

Blindfolded water buffalo epitomized Rauschenberg's reaction to insular lives led by Chinese in 1982

By TOM HALL
October 20, 2014

At the height of his artistic celebrity in 1982, Robert Rauschenberg decided to visit China. His experiences there would serve as impetus for the worldwide arts and culture tour he launched from the United Nations three years later. But “without the 1982 trip,” concedes Bob Rauschenberg Gallery Director Jade Dellinger, “R.O.C.I. (short for Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Interchange) might never have taken place.”

The '82 trip nearly ended before it started. Rauschenberg wanted to make art in a 1,500-year-old paper mill located in Jingxuan. According to Barbara Rose, it took Bob, print atelier Gemini G.E.L. and the Anhui Artists' Association more than two years to secure permission to work at the mill. But when Rauschenberg and his entourage arrived, the Chinese officials overseeing the trip were so afraid of giving the Americans free reign at the mill and surrounding countryside that they tried to force the paper mill expert to make the delicate-strength Xuan paper that Bob wanted to use at the guesthouse in the nearby Yellow Mountains where they had sequestered the artist and his staff.

“He said he could not fabricate outside the mill,” Rauschenberg recounted later. “I don't know what happened to him. It's never wise to disagree in China.”

The Chinese officials still refused to give Rauschenberg access. Perhaps they were worried about what might happen if one of the West's leading contemporary artists got hurt working in the mill or produced art critical of the Chinese government. Or they may have simply been reluctant to let Rauschenberg experiment with their handmade “thousand year” paper. The Chinese, after all, considered Xuan paper a national treasure, to be used only for official documents and scrolls.

“There we sat getting frustrated because I only had a limited time to do my project,” said Rauschenberg. (Cue up Deep Purple's *Smoke on the Water*.) “I wanted to actually work in the mill, but it was an extremely controversial thing.”

Rauschenberg finally forced the issue by refusing to stay any longer at the guesthouse. Rather than risk the adverse publicity associated with creating an international incident, the Chinese

finally relented. But when Bob and his team journeyed into the towns and villages surrounding the ancient paper mill to meet and photograph the area residents, they were shocked to find that the locals had virtually no knowledge of the outside world since, due to government-imposed travel restrictions, few had ever been more than 25 miles from their homes.

Rauschenberg used his camera to create an iconic symbol of the plight of the people he encountered around the Jingxian Paper Mill. He snapped a photograph of a water buffalo blindfolded with an old rag who was made to continuously walk in a circle to power the mixing machine in a nearby brick factory. "That was his whole life," Rauschenberg later said with incredulity. "If one isn't moved by that"

Well, Bob and his staff were moved. "In China, the idea developed that the project would have to extend beyond simply a retrospective and it would have to have some relevance to countries with sensitive problems," said the GraphicStudio director Don Saff, who accompanied Rauschenberg on the 1982 China trip. "By the time we arrived back in Beijing, the concept was there. You can effect change by taking imagery that they use in a very traditional way and you use it in your own way. Perhaps in so doing, you give them the license to think more openly."

The impact of this experience led Rauschenberg, Saff and the rest of his team to conclude that he would have to immerse himself in the images and media of each country that R.O.C.I. visited so that they could see how they saw themselves and others through the lens of Rauschenberg's unerring eye and artistic interpretation. "If Israel could see India and Japan could see Mexico, an international chain of artistic understanding might begin," Rauschenberg explained, "with the power of art to communicate beyond language and break down the barriers of isolation.

Thus, R.O.C.I. became the manifestation and outgrowth of Rauschenberg's long-held belief that "the artist must be engaged in determining the fate of the earth, that the artist cannot stand aloof, as an observer." *The RAUSCHENBERG: China/America Mix* exhibition will open to the public from 7-9 p.m. on Bob Rauschenberg's October 22nd birthday with musical performances by longtime friends Dickie Landry, Kat Epple and Sonic Combine. A pre-opening lecture on "Rauschenberg in China" will be presented from 6-7 p.m. by distinguished guest Dr. Donald Saff, who not only served as Founder of USF's Graphicstudio, but as Artistic Director of Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange/ROCI. ■