

Rose Bishop
Final Paper
Research Methods
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SC192 (Untitled)

Date unknown

Blueprint

16 5/16 x 14 1/2 inches

Blueprint Study Collection

The Robert Rauschenberg Foundation.

Referenced in:

- Emile de Antonio to Leo Castelli, December 26, 1974, Leo Castelli Gallery Records, Archives of American Art, Washington DC.
- Emile de Antonio to Leo Castelli, October 3, 1975, Leo Castelli Gallery Records, Archives of American Art, Washington DC.
- Correspondence from Emile De Antonio to Robert Rauschenberg, October 12, 1976, Box CO-27, Robert Rauschenberg Papers, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, New York, NY.

Blank Space:
***SC192* and the Robert Rauschenberg Blueprint Study Collection**

The Blueprint Study Collection is one of the more mysterious bodies of works held at the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation. It consists of seventeen blueprints and five diazotypes that were likely made during the early stages of Rauschenberg's career. Filmmaker Emile de Antonio owned the collection up through the 1970s — but the Foundation does not know exactly when or how the prints entered Rauschenberg's archive.¹

This is the extent of the established knowledge on the Study Collection, posing several obstacles to scholars looking for definitive answers. With this paper I do not intend to come to such a conclusion, a pursuit that I believe to be a trap not uncommon to the study of Rauschenberg's work. Instead, the purpose of this research is to assess what can be learned from the Study Collection with these challenges in mind, through an overlapping framework of formal, technical, and historical analysis.

This inquiry will focus on one work from the Study Collection: *SC192* (Figure 1).² At first glance, the work is rather unassuming, projecting the appearance of a creased piece of paper. For many, a crumpled up piece of paper is evidence of a failed idea, or detritus of the creative process, and on a meta-level, the Study Collection is an equivalent form of discarded or forgotten material, given that very little is known about the collection's origins. The clarity and definition in visual forms of *SC192* provide a good entry point into the Study Collection as a whole, particularly given the

¹ Information provided with consent by the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation.

² Title of *SC192*, as with the other works in the Study Collection, was assigned by Foundation.

indeterminate nature of this body of work. In singling out this print in particular, my intent is to excavate the remains of Rauschenberg's creative process on a micro-scale, in addition to exploring his interest in the material possibilities of blank space at its most profound simplicity.

Not quite a perfect square, *SC192* is printed on a piece of exposed blueprint paper that is slightly taller than the overall width of the composition. The left and right sides of the page are cut along a moderately uneven line, intensifying the overall asymmetry of the work. It is unclear if the piece of blueprint paper—which was most likely mass-produced and standardly sized—was cut before or after the composition was exposed.

The faded remains of a rectangular strip of tape are evident on the verso side of *SC192*, located in the top right corner of the sheet (Figure 2). This indicates that at some point in its history *SC192* was mounted, perhaps to mat board or another material sturdier than paper.³ A blotchy white circular form dominates the backside of the composition. It is unclear what exactly produced this effect. However, given that it is only visible on the verso side of the sheet, it is unlikely that it was intentional.

Generally speaking, the paper shows signs of aging and was mostly likely stored in less than ideal archival conditions in the time after its production. Patches of brown discoloration are clearly observable on the verso side of the composition, particularly towards the edges of the sheet. On the front of the page, these sporadic stains are only noticeable in the lightest areas of the image, such as in the bottom register towards the center left.

³ Hypothesis proposed by conservators at Blueprint Study Day held at the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, November 21, 2019.

SC192 is a blueprint, or cyanotype, as it is often referred to interchangeably. This means that the composition was printed on a special type of photosensitive paper coated with an iron-based solution that turns from white to blue when exposed to UV light. Typically, objects are placed directly on the sheet of photosensitive paper, which when exposed yields a one-to-one scale contact print of the arrangement. Sir John Herschel invented the blueprint method in 1842 as an inexpensive means of mechanically reproducing text and drawings.⁴ Herschel introduced the method to Anna Atkins, who used blueprints to illustrate her three-volume botanical study *Photographs of British Algae: Cyanotype Impressions* (1843–53), which is one of the earliest books illustrated with photographically produced images.⁵

While blueprinting has long been associated with scientific and technical imaging, its status as “fine art” has always been tenuous. Nancy Burns, curator of a recent survey on blueprints at the Worcester Museum of Art, suggests that many 19th and 20th century photographers viewed the method with disdain “because it was too easy,” and seemingly requires little skill.⁶ Edward Curtis, for example, only used blueprinting for proofs, while Edward Steichen once referred to his blueprinting as a “secret” in a letter to Alfred Stieglitz.⁷

