

Press Release

Robert Rauschenberg

ROCI

24 April—15 June 2024
Opening Tuesday 23 April 2024, 6—8pm

Thaddaeus Ropac Ely House, London
37 Dover Street, London, W1S 4NJ



Robert Rauschenberg, *Caryatid Cavalcade I / ROCI CHILE*, 1985.
Silkscreen ink, acrylic and graphite on canvas. 352.2 x 655.6 cm (138.66 x 258.11 in).
© Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

If the attitude of ROCI is going to work, we are dependent on a one-to-one contact with as many people as possible because the most dangerous weapon we have is a lack of understanding.

— Robert Rauschenberg, 1986

Between 1984 and 1991 Robert Rauschenberg undertook a monumental cultural exchange programme to foster mutual understanding between different cultures through artistic expression. The Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange (ROCI), pronounced 'Rocky' after the artist's pet turtle, foregrounds his conviction in art as a force for positive social change, along with the role of travel as

a key catalyst for his characteristically experimental approach to materials and techniques.

Spanning the entirety of the seven years of ROCI's intense creative production, the exhibition at Thaddaeus Ropac London encompasses canvases, sculptures, cardboard works, neon light, photogravures and textiles, as well as an example of the artist's earliest metal paintings. Presenting works directly from the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, this is the first gallery survey dedicated to ROCI since the conclusion of the project in 1991. The ROCI works, many of which are also shown publicly for the first time since the project ended, are

contextualised with archival materials. A selection of the artist's black-and-white photographs, taken as source material during his travels and used for the silkscreen images in the ROCI works, are also included. Together, these elements offer an unprecedented overview of one of the most ambitious and wide-reaching artistic interchanges of the late-20th century.



Robert Rauschenberg, *Magnetic Script / ROCI TIBET*, 1985.
Construction with chairs and typewriter.
110.5 x 77.8 x 58.6 cm (43.5 x 30.63 x 23.07 in).
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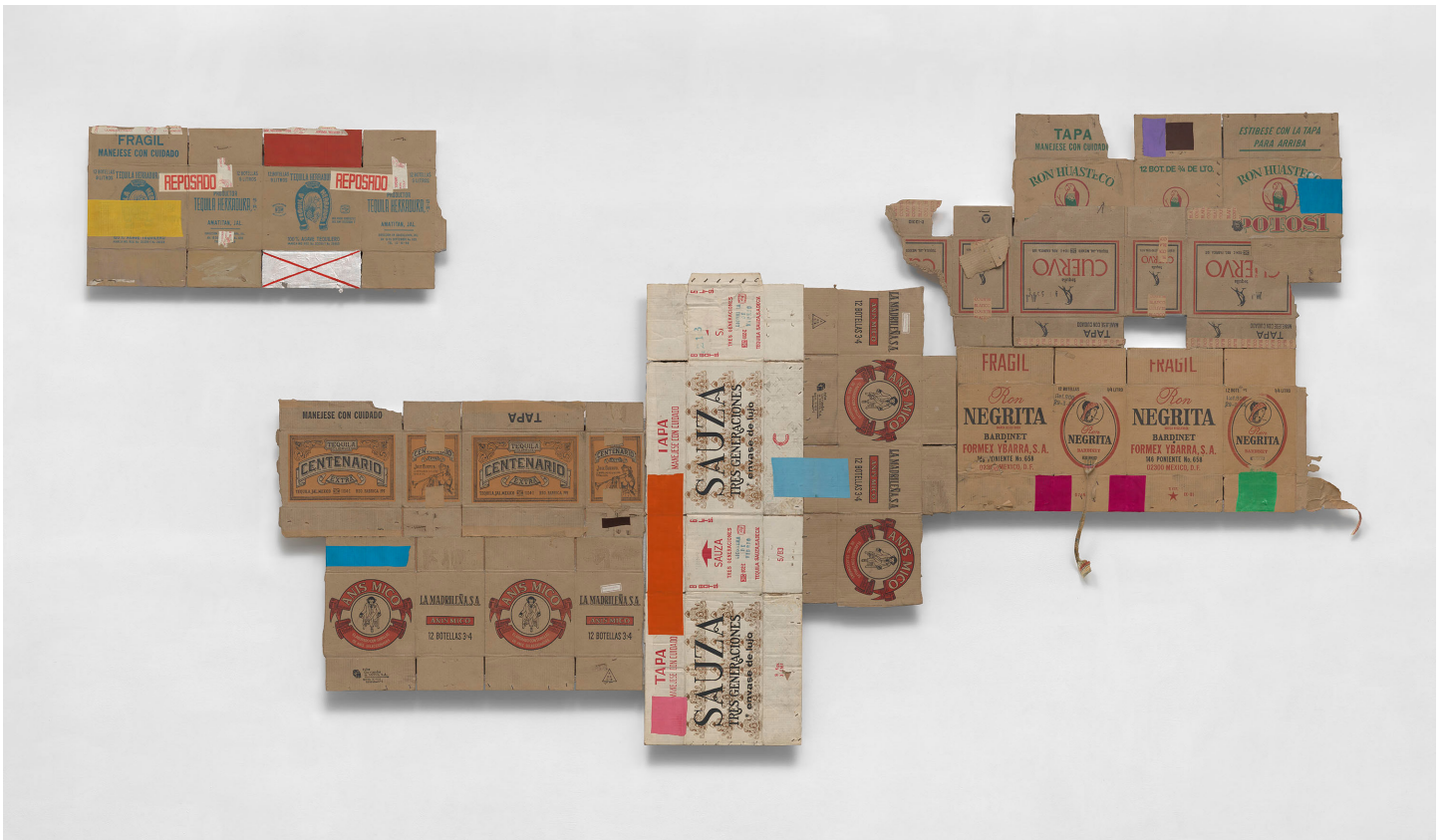
I feel strong in my belief, based on my varied and widely traveled collaborations, that a one-to-one contact through art contains potent peaceful powers and is the most non-elitist way to share exotic and common information, seducing us into creative mutual understandings for the benefit of all.
— Robert Rauschenberg, 1984

