

# HYPERALLERGIC

## The Untold Story of Rauschenberg's Earliest Champion

Among the reigning patriarchs of the New York School, the young Rauschenberg found his greatest and earliest champion in the painter Jack Tworkov.

By Jason Andrew  
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Robert Rauschenberg “Jack Tworkov at the easel” (July, 1952) photo © Robert Rauschenberg Foundation / Collection of Estate of Jack Tworkov, New York

It is hard to imagine a time when Robert Rauschenberg wasn't wildly admired. But it certainly was the case in the earliest days of his career, especially among the older generation of Abstract Expressionists who found him irreverent. They labeled his antics “anti-art,” and disregarded him altogether.

Rauschenberg was up against a stigma that dated back to the 1930s, held by artists like Pollock's mentor, Thomas Hart Benton who believed that intellectuals, Marxists, and homosexuals had overtaken the American art scene. Abstraction equalled immorality in his view.

Yet the young Rauschenberg would find among the reigning patriarchs of the New York School, his greatest and earliest champion in the painter Jack Tworkov who was twenty-five years his senior.



Robert Rauschenberg Contact Sheet: Jack Tworkov teaching / Merce Cunningham dancing, Black Mountain College (July, 1952) 2 ¼ inch film contact sheet of photographs taken by Robert Rauschenberg at Black Mountain College, Asheville, North Carolina, photo: © Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

Although drastically differing in temperaments, Tworkov and Rauschenberg both shared a common adversary: hundreds of years of European history, theory, and dominance in the arts. Tworkov and the New York painters of his generation argued from an existentialist platform “[declaring] their independence from all institutionalized concepts of the artist’s role in society,” wrote Dore Ashton. And they placed an importance on the individual over all else. “Painting is self-discovery,” Pollock told Selden Rodman in 1956, “Every good artist paints what he is.” Rauschenberg took this notion and ran with it.

Tworkov first became acquainted with Rauschenberg in the milieu of downtown New York. The journals of Tworkov, the letters of Rauschenberg, and two revelatory books by Calvin Tompkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors* (1965) and *Off the Wall: Robert Rauschenberg and the art world of our time* (1980) reveal the depth of their relatively unknown friendship.

In *The Bride*, Calvin Tompkin’s witty account of the lives and work of Marcel Duchamp, John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Jean Tinguely, and Rauschenberg, Tworkov told Tompkins that he was drawn immediately to Rauschenberg’s “sense of comedy, his high comic spirit,” and his attitude of “you never know how it’s going to look until you do it, so let’s do it.” “[Rauschenberg] has always been able to see beyond what others have decided should be the limits of art.” He continued: Twentieth-century art has been a constant expansion of these limits, of course — people once thought that Cézanne had gone as far as you could go. But Bob always wants to go still further. Look at what he did with collage. If it was all right to make pictures with bits of pasted paper or metal or wood, he asked, then why couldn’t you use a bed, or even a goat with a tire? He keeps asking the questions — and it’s a terrific question philosophically, whether or not the results are great art — and his asking it has influenced a whole generation of artists.

The friendship between Tworikov and Rauschenberg intensified at Black Mountain College, in 1952. Tworikov taught painting that summer and traveled with his entire family: his wife Wally, and their two daughters Hermine and Helen. Among his students that summer were Fielding Dawson, Jorge Fick, Dan Rice, and Dorothea Rockburne. And of course there was Rauschenberg.

“Rauschenberg didn’t take classes with anyone, but he certainly came and went from Tworikov’s classroom, and often,” Rockburne told me.



Robert Rauschenberg, “Hermine Asheville, North Carolina,” (1952) photo © Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

Rauschenberg photographed Tworikov in the studio, in the classroom, and documented Tworikov’s two daughters, Hermine and Helen, playing in the fields and hills that made up Black Mountain. These photographs illustrate a love and affinity Rauschenberg had for Tworikov and his family. Twentieth-century art has been a constant expansion of these limits, of course — people once thought that Cézanne had gone as far as you could go. But Bob always wants to go still further. Look at what he did with collage. If it was all right to make pictures with bits of pasted paper or metal or wood, he asked, then why couldn’t you use a bed, or even a goat with a tire? He keeps asking the questions — and it’s a terrific question philosophically, whether or not the results are great art — and his asking it has influenced a whole generation of artists. Rauschenberg undoubtedly was also drawn to Tworikov’s philosophy. Tworikov “encouraged his students to explore other means of expression,” wrote Delia Graze in *Dictionary of Women Artists*. Rauschenberg found encouragement in statements such as these that were sympathetic to his experimental nature. “If advanced painting is not unexpected then how is it advanced?” wrote Tworikov in 1948.

Rauschenberg assumed the responsibility of packing up Tworikov’s studio that summer and arranged for the works to be returned to New York from BMC. While Tworikov “undertook to store a number of the white and black paintings in his New York studio when the summer was over,” wrote Tompkins in *Off the Wall*.

A letter to Tworikov in New York from Rauschenberg at BMC, early August 1952, offers insight into the relationship built that summer:

My dear Jack you and your family gave everyone at B.M.C. something to think about. Even Tommie [the dog] has not gone back home. I will write again, but not so hurriedly next time.

Love, Bob

Rauschenberg would write two more long letters that year reporting on his journey with Cy Twombly to Italy. In the first he wrote, "We stopped at Palermo and hated it." And in the second he explains, "I just got back from Florence. Cy and I went up and scratched Michael Angello [sic] and that silly sissy Fra Angelico [sic] off the list and I'm sick to my stomach of Martyres [sic], Saints and Christ."

Back in New York, Tworkov continued to be Rauschenberg's "staunch ally, exerting himself on Rauschenberg's behalf" and managed "against considerable opposition from other artists to get one of Rauschenberg's black

paintings into the First Stable Annual [1952]," reported Tompkins in *Off the Wall*.

It was Tworkov who kept encouraging his dealer, Eleanor Ward of the Stable Gallery, to go down to Rauschenberg's Fulton Street studio. When she finally did in the early summer of 1953, "she saw the white and black pictures and several of Twombly's abstractions. She offered them a joint show in the fall," wrote Tompkins in *Off the Wall*. The bulk of Rauschenberg's show at the Stable was made up of the very paintings Tworkov had stored for Rauschenberg in his own studio the previous summer.