Adelaide Skeel, a 19th century photographer and critic, was one of the few to publicly advocate for the cyanotype’s artistic validity. In an 1888 article for the

⁴ For more information on the production, history, and conservation of blueprints, see Stulik, Dusan C. and Art Kaplan, “The Atlas of Analytical Signatures of Photographic Processes: Cyanotype.” The Getty Conservation Institute, 2013.

https://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications_resources/pdf_publications/pdf/atlas_cyanotype.pdf

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ As quoted in Loos, Ted, “Cyanotype, Photography’s Blue Period, Is Making a Comeback.” *The New York Times*, (New York, NY), February 5, 2016.

⁷ Burns, Nancy Kathryn and Kristina Wilson, *Cyanotypes: Photography’s Blue Period* (Worcester, Massachusetts: Worcester Museum of Art, 2016), 64.

American Annual of Photography, Skeel unabashedly embraced blueprinting, despite its negative perception among photographers:

‘Does your machine only take blue pictures — real photographers make people in black and white,’ friends naively said to me when I bought my ten dollar outfit. I paid no heed, and today blue grass, blue cows, blue trees, and blue faces distinguish my work from that of real photographers. Although other amateurs confess they use ferro prussiate-paper because, like patent medicine it is cheap, reliable, and within the reach of all, I make blues because I like them.⁸

Skeel’s statement, while playful in tone, outlines an important theoretical aspect of blueprinting. In comparison to a black and white photograph, the cyanotype’s distinct blue tone adds a sense of artificiality, which Skeel asserts produces a decorative rather than ostensibly empirical object. Skeel concedes in a subsequent article, titled “Something Moore About the Blues,” that “the usual objection” to blueprinting is “that such pictures do not look real or natural,” which she believed to be the ultimate hindrance to the medium’s wider acceptance among photographers.⁹

Alternatively, blueprints were incredibly popular among amateurs, particularly women. In addition to using commercially available blueprint supplies, many amateur hobbyist photographers made their own paper from recipes published in women’s periodicals and craft journals.¹⁰ It is not unreasonable to suggest that Skeel’s colleagues may have trivialized her blueprinting practice because of its implicit femininity. Skeel herself, in fact, wrote that some critics would dismiss her blueprints as “crazy-quilt

⁸ Skeel, Adelaide, “Blues.” *The American Annual of Photography and Photographic Times Almanac*, 1889, 48-50.

⁹ Skeel, Adelaide, “Something Moore About the Blues.” *The American Annual of Photography and Photographic Times Almanac*, January 30, 1891, 54-55.

¹⁰ Burns, *Cyanotypes: Photography’s Blue Period*, 18.

work," a reference which appears to intentionally invoke the gendered dichotomy between fine art and craft.¹¹

With this history in mind, it is significant that Rauschenberg was introduced to the blueprint technique through his then-wife, Susan Weil. From 1949 through 1951 the pair produced dozens of blueprints, very few of which survive today.¹² Weil learned the blueprint technique as a child, citing a cyanotype created by her grandmother Sarah Adler as partial inspiration for her and Rauschenberg's later exploration (Figure 3).¹³ The cyanotype's historical classification as a craft arguably informed the pair's blueprinting more so than its association with scientific imaging.

Rauschenberg and Weil's proclivity for craft is perhaps rooted in their unconventional education at Black Mountain College, which was under the supervision of Joseph and Anni Albers. In a 1946 profile of the school published in *Junior Bazaar*, the role of craftwork in the curriculum was described as such:

The average college would turn up its aristocratic nose and murmur disdainfully that the crafts have nothing at all to do with higher education. At Black Mountain things are different. Rightly or wrongly, from the academic point of view, Black Mountain does not distinguish between art history and the actual work of being a craftsman. Moreover, it maintains that pure art and a craft such as weaving are cousins at the very least. Anni Albers, Assistant Professor of Art at Black Mountain, puts it this way: "Any craft may end in producing useful objects, or it may rise to the level of art."¹⁴

In their blueprinting, Weil and Rauschenberg take on a similarly nonchalant attitude towards traditional artistic hierarchies. As a young, recently married couple, they

¹¹ Skeel, Adelaide, "Something Moore About the Blues," 55.