Acutely aware of contemporaneous global tensions, Rauschenberg sought to realise a large-scale touring exhibition primarily in countries where access to contemporary Western art and freedom of artistic expression were limited or non-existent. Almost entirely funded by the artist, ROCI ultimately travelled to 10 countries outside of the United States: Mexico, Chile, Venezuela, China, Tibet, Japan, Cuba, the Soviet Union, Germany (Berlin) and Malaysia, concluding in the U.S. with an exhibition at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

Working with a small team, Rauschenberg undertook a research trip to each participating country ahead of the corresponding leg of the exhibition to visit sites of interest and meet with local artists, artisans and prominent cultural figures. He then returned to his studio in Captiva, Florida, where he translated his experiences into a new body of work, which was subsequently exhibited alongside the touring retrospective of the artist's work and a selection of ROCI pieces from the previous countries. Each iteration of the exhibition consequently facilitated a dialogue between the participating countries through the works assembled, while simultaneously offering an overview of Rauschenberg's practice to audiences who may have had little or no exposure to contemporary Western art.

I couldn't see clearly as an artist until I understood that it wasn't the similarities that were important, it wasn't the similarities that pulled things together, but it was the differences that made things interesting.
— Robert Rauschenberg, 1986

Meaningful contact with other cultures was an enduring source of inspiration for Rauschenberg throughout his career. He travelled internationally with artist Cy Twombly in the early 1950s and then again as a set and costume designer for the Merce Cunningham Dance Company's world tour in 1964. He created a series of paper works with the artisans at an ancient Chinese paper mill in 1982. These travels and previous collaborations found expression in his artworks, which feature his pioneering experiments with materials and techniques and continue to inspire new generations of artists working today. It was in the course of his ROCI research trip to Chile that he



Robert Rauschenberg, *Night Post / ROCI MEXICO*, 1985.
 Acrylic, fabric and tape on cardboard.
 approx. 214 x 397 x 10 cm (84.25 x 156.3 x 3.94 in).
 © Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

began working on copper as a sign of solidarity with the Chilean people. The *Copperhead-Bites / ROCI CHILE* (1985) fuse artistic innovation with the artist's desire to reflect the socio-political conditions of the people he encountered, many of whom worked in copper mines during the oppressive regime of dictator Augusto Pinochet. At the same time, the artist was cultivating his own artistic evolution, resulting in the production of 15 metal painting series over the following decade.

Elsewhere in the exhibition, Rauschenberg's use of materials gestures to continuity within his practice. For *ROCI VENEZUELA* (1985) he integrated three-dimensional found objects onto supports silkscreened with photographic imagery. Recalling his earlier Combines (1954–64), they blur the traditional boundaries between painting and sculpture, image and object. This non-hierarchical approach also finds expression in the *ROCI TIBET* (1985) sculptures assembled from everyday objects – chairs, a typewriter and a fire hydrant – as well

as the cardboard boxes unfolded and arranged in a modernist cubic formation for *ROCI MEXICO* (1985). In turn, hanging fabric works created for *ROCI USSR* (1989) recall the unstretched textile supports used for Rauschenberg's solvent transfer images in the *Hoarfrosts* (1974–76) and the sewn fabric *Jammers* (1975–76), the latter inspired by a trip to a textile centre in Ahmedabad, India.

ROCI also marked the artist's return to direct silkscreening, a technique he had rarely used in painting since the early 1960s. While his earlier screenprinted paintings feature images taken from mass media, the ROCI works rely solely on his own photographs, which were primarily taken during ROCI research trips. Cropping, enlarging and colouring these images with ink, Rauschenberg layered them in complex compositions to draw unexpected resonances that reflect his own unique impression of the cultures and environments he encountered. Often juxtaposing these mechanically reproduced images with hand-applied elements, such as splashes

of acrylic paint and corrosives that bit into the metal supports, he further mediated the documentary material through his own artistic intervention.

