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Robert Rauschenberg: ROCI and its consequences for today's intercultural exchange

Robert Rauschenberg is one of the most significant American artists of the 20th century. He was born in 1925 in Port Arthur, Texas, and died in 2008 on Captiva Island, Florida. He was not only one of the most important protagonists of Pop Art but also a politically and socially committed artist. At a young age he was a widely accepted figure in the international art world. In 1964, he won the grand prize in painting at the Venice Biennale at the age of 39. In 1976-1978, a retrospective of his works organized by the National Collection of Fine Arts, Washington, DC, traveled throughout the United States enjoying great public success. Rauschenberg participated in four documenta exhibitions in Kassel (1959, 1964, 1968 and 1977). Besides his artistic activities as a painter, sculptor, photographer, print maker and video producer, from the early years on he was engaged in political and social undertakings. In 1966, he cofounded his first non-artistic organization, "Experiments in Art and Technology" (E. A. T.), with the aim to promote collaborations between artists and engineers. Four years later after withdrawing from the US pavilion at the Venice Biennale as a protest against the US being involved in the Vietnam War, Rauschenberg founded "Change", another non-profit organization helping artists in need. But his most important and most extensive activity outside the art world is his world tour called "Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange" – briefly called "ROCI" which took place between 1984 and 1991 in eleven different countries. The first inspiration for this global tour is often said to be his participation as a costume and set designer in the world tour of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company in 1964 when the group traveled throughout Europe and Asia including thirty cities in fourteen countries. At that time Rauschenberg became aware of the importance of a cultural dialogue across different nations and political systems. Rauschenberg had a strong belief in the possibilities of global exchange until his death.

To prepare ROCI Robert Rauschenberg made a formal announcement at the United Nations press conference in 1984 – the so-called "Tobago Statement" – to explain his motivations: "I feel strong in my beliefs [] that a one-to-one contact through art contains potent peaceful powers []. It was not until I realized that it is the celebration of the differences between things that I became an artist who could see."¹ Rauschenberg undertakes the world tour to foster improved international communication, "the project evolved as the artist took the world as his palette and the source of his imagery."² He visited each of the chosen countries for a brief period of time, talking to local artists and intellectuals, collecting photographic images and

¹ "Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange", exh. cat. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C. 1991, p. 154.

² Quote from the invitation of ROCI at the National Gallery of Art, Washington from 1991, May 8.

materials, to build a new body of work being exhibited at a local museum together with a selection of works from other ROCI venues. Starting with ROCI Mexico, the tour went on to Chile, Venezuela, Tibet, China, Japan, Cuba, the USSR, Berlin, Malaysia to end in the United States with a solo exhibition of more than 170 ROCI works at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. Rauschenberg selected countries which were “underdeveloped or had politically repressive governments”³ – or as he explained it – “more sensitive areas”.⁴ It is remarkable that Berlin is not only the only European venue but also the only site which concentrates on one single city. All other venues are countries where Rauschenberg visited several regions and cities. Not only Rauschenberg’s paternal grandfather came from Berlin but at the time of his first contact with the political officials Berlin was still a divided city. This Berlin exhibition may have been the most political intervention of all venues. In January 1989, Rauschenberg writes a letter to Erich Honecker asking for help as he wanted the ROCI show simultaneously taking place in both parts of the city. The artist aimed for “uniting the separate Germanys”.⁵ He remembers: “[The East Berliners] finally did agree that West Berlin could have the show immediately after the East Berlin show. So not only did they want the exhibition first, but they absolutely insisted that it not overlap at all []. So we refused.”⁶ In November that year after the opening of the Berlin wall the discussions of ROCI Berlin were renegotiated. Only two days after the wall came down, the show was organized. Rauschenberg decided to have only one exhibition in East Berlin “since it will all be one Berlin in the near future”. From March 10 until April 1, 1990 ROCI Berlin was exhibited at the „Neue Berliner Galerie im Alten Museum“ in East Berlin showing nearly 100 works from six years. Rauschenberg comments the exhibition just after the opening as follows: “The split between East Berlin and West Berlin had been broken, and I think the exhibition serves as a bandage to heal the wound.”⁷ The same year the artist created the so-called “Robert Rauschenberg Foundation” (RFF) to strengthen the aims of ROCI by a permanent institution. Until today the RFF continues to work for the support of cultural exchange.