¹² Lobel, Michael, "Lost and Found: Susan Weil and Robert Rauschenberg's Blueprints." *ArtForum*, February 2016, 188.

¹³ "Rauschenberg Oral History Project: The Reminiscences of Susan Weil," Columbia Center for Oral History Columbia University, January 27, June 6, and September 10, 2014, 89.

¹⁴ "Black Mountain College," *Junior Bazaar*, May 1946, 130-133, 178.

embraced the practical nature of blueprinting as a means of pursuing a fine art career on a tight budget.

While the pair did not develop this technique during their time at Black Mountain, their blueprints share striking similarities with *matière* studies, a teaching exercise developed by the Albers.¹⁵ A *matière* study is an assemblage or collage fashioned from unconventional materials, such as plants, fabric, and wire. The Albers encouraged the students to make *matière* studies in order to explore the material and tactile possibilities of the compositional space. In a photograph published in the aforementioned *Junior Bazaar* article, a student is pictured arranging squares of fabric, crumpled up pieces of wax paper and leaves on a black background (Figure 4). She does not sit at a desk or conventional classroom table, and instead works on the floor.

The unnamed student and her arrangement bear striking similarities to a 1951 picture of Rauschenberg blueprinting, minus the UV bulb (Figure 5). Included in a *LIFE* magazine spread on Rauschenberg and Weil's blueprinting practice, the photograph depicts Rauschenberg exposing a blueprint on the floor of his New York apartment.¹⁶ Like the student's *matière*, Rauschenberg's arrangement creates formal relationships between disparate materials. For example, the amorphous netting towards the top of the composition contrasts with the rigidity of the medal chain that runs along the bottom quarter of the page. Despite these structural differences both objects are perforated, allowing light to pass through in a manner well suited for the blueprinting process. In the final exposure, which was reproduced in the magazine above the photograph of Rauschenberg, these objects are bound together in a field of blue and give off the

¹⁵ This relationship was first proposed by Troiano, Vanessa S., "The "Bauhaus Idea" in Robert Rauschenberg's Blueprints," *International Journal of Architectural Theory* 24., no. 39 (2019), 99-113.

¹⁶ "Speaking of Pictures," *LIFE*, April 9, 1951, 22-24.

appearance of weightlessness. The prints in the Study Collection contain similar formal comparisons. For instance, in *SC195* gears and mass-produced light switch covers are placed against a background flecked with dirt and other natural detritus. Similar comparisons between natural and technological forms appear throughout this body of work. In this light, the Study Collection can perhaps be viewed as a series of variations on the *matière* studies taught by Albers.

As is the case with *matière* studies, it is difficult to evaluate the status of Rauschenberg and Weil's blueprints as independent works of art. While at least one work, *Female Figure*, was exhibited as art in Edward Steichen's "Abstraction in Photography" at the Museum of Modern Art, others were made for publicity or commercial purposes.¹⁷ Rauschenberg also made several commercial blueprints in collaboration with Jasper Johns under the pseudonym of Matson Jones. We do not know definitively if Rauschenberg produced the works in the Study Collection with or without a collaborator.

Interestingly, the motif of crumpled paper appears in Rauschenberg's blueprints with both Weil and Johns. The earliest known example is clearly visible in another photograph taken by Wallace Kirkland for *LIFE* in January 1951 (Figure 6).¹⁸ The image pictures Rauschenberg in his living room surrounded by blueprints, as well as works created independently by Weil. A blueprint produced with the same crumpled paper aesthetic as *SC192* is located directly behind where Rauschenberg stands. In his article "Lost and Found," Michael Lobel proposes that Rauschenberg and Weil strategically

¹⁷ Lobel, "Lost and Found," 188.

¹⁸ Photograph was not published in final version of article. Lobel found original negative in Wallace Kirkland papers. (0062_OL11C_0004], Special Collections and University Archives. University of Illinois at Chicago.

staged the setting of the Kirkland photographs in order to give prominence to certain works.¹⁹ The couple perhaps included the crumpled paper blueprint in efforts to demonstrate the diversity of their practice, as the majority of their other blueprints feature figures or botanical forms.