Art is educating, provocative, and enlightening even when first not understood. The very creative confusion stimulates curiosity and growth, leading to trust and tolerance. To share our intimate eccentricities proudly will bring us all closer.

— Robert Rauschenberg, 1984

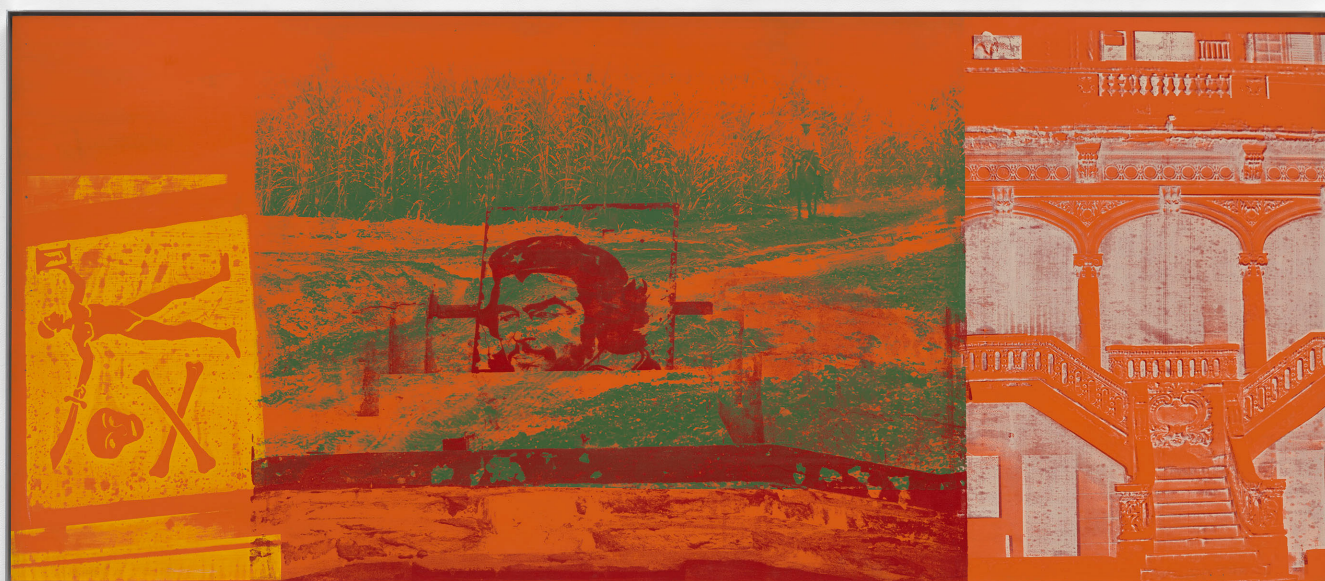
At the conclusion of the ROCI project, Rauschenberg had created more than 125 paintings, sculptures and editioned objects and over two million visitors worldwide had seen a ROCI exhibition. In several of the countries he visited, ROCI was the first solo exhibition by a contemporary Western artist. Rauschenberg's creative vision had a critical impact on a new global generation of artists, with many in

China still referring to eras as 'before- and after-Rauschenberg'.

Presented in London at another moment of deep global uncertainty, this exhibition revisits ROCI to consider the power of international collaboration and cultural exchange in the 21st century. The exhibition is accompanied by an illustrated catalogue featuring an interview with contemporary artist Alvaro Barrington.

I see the legacy of ROCI in part being the ability to look at other cultures, look at other countries, look at other people, and find your common humanity, and that's what I would hope that people take away from viewing the works and the spirit of the project.

— Julia Blaut, Senior Director of Curatorial Affairs at the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, New York.



Robert Rauschenberg, *Premonition (Ante de Creer) / ROCI CUBA*, 1988.
Silkscreen ink and enamel on galvanised steel.
93.5 x 215 cm (36.81 x 84.65 in).
© Robert Rauschenberg Foundation



Robert Rauschenberg taking a photograph during a research trip for ROCI Malaysia, 1989.
© Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York.
Photo: Terry Van Brunt.

About the artist

Over the course of his 60-year career, Robert Rauschenberg's work was inspired by wide-ranging experiences, lifelong collaborations and a spirit of experimentation. Although he resisted identification with any specific movement, he has been identified as a forerunner of practically every post-war artistic development since Abstract Expressionism. He was awarded the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale in 1964, received numerous retrospectives during his lifetime – notably at the Solomon R. Guggenheim

Museum, New York (1997) – and, more recently, at Tate Modern, London and The Museum of Modern Art, New York (2016–17). His work is held in important institutional collections worldwide, including The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Moderna Museet, Stockholm; and Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt, among others.

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