

Getting to know Bob Rauschenberg the artist and ambassador of peace through R.O.C.I. Artistic Director Donald Saff

By TOM HALL
October 24, 2014

If you have ever heard Terry Gross interview Billy Crystal on NPR's Fresh Air radio show, then you have sampled the flavor of the tasty dish served up by Donald Saff during his talk last Wednesday evening prior to the opening of RAUSCHENBERG: China/America Mix. Besides being the founder and director of USF's GraphicStudio at the time, Saff served as the Artistic Director and advance man for the Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Interchange. But Saff did not merely provide the background for how Rauschenberg and he conceived and carried out Bob's seminal trip to China in 1982 and ROCI's subsequent 1985 exhibition in Beijing. As one of Bob's dearest friends and closest confidantes, he entertained the SRO Rush Auditorium crowd with a medley of inside stories, humorous anecdotes and pithy insights into both the tour and the artist himself.

Just as Rauschenberg gave the people in the countries R.O.C.I. visited the rare privilege of seeing themselves through his eyes and keen intellect, Saff gave the China/America Mix audience the unparalleled opportunity to see Bob through the prism of his own colorful view of a man he not only admired but clearly loved and greatly misses. "Bob's not gone," Saff insisted from the outset of his remarks. "He's over in that gallery and is still very much a part of our lives."

Considering his long and illustrious career, Saff was certainly Rauschenberg's equal, but you'd never know it from the stories the self-deprecating Saff told last Wednesday night. Rauschenberg had a camera with a long, heavy lens. "He only carried it on flat ground," Saff chuckled. "He gave it to me to carry whenever it came time to climb up a hill."

Bob also handed the camera to Saff when a policeman came running up one day after Bob snapped a shot of a sensitive political poster he happened upon in Shanghai. "I saw immediately what was happening," Saff recounted. "I can work a little magic, so I reached into my pocket and pulled out a spare roll of film. When the policeman demanded the film, I opened the back of the camera, palmed the film and handed him the blank roll I'd had in my pocket."

It was that kind of cool resourcefulness that induced Rauschenberg to invite Saff to Captiva on his birthday eve in October of 1981. "He'd been invited by Gemini G.E.L. in California to do a paper project at the [1,500-year-old] Huan paper mill [in Jing Xian, China]. Bob wasn't afraid of anything, but he did have some concerns." He wanted the Chinese to take him seriously, so he asked Saff to bring along a book he'd co-authored that contained a chapter on paper making as an art form. "Bob wanted to bring along the book to show the Chinese that we were really qualified to work at this paper mill," Saff recounts. But the book was apparently so authoritative that the officials in charge of

the paper mill became fearful that Rauschenberg and his group were actually coming to steal their centuries-old paper-making secrets.

“When we got to the Yellow Mountains, there was a delay,” Saff explained. Their chaperones did not tell them that the people in charge of the mill suspected they were there to commit industrial espionage. “The excuse they gave us was that when the paper makers get into the vat with the pulp, they’re nude. They move the pulp around the vat nude. Well, Bob’s face lit up and you know that Bob is thinking whatever he’s thinking and you know there’s a performance piece that’s going to come out of all this when it’s over.” Nevertheless, there they sat.

“A day goes by,” Saff continued. “Then a week goes by.” Rauschenberg would later say in an interview that he forced the issue by refusing to stay any longer in the Yellow Mountain guesthouse. Saff recalled the episode a little differently.

“I suggested [to one of the women in our group] that she lock herself in her room, which she did. And when our chaperones got concerned, I said, ‘We’re knocking on the door and she won’t come out of her room and I’m really afraid she could hurt herself. She’s very depressed about not getting to go to the paper mill. We planned that. I tried to speak to her, but she’s very difficult.’ And she really was difficult. But 15 minutes later, the door was unlocked, and half an hour later, we were on the bus heading for Jing Xian.”

Unfortunately, their problems weren’t over. They got no further than the VIP compound in Jing Xian. “The Chinese were so convinced that we were there to steal their ideas that they would walk into our room at night to make sure we were sleeping. So they decided they were going to bring a paper maker to this VIP compound. It was a real thin old man. And he just stood there like [Herman Melville’s] Bartleby the Scrivener. He refused. He just refused to work. In the end, we worked out a system in which we would cut up these posters, lay them out on a template and they’d carry that back and forth to the mill.”

Saff’s resourcefulness and diplomacy would come in handy many more times throughout the 1962 trip and during the course of the R.O.C.I. world tour. But Saff would be the first to object that neither the China visit nor R.O.C.I. was in the least little bit about him.

In the microcosm of each host country that R.O.C.I. visited, Saff summed it up like this. “R.O.C.I. was taking images of these countries solely through [Bob’s] eyes and bringing it back to them so that they could see things in a different light. To give them license to go beyond the template of their own approach to their art, to the historically mired approach that many of the artists in these countries had because of a lack of seeing alternatives.”

And in the macrocosm of world peace, Saff observes, “Although R.O.C.I. was apolitical, it is mindboggling to contemplate the contribution that Robert Rauschenberg made to diplomacy around the world. Each work of art he gave [the host countries] was like an ambassador because Bob felt if we can these people together socially, maybe something good could happen. He never thought we’d have peace in our time because of what he did, but he did think that he had contributions to make through his art, and nobody was going to get in his way.

“And nobody did.

“And the world is better for it.” ■