The one extant Matson Jones blueprint, titled *Jasper Johns Blue Ceiling* (c. 1955), prominently features sections of paper that appear creased or wrinkled in a similar manner to *SC192* (Figure 7).²⁰ Consisting of four separate panels, each print pictures an aquatic scene decorated with a large merman and a variety of sea creatures. The crumpled paper technique is used to simulate the effect of water — or perhaps more accurately, the changes in vision that occur when underwater. Notably, this effect is used to obscure the figure's bodies, adding the appearance of dimensionality to the relatively flat silhouettes (Figure 8). *Jasper Johns Blue Ceiling* reportedly hung in the windows of the New York department store Bonwit Teller. However, it is unknown when the work was installed, or what products were paired with the prints

In addition to *SC192*, one other blueprint in the Study Collection at the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation features the crumpled paper motif (Figure 9). Now given the designation *SC183*, the work also pictures the imprint of a perfume bottle. The bottle appears to be a near perfect match with Mary Chess's star bottle, which was produced between 1942-1956 (Figure 10).²¹ The perfume was primarily sold at luxury department stores and retailed between \$5-7.50. The perfume perhaps belonged to Weil, although Rauschenberg could have gotten it through his work for Bonwit Teller. There's evidence

¹⁹ Lobel, "Lost and Found," 195.

²⁰ These prints are in the collection of Philip Williams.

²¹ This date range is extrapolated preliminary search on ProQuest database of periodicals and newspapers. Earliest printed reference to the star bottle can be found in *The Washington Post*, October 22, 1942: B6. Latest can be found *Women's Wear Daily*, Vol. 93, Iss. 83, October 26, 1956, 28.

to suggest that Bonwit Teller did feature Mary Chess-themed display windows, such as a display installed between June 27 and July 11, 1950, documented in the Dan Arnje papers at the New School.²² However, no extant photographs of Bonwit Teller windows feature *SC183*, so it is unknown if the print was ever featured in a display .

While we don't know if the Study Collection was created with a collaborator, circumstantial evidence suggests that this body of work was indeed commercial, like *Jasper Johns Blue Ceiling*. As I mentioned in my introduction, the Study Collection was at one point in the possession of Emile de Antonio. In addition to his work as a filmmaker, de Antonio reportedly helped broker commercial jobs between fine artists and corporate clients. In his biography of Rauschenberg, Calvin Tomkins referred to De Antonio as Rauschenberg's "agent" and "business intermediary," although the specifics of this position are unknown.²³ In all likelihood, de Antonio, facilitated some of Rauschenberg's display work for department stores such as Bonwit Teller. De Antonio might have received the study collection as a gift or form of compensation, although this theory is unconfirmed.

De Antonio attempted to sell the study collection as works of art to Leo Castelli in the mid 1970s. In 1976 letter addressed to Rauschenberg, de Antonio writes, "A dealer put it to me clearly as it can be stated: if you sign them, they're art and worth money."²⁴ The works in the study collection remain unsigned, however, suggesting that

²² The display, designed by Gene Moore, features actor Cris Alexander in drag, surrounded by Mary Chess bottles and white lilacs. *Bonwit Teller Display Featuring the Perfume "White Lilac" by Mary Chess*, photographic print, binder 1, KA0001_000008, Dan Arnje Papers, The New School Archives and Special Collections.

²³ Tomkins, Calvin, *Off the Wall: Robert Rauschenberg and the Art World of Our Time*, (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1981), 147

²⁴ Correspondence from Emile De Antonio to Robert Rauschenberg, October 12, 1976, Box CO-27, Robert Rauschenberg Papers, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, New York, NY.

Rauschenberg did not classify this material as art, nor did he want the collection on the commercial market.

Regardless of Rauschenberg's personal classification of the study collection, *SC192* is an interesting aesthetic object, worthy of art historical and technical examination. Unlike conventional cyanotypes, which are typically contact prints, *SC192* was exposed in an entirely different manner. Initially, it was assumed that the composition was produced by laying a piece of wrinkled cellophane or tissue over the blueprint paper. However, upon experimenting with the blueprinting process in a workshop led by Hunter College instructor Christina Freeman, this theory failed in action. At the suggestion of Professor Freeman, we then exposed an actual crumpled up ball of blueprint paper, which proved to be a eureka moment in our research. Once placed in the water bath, the physical wrinkles in the paper ball smoothed out. Yet, due to the uneven exposure of the ball, the paper retained an imprint of its former, crumpled state, rendered in blue and white tones. The result proved to be a close match with *SC192* (Figure 11).

