

Chinese cook's story inspired Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Interchange

By TOM HALL
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Long before the Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Interchange took shape in Bob Rauschenberg's mind, the Anhui Gallery in California was trying to induce the artist to do a world tour of his art. Rauschenberg, after all, was a citizen of the world. He travelled extensively and regarded all the world as his palette. But he remained unconvinced that it was his prerogative to embark upon such an ambitious undertaking. Nevertheless, he did take up Gemini G.E.L.'s offer to go to China to do a paper project at an ancient, 1,500-year-old paper mill in Jingxian. Ironically, it was a cook he met there who persuaded Rauschenberg that a global cultural tour was a necessity.

For a variety of reasons, the officials in charge of the Xuan paper mill would not let Rauschenberg and his group actually work inside the facility itself. [*Read the next article to find our why.*] Instead, they agreed to let Rauschenberg send templates to the mill, which would then produce the paper he needed and send it back again. As a result, Rauschenberg spent day and night working inside the VIP compound outside the mill, and that's where he met a Chinese cook who befriended him. The cook invited Bob into the kitchen and began to share recipes with Bob, including one for Chinese dumplings. "While they were cooking one day, Bob asked, 'Where's your family?'" recounts Don Saff, the GraphicStudio founder and director who accompanied Rauschenberg on the China trip. "The cook told him that his family was 25 miles away. Bob asked, 'How often do you see them?' And the cook answered, 'I don't see them.' So Bob asked, 'When was the last time you did see them?' And he answered, 'Twenty-five years ago – because the paper work, bureaucracy and suspicions are too great for us to make the trip, to take that chance.'"

Rauschenberg was incredulous. "It was right then and there that the concept of going to sensitive areas and showing them imagery became a reality," Saff expounds. "If you couldn't know what was going on 25 miles away, how could you know what was going on 2,500 miles away, or 10,000 miles away? So when we got back to Beijing, Bob said he wanted to do a world tour, 'my world tour, and I want it to be an introduction of the world to itself through my art.' And that's what R.O.C.I. became and how it developed."

And one of the images that came to symbolize the insular life of people living in many of the countries that R.O.C.I. visited was a blindfolded water buffalo. [*See "Blindfolded water buffalo epitomized Rauschenberg's reaction to insular lives led by Chinese in 1982" (10-20-14), below.*] Rauschenberg happened upon the water buffalo after leaving Jingxian. It had been blindfolded and made to walk continuously in a circle to power a mixer at a local brick factory. "It was blindfolded so he wouldn't get tipsy going around in circles hour after hour," Saff explained during his *RR to PRC to ROCI* talk prior to the opening of *RAUSCHENBERG: China/America Mix*.

"That was his whole life," Rauschenberg later said with incredulity. "If one isn't moved by that"

"The metaphor for Bob was extraordinary. The cook can't see his family 25 miles away and the water buffalo can't see where he's going, and the imagery begins to fold into Bob's photography in the same way his photography begins to get cut up into the [100-foot-photo] collage."

You can see the 100-foot-photo, titled *Chinese Summerhall*, along with examples of the paper projects, titled *7 Characters*, that Rauschenberg made during and following his return from the 1982 China trip at the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery through December 17. They're part of *RAUSCHENBERG: China/America Mix*, which opened October 22. ■