What are the consequences of this world tour for intercultural exchange? Was Rauschenberg able to achieve his goal, that art can be – as expressed in his own terms – a “social force and a conduit for new ideas.”⁸ Did his artistic and social activities contribute to “change the world” as he proclaimed in 1982?⁹

³ Robert S. Mattison: “Robert Rauschenberg: Breaking boundaries”, Yale 2003, p. 222. The “Tobago Statement” dates from October 22, 1984 and was written during Rauschenberg’s trip to Tobago. On December 13, 1984 he spoke in the Delegates Lounge at the United Nations. See Mattison 2003, p. 228 and Washington 1991, p. 181.

⁴ “Robert Rauschenberg and Donald Saff: A conversation about Art and ROCI” in: Washington 1991, p. 158.

⁵ Ibid p. 175.

⁶ Ibid p. 175.

⁷ Daniel Waterman: “Rauschenberg’s Bandages” in ART news, May 1990.

⁸ Interview with Robert S. Mattison, November 6, 1993 in: Mattison 2003, p. 222.

⁹ See his visions published on the RFF website: <http://www.rauschenbergfoundation.org>.

There are three different ways in which his activities still have an impact on today's world. First of all, his art works still exist. As his position in art history is even more established, he is one of the most often and widely shown artists of the 20th century. More than twenty solo exhibitions were organized across the globe since his death. His oeuvre is furthermore shown in most different contexts. One of the aspects of the ROCI organization is that one art work of each venue would be a gift of the artist to the People of the host country and would thus remain there permanently. The work which Rauschenberg chose for the ROCI Berlin venue to stay in Germany is the large-scale collage entitled "German Stroll" from 1990. Since then the collage is part of the collection of the Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Since 1997, this work is on loan to the Federal Chancellery – the Bundeskanzleramt Berlin. There it can be viewed by the government workers. A large quantity of his works are on view in other public institutions such as museums, non-profit organizations, banks, universities and research institutes, press and media houses. Even if only scientists and art interested people read interpretations of his works he can still reach a wide audience to inform about political and social situations. The beholder of "German Stroll" will certainly recognize the Berlin wall and therefore remember the historical separation of the city.

Second, as explained the RFF still operates and gives grants for artistic innovations and supports small-to-medium arts organizations. The Foundation has an extensive educational program and also helps non-art organizations such as the Mt. Everest Nature Preserve, Earth Day, AIDS awareness and treatment and the Natural Resources Defense Council among others. The RFF also offers a so-called "Emergency Grant" where individual artists as well as arts organizations can apply - at the moment victims of Hurricane Sandy.

The third way in which Rauschenberg's initiative still influences the world is maybe the most important. When he organized ROCI in the 1980s he was *the* early pioneer of global art tours which are now about to become typical international exhibitions. The most recent biennials and large-scale group exhibitions such as the documenta in Kassel are all global. They intend to include as many international artists as possible and try to widen the understanding of what is art in all possible directions. So Rauschenberg's aim to involve as many individuals as possible in his art-making processes is like an anticipation of developments in the current art scene. In 2012, the Berlin Biennale in spring time and the documenta 13 in summer time are the most visible examples of this vision of art becoming a part of daily life. As in ROCI artists work more and more in the function of curators – again seen at the 7th Berlin Biennale which was curated by the artist Artur Żmijewski. ROCI still works as the early model for the current art globalization. Robert Rauschenberg had an intuitive feeling for globalization being the *status quo* of the 21st century. He will hence remain the precursor of a new attitude of art communication and understanding.

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