In comparison to the prints produced by Hunter students, Rauschenberg was able to achieve a much subtler range of tones. After consulting with conservators brought together at the Rauschenberg Foundation, one concludes that a multitude of factors could have contributed to this effect.²⁵ For example, it is likely a much stronger UV bulb than those commercially available today was used. It's also possible that Rauschenberg's paper was coated with a slightly more sensitive chemical solution, which could explain the wider tonal range within his blueprints.

²⁵ Hypothesis proposed by conservators at Blueprint Study Day held at the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, November 21, 2019.

There's also evidence to suggest that Rauschenberg may have employed a more elaborate folding technique, allowing him to produce a more detailed impression (Figure 12). In the case of *SC192*, the sheet of paper appears to have been folded into twelve roughly even sections. The creases are most clearly visible on the backside of the composition. However, the final exposure appears to be divided up into six parts, not twelve. Rauschenberg likely folded the paper accordion-style into twelve parts, and then systematically unfolded, creased, and exposed two sections at a time. This segmented technique would have allowed him more control over the crinkling of the paper and overall contrast of the image. Additionally, it provides more evidence that Rauschenberg's blueprints were not simply "one-shot" images, but highly coordinated and skilled efforts.

This exposure method has several interesting symbolic implications. *SC192* captures a state of material change, referencing multiple life stages of the sheet of paper all at once. While the paper remains blank, showing no signs of language or artistic gesture, the hand of the artist is clearly present. The act of crumpling up the sheet of paper is the very mechanism that produces the final photographic image. Thus, the distinction between process and aesthetic content is effectively collapsed.

When examining *SC192* and the crumpled paper technique, one is reminded of John Cage's assessment of Rauschenberg's infamous White Paintings, which are similarly "blank," and function as receptors for light and shadow (Figure 13):

To Whom / No subject / No image / No taste / No object / No beauty / No message / No talent / No technique (no why) / No idea / No intention / No art / No object / No feeling / No black / No white (no and) / After careful consideration, I have come to the conclusion that there is nothing in these paintings that could not be changed, that they can be seen in any light and are not

destroyed by the action of shadows. / Hallelujah! the blind can see again; the water's fine.²⁶

Cage suggests something of the boundless, if not cosmic possibilities of blank space. A 2018 study conducted by researchers at Harvard recently confirmed that a crumpled-up ball of paper could take on an infinite number of configurations.²⁷ In his crumpled paper blueprints, Rauschenberg intuitively toyed with this concept of infinity, as each iteration of the crumpling technique produces a distinct, one-of-a-kind image. The simplicity of this process allowed him to apply this aesthetic across a range of different projects, making it a highly practical artistic tool.

It is this dual conceptual and pragmatic nature that makes *SC192* a compelling object in the context of the artist's large oeuvre. Perhaps it is fitting that our knowledge of *SC192* — and the Study Collection as a whole — has significant gaps, as it signals that there is ample blank space for original research on this enigmatic body of work.

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Gottesman, Omer, Jovana Andrejevic, Chris H. Rycroft and Shmuel M. Rubinstein, "A

²⁶ As cited by Roberts, Sarah, "White Painting [three panel]." *Rauschenberg Research Project*, July 2013. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, <https://www.sfmoma.org/essay/white-painting-three-panel/>

²⁷ Gottesman, Omer, Jovana Andrejevic, Chris H. Rycroft and Shmuel M. Rubinstein, "A state variable for crumpled thin sheets." *Communications Physics* volume 1, Article number: 70 (November 8, 2018), <https://www.nature.com/articles/s42005-018-0072-x#citeas>

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- Special thanks to the staff at the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation and Christina Freeman.*

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FIGURES

Figure 1:



SC192, recto, c.1949-1958, unique blueprint, 16 5/16 x 14 1/2 inches, Blueprint Study Collection, The Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, New York, NY.

Figure 2:



SC192, verso, c.1949-1958, unique blueprint, 16 5/16 x 14 1/2 inches, Blueprint Study Collection, The Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, New York, NY.

