were made relatively simplistically—a presumption reinforced by the *Life* article, which describes a blueprint being finished in just twenty minutes. That is to say, they appear to be whimsical, one-shot images, with the various elements laid on the paper surface, the entirety exposed at one go, and then the image fixed. (One wonders what the artists' neighbor thought of the two commandeering the shared bathroom to develop the blueprints.) The Kirkland negatives, however, show that the process

of making the blueprints was significantly more complex than one might initially assume. At times the paper appears to have been exposed in several passes in the creation of a single print. For instance, for an image of a woman, hands crossed above her head, it turns out that the figure was added only after the fabric element—a skirt—had been burned into the paper. (It is this work that Rauschenberg holds up for the camera in the first image reproduced here.) This kind of pictorial experimentation with textiles occurs throughout Rauschenberg's longer career, in his use of fabric to veil or obscure—a strategy that surfaces often, for example, in his Combines, begun later that decade.

**WITH ITS IMAGES** of artworks being made on the floor, the artist poised over them, the blueprint photo-essay inevitably conjures associations with one of the most memorable *Life* profiles of this period, from just two years earlier, which had asked, "Jackson Pollock: Is he the greatest living painter in the United States?" (The impact of that spread was no doubt fresh in Rauschenberg's mind when he sought out the same periodical.) However, the piece on the Weil-Rauschenberg collaboration was not filed under the heading Art—as the Pollock profile had been—but rather as part of a section at the front of the magazine devoted to photography in all its variations. Titled *Speaking of Pictures*, the feature dated from the second issue of *Life*, in 1936. The articles that appeared there ran the gamut from Cecil Beaton's portraits of Queen Elizabeth to a profile of the professional animal photographer Ylla Koffler to



Opposite page: Robert Rauschenberg, *Automobile Tire Print* (detail), 1953, house paint on twenty sheets of paper mounted on fabric, overall 1' 4½" x 22' ½".

Right: Robert Rauschenberg and Susan Weil developing a blueprint in their bathtub, West Ninety-Fifth Street, New York, 1951. Photo: Wallace Kirkland.





Left: Blueprint by Robert Rauschenberg and Susan Weil tacked to a wall in their West Ninety-Fifth Street apartment, New York, 1951. Photo: Wallace Kirkland.

Right: Robert Rauschenberg demonstrating the blueprint exposure process, West Ninety-Fifth Street, New York, 1951. Photo: Wallace Kirkland.











Robert Rauschenberg demonstrating the blueprint exposure process, West Ninety-Fifth Street, New York, 1951. Photo: Wallace Kirkland.





Susan Weil, *The Eden*, 1950, oil on canvas, 51 x 51".





Robert Rauschenberg demonstrating the blueprint exposure process, West Ninety-Fifth Street, New York, 1951. From left: Susan Weil, Rauschenberg, model.  
Photo: Wallace Kirkland.



Robert Rauschenberg, *22 the Lily White*, ca. 1950, oil and graphite on canvas, 39½ x 23¾".

**The rediscovered photographs show that the process of making the blueprints was significantly more complex than one might initially assume.**

Weegee teaching a class of aspiring news photographers how best to photograph a corpse. What connected these diverse subjects was the persuasive power of photography, a preoccupation that lay at the very heart of *Life's* editorial directive. The inclusion of Weil and Rauschenberg's blueprints under that banner thus underscores the artists' savvy linking of their work to the mission of one of the most high-profile and widely circulated media outlets of the twentieth century. Perhaps the pair even realized that, given their age and status in the art world, they had a better chance of drawing attention for these experimental efforts than for the paintings both were making at the time.

