

"Robert Rauschenberg was nervous. Standing in front of Willem de Kooning's house, clutching a bottle of Jack Daniel's in one hand, the 27-year-old artist knocked hesitantly on the door. *Don't be home*, he silently prayed.

"'But he was home,' Rauschenberg later recalled. 'And after a few awkward moments, I told him what I had in mind.'

"What Rauschenberg wanted was one of de Kooning's drawings. By itself, the request wasn't surprising—artists in the same circles often traded works, and the two of them were already friendly after meeting at Black Mountain College a year earlier. But the younger artist didn't want to hang the sketch on the wall of his studio. No, Rauschenberg explained, he wanted to erase it.

"It was a radical request. By 1953, when Rauschenberg arrived on his doorstep, de Kooning was the most celebrated modern artist in New York City. Other artists admired him for his unparalleled draftsmanship; collectors were snapping up his paintings for unprecedented sums... In short, a de Kooning was worth something. Even a throwaway sketch had value, both monetary and art historical—and for Rauschenberg, that was key. "It had to be something by someone who everybody agreed was great," he explained to Calvin Tomkins for a 1964 *New Yorker* profile,

"Before he approached the venerated, however, Rauschenberg had experimented with erasure by wiping out his own drawings. But he found it unsatisfactory. 'If it was my own work being erased, then the erasing would only be half the process, and I wanted it to be the whole,' he said.

"De Kooning was, unsurprisingly, less than enthused at the request. 'I remember that the idea of destruction kept coming into the

conversation, and I kept trying to show that it *wouldn't* be destruction,' said Rauschenberg, 'although there was always the chance that if it didn't work out there would be a terrible waste.' As the younger artist further elucidated his intentions over glasses of whiskey, de Kooning relented.

"But the painter wasn't going to make it easy. As Rauschenberg tells it, de Kooning pulled out a portfolio and began flipping through the contents. Just as he seemed to settle on one, he paused. 'No,' the artist mused, 'it has to be something I'd miss.' So he pulled out a second folder, finally landing on a sketch made with a combination of grease pencil, ink, charcoal, and graphite.

"Later, Rauschenberg couldn't recall precisely what the drawing looked like. (In 2010, SFMOMA enhanced an infrared scan of the work that revealed several female figures from different angles.) What he did remember was how long the process took: two months, 'and even then it wasn't completely erased,' he said. I wore out a lot of erasers.'

"The result? A blank sheet of paper bearing a few smudges of its former image. It wasn't until late 1955, when Rauschenberg was scrounging for submissions to a group drawing show, that his friend Jasper Johns suggested he frame the work. Using a duplication machine he had access to through a job designing department store window displays, Johns printed the accompanying inscription:

ERASED de KOONING DRAWING
ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG
1953

"When it went on view at New York's Elinor Poindexter Gallery, there was no fanfare. No reviews of the show mentioned *Erased de Kooning Drawing*. But the story spread through the art world anyway. 'You heard of it by word of mouth,' Steinberg recalled."