Figure 3:



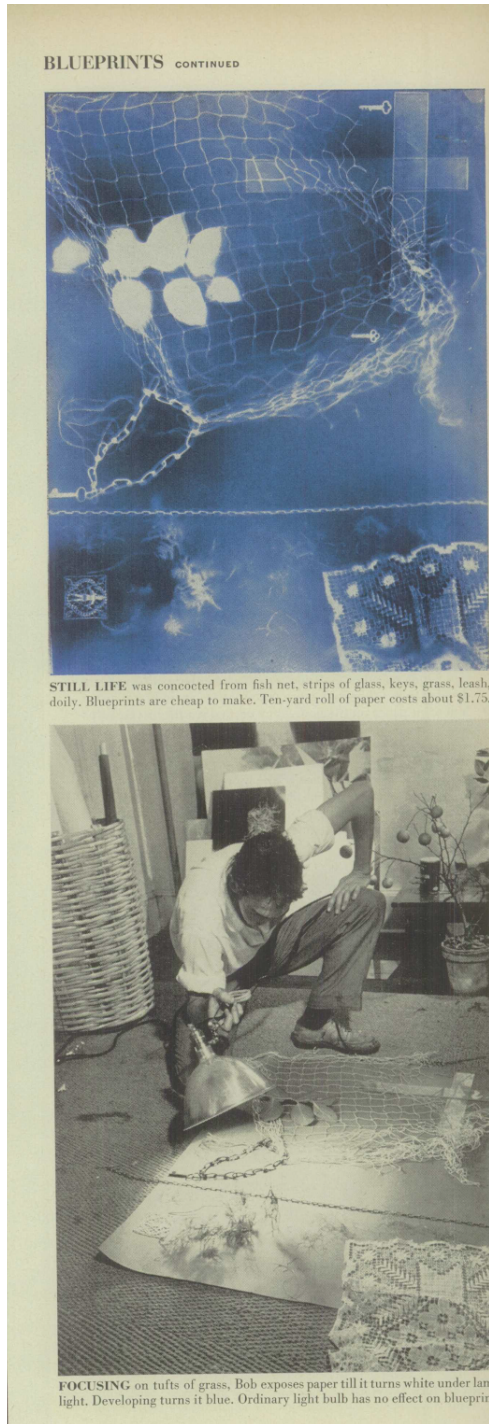
Sara Adler, *Self Portrait*, c.1870, cyanotype, collection of Susan Weil.

Figure 4:



Genevieve Naylor, *Black Mountain College Student making matière study*, published in *Junior Bazaar*, May 1946, 132.

Figure 5:



Wallace Kirkland, *Still Life* and *Focusing*, taken c. January 1951, published in *Life*, April 9, 1951, 24.

Figure 6:



Wallace Kirkland, *Robert Rauschenberg holding a blueprint by Susan Weil and himself in their West Ninety-Fifth Street apartment, New York, c. January 1951*, unpublished negative, Wallace Kirkland papers. (0062_OL11C_0004], Special Collections and University Archives. University of Illinois at Chicago.

Figure 7:



Matson Jones, *Untitled (Jasper Johns Blue Ceiling)*, c. 1958, cyanotype, originally hung in Bonwit Teller, collection of Philip Williams.

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Figure 8:



Detail of Matson Jones, *Untitled (Jasper Johns Blue Ceiling)*, c. 1958, cyanotype, originally hung in Bonwit Teller, collection of Philip Williams.

Figure 9:



SC183, recto, c.1949-1958, unique blueprint, 10 11/16 x 9 3/4 inches, Blueprint Study Collection, The Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, New York, New York.

Figure 10:



Advertisement for Mary Chess Perfume, featuring “Star Bottle,” in bottom right corner, c. 1947.

Figure 11:



Selection of prints made at Blueprint Workshop with Hunter College instructor, Christina Freeman.

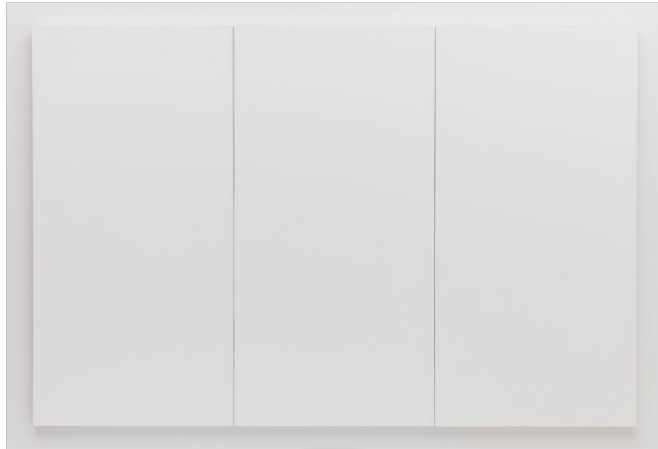
Figure 12:



Detail of folds on *SC192*.

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Figure 13:



White Painting [three panel], c. 1951, paint on canvas, 72 x 108 inches, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.