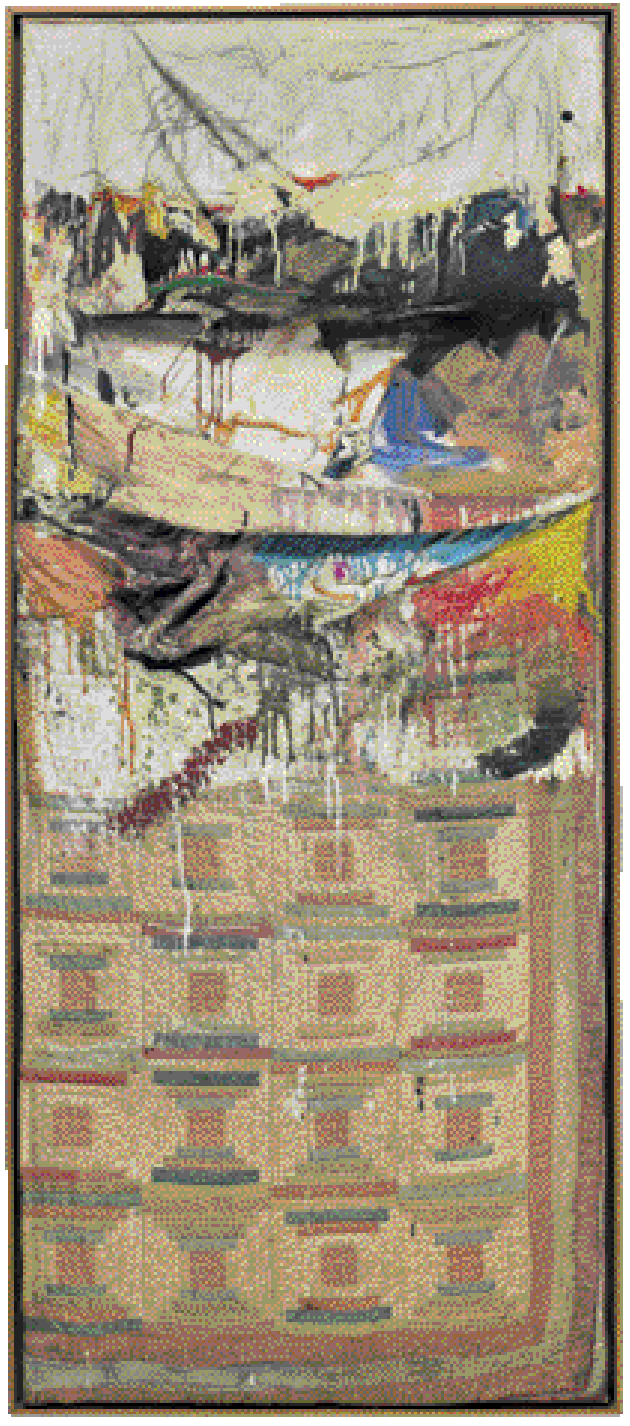
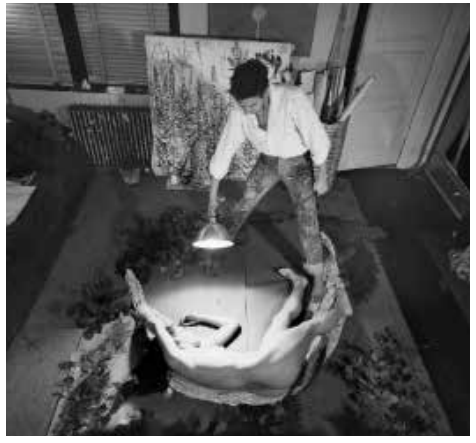
Bed (1955)

It is unlikely that anyone other than Rauschenberg has speculated that a viewer might be possessed of an urge to occupy this bed. At its first showing it reminded one reviewer of "a police photo of the murder bed after the corpse has been removed," an interpretation widely shared—and amplified—over the years. Rauschenberg, however, claimed that this reading was wholly at variance with his own: "I think of *Bed* as one of the friendliest pictures I've ever painted. My fear has always been that someone would want to crawl into it." Whatever measure of sly amusement there must have been in this response, it implicitly acknowledges the double identities of this object—first as a picture and second as a bed. It was fashioned as an arena for cognitive collisions and it has gone about producing them for decades.

Once hanging on the wall of a celebrated collector, now gracing one in The Museum of Modern Art, *Bed* ambushes unprepared visitors every day. Like most of the neighboring objects in the Museum's collection, it is composed of fabric stretched over a wooden structure and selectively covered with paint—but it is manifestly not a picture *of* anything: it is a bed, seen not from above but in direct vertical address. In this work Rauschenberg's gestural handling of paint is a clear reference to Abstract Expressionism, but the artist chose to reverse the procedures Jackson Pollock had famously instated only a few years previously. Where Pollock had positioned commercially supplied canvas on the floor in order to fling, drip, and otherwise apply paint from above, Rauschenberg upended the normally supine components of his bed into a traditional easel stance that



Bed 1955
Oil and pencil on pillow, quilt, and sheet on wood supports, 6' 3¼" x 31½" x 8" (191.1 x 80 x 20.3 cm)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Leo Castelli in honor of Alfred H. Barr, Jr., 1989



would allow the messy bits of his pigment to run in downward rivulets over the pillow, sheet, and quilt.

It is more than likely that the artist had formal, compositional reasons for wanting those downward vectors in this almost militantly vertical painting. Given Rauschenberg's extreme sensitivity to the connotative powers of his materials, it is difficult to imagine that he would not have foreseen a bed, an obviously used bed, smeared with red, yellow, blue, brown, white, and magenta paint as so many invitations to readings of violence, impurity, and sexual mayhem—but a body lying on the bed, whether being murdered or expelling fluids, would not leave trails of stuff running *down* its surfaces. If this evidence of artful practice as opposed to indexical trace might require a particularly observant parsing, Rauschenberg more obviously emphasizes the object's pictorial qualities in his use of the quilt. First, its repeated pattern of rectangles contrasting with his extravagant latherings of paint forces an encounter between geometric and gestural abstraction. And second, where he had earlier required a model to lie on light-sensitive paper spread on a hard floor in order to

5 Rauschenberg exposing blueprint paper to light, West 96th Street, New York, spring 1951. Wisconsin Historical Society (WHi-66573)

preserve the ghostly record of her presence in a blueprint (fig. 5), here he enlisted no collaboration. The soft surface of the quilt is undisturbed—tidily made, it bears no imprint of an occupant.

Rauschenberg wanted, he often said, to operate "in the gap between art and life." The limbo *Bed* inhabits between painting and felt experience hovers close to that ambition. In one ambiguous place, it conflates the private retreat of the bedroom and the public display of art. In the "friendliest" of manners, it unmakes distinctions, coaxing opposites into cooperative action.

Rebus (1955)

"There is no reason," Rauschenberg said, "not to consider the world as a gigantic painting." That all-embracing vision of the environment as a vast image bank sustained the artist's prolific and widely varied creative activity over nearly six decades. According to his friend Jasper Johns, he was the most inventive modern artist since Picasso. Linking them most significantly is collage, invented by Picasso in 1912 and reinvented by Rauschenberg between 1954 and 1964 with hybrids of painting and sculpture he called Combines. With these works, collage was transformed from a Cubist-derived process that assembles commonplace materials to serve illusion into a process that undermines both illusion and the idea that a work of art must have a unitary meaning.

Rauschenberg made *Rebus* at a moment in his career when, as critic John Russell commented, he had "just discovered the poetics of glut, and he couldn't wait to tell us about them."