

Fully committed, Bob Rauschenberg leveraged entire estate to finance R.O.C.I.

By TOM HALL
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Imagine the cost of travelling for a two or three weeks to Mexico. And then to China, Tibet, Malaysia, Cuba, Chile, Venezuela, East Germany and Russia. Now add in the expense of sending an advance team ahead to scout out hotels, restaurants and places to visit and see. Of course, you'd need to bring along an entourage of family and friends. And if you're an artist, you'd want to bring along art supplies and materials as well. Starting to feel financially overwhelmed? Well that's undoubtedly how Bob Rauschenberg felt as he left for Tobago in 1985 to figure out how he was going to pay for the Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Interchange global tour to promote peace and understanding through the