Some have tied Pollock's decline to the fact that he allowed his approach to painting, supposedly inchoate and expressive, to be captured and dissected through photography and film, as evidenced in the images by Martha Holmes taken for the *Life* profile, and in the well-known later efforts by Hans Namuth—as if the artist's painterly technique were undone in being made visible by the camera. But Pollock, who was profiled at the height of his career, was a different case from Weil and Rauschenberg, who used that platform to deliver their neophyte work to a mass audience. It should come as no surprise, then, that they not only sought out the coverage but also decisively staged their process for Kirkland's camera. The pair seem to have exploited a feature of the blueprint exposure technique that calls for an ultraviolet bulb commonly used in sunlamps rather than a conventional incandescent one. (As one *Life* caption helpfully points out, the "ordinary light bulb has no effect on blueprint.") A careful examination of the photos in sequence suggests that at certain moments, they swapped out the ultraviolet bulb for an incandescent, allowing them to mime the process for Kirkland without actually exposing the paper (again, this would have been a canny move for two young artists on a tight budget).

Weil and Rauschenberg also appear to have set things up not merely to show how they made work but also with the magazine's audience in mind. In studying Kirkland's photographs, I wondered, with no little befuddlement, why in some the model is

shown with foliage laid across her skin. This didn't make any sense to me, since the process only captures the exposed contours—the outermost silhouettes—of objects. Until, that is, I realized that in certain cases the leaves and branches were being used as de facto censor bars, covering the model's exposed body parts (for the photographs and not the blueprints), most likely in a nod to the magazine's broader audience. Again, we are presented with evidence of the extent to which the young artists were willing to tailor their practice—or, at the very least, its documentation—to accord with the demands of a mass-circulation weekly.

If they were staging parts of their process, and their model, were they also staging the setting? When queried, Weil indicated that this was just how the room looked at the time, but I can't help but notice the prominence in Kirkland's photos of existing works by the two. To the right, on the wall, is a doubled blueprint portrait of Rauschenberg, and on the back wall are two paintings by Weil, one leaning and one hanging. Considering how calculated the *Life* photo shoot was, and the potential size of its intended audience, it's hard to imagine the pair didn't also consider that it would be a smart move to make sure other works by them were visible in their apartment. That this was intentional on their part is further suggested by the clear correlation between the largest blueprint, laid out on the floor, and the painting by Weil behind it, *The Eden*, 1950, which contains almost identical subject matter: a human figure (or figures) situated within a field of foliage.

The potentially deliberate placement of Weil's works in Kirkland's photographs stands in stark contrast to her physical absence from them. Although the text accompanying the *Life* article describes the blueprints as a collaborative endeavor, and both artists insisted on this point in later years, most of Kirkland's photographs present Rauschenberg as the primary creator, in line with the magazine's earlier presentation of Pollock. When Weil appears, she is literally marginalized: She plays the role of assistant, ready with a bucket as Rauschenberg does the work of developing a blueprint on the bathroom wall; or she



appears from off frame, a disembodied hand holding a lamp or a pair of feet clad in loafers. This may have been partly (or largely) Kirkland's doing, but it also reflects cultural currents. The photographs thus stand to more narrowly document the pair's artistic practice while, at the same time, they attest to broader patterns of women's marginalization in the art world, especially women—think of Lee Krasner or Elaine de Kooning—married to male artists.

In this respect, one photograph is particularly telling. From a purely documentary perspective, it importantly captures Rauschenberg's early canvas *22 the Lily White*, ca. 1950, on the wall at left. Even though sections are partially hidden, enough is visible to show that the painting was originally positioned in a 180-degree reversal from its current configuration. (The willy-nilly placement of words and numbers refuses any proper upright orientation—the very condition that would later draw Steinberg's attention.) But the details of human interaction captured in the image are even more revealing. Rauschenberg crouches by the side of a nude model splayed out on the floor—perhaps uncomfortably close, when we consider that his wife sits just inches away. (To add further significance, Weil was at this point pregnant with the couple's son, Christopher, who would be



In their de-skilled photographic technique, one-to-one scale, and performative process, the blueprints laid the groundwork for years of experimentation by both artists.

born in mid-July.) The image is a prime example of the visual marginalization I have described, with Weil partially cropped by the photo's edge, suggesting that Kirkland didn't consider her of central interest to the scene. She looks straight back at the camera, breaking the proverbial fourth wall. Her expression is hard to make out: Is it merely one of boredom, or is there some irritation or frustration evident, perhaps signaling her recognition of her exclusion from the central action depicted here? This is not an image that would have made it into the pages of *Life*—certainly not without further cropping—but it is Weil's unexpected presence, breaking the frame, that gives the picture continuing interest.

**IF RAUSCHENBERG** has over the years been afforded the lion's share of attention, the Kirkland images show how that imbalance was already being instilled at the start of these two artists' careers. At the same time, the photographs give us the opportunity to begin the work of redressing that situation. So they might lead us to observe that the large painting by Weil visible in many of the images bears the same title—*Eden*—as a work included in Rauschenberg's show a month later at the Betty Parsons Gallery. Which might lead us to consider how meaningful—and fraught—that subject is for a recently married young couple expecting a child. Which might encourage us to look for further correspondences, such as the abundance of scrawled characters in Rauschenberg's *22 the Lily White* and Weil's long involvement with writing, including an early text-filled torn-paper collage, *Secrets*, from 1949. Which, taken together, might help us recognize the richness of the dialogue between the two—the depth of their collaboration in that period.

These observations, in turn, prompt me to say something about the relevance of archival research for the study of recent art. In an age when so many historical materials are available in digitized form, the rooting out of actual, physical documents from archives and libraries might seem redundant or unnecessary; similarly, certain scholars tend to dismiss such activities as overly antiquarian or empiricist.



Robert Rauschenberg and Susan Weil, *Female Figure*, ca. 1950, exposed blueprint paper, 105 × 36".

But the sheer quantity of such materials will always exceed the labor and financial resources available to digitize them, meaning that there will always be more to uncover, and a need for researchers to continue looking. And while critics tend to focus on the classifying systems used to file archival materials, presenting them as primary examples of the drive to organize and regulate knowledge, in point of fact the materials in any archive—invariably heterogeneous, often assembled by whim or happenstance—are never fully contained by the means employed to order them.

It's particularly fitting to use materials found in an archive to illuminate Rauschenberg's approach, since, as scholars have long noted, his work exhibits a strong archival impulse, evident in his propensity to cram diverse images, objects, and registers together

in a single piece. Likewise, any visit to an actual repository puts one in surprising proximity to some of the very principles espoused in the circles in which Weil and Rauschenberg moved at Black Mountain College and in the orbit of John Cage. (One of their blueprints was included, along with individual works by each, in the Boston Institute of Contemporary Art's exhibition "Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College 1933–1957"; the show travels, minus the blueprint, to the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles this month.) Those tendencies include a frequent interest in the overlooked, neglected, or discarded remnants of the everyday, and in the embrace of chance and accident. One is never sure exactly what one will find in an archive, which is what's challenging about such research: The outcome is always uncertain.

In that spirit of not always knowing the outcome and of leaving things open, I want to bring us, one final time, back to the Kirkland photographs. While the *Life* shoot has always been identified as a one-day episode, Rauschenberg actually appears in two outfits: in some photos barefoot in paint-spattered jeans, in others in wool trousers and shoes. (This difference accords with the various appearances of the two models.) Is this evidence that the shoot in fact occurred over the course of more than one day? Or was this another savvy strategy on the part of the two young artists to introduce some degree of variation to the magazine pictures? On their own, such details may appear insignificant, unworthy of attention. Yet, as with the broader task of research, the slow accumulation and steady consideration of many seemingly ephemeral details, piece by piece, bit by bit, can over time furnish new historical insights. A trip to an archive is, after all, always a game of chance, a roll of the dice. There are those days when one comes away empty-handed, feeling defeated. And then there are times when something new (well, newly found) and revealing emerges from the papers—a story just waiting to be developed. □

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A blueprint in progress at Robert Rauschenberg and Susan Weil's West Ninety-Fifth Street apartment, New York, 1951.  
Photo: Wallace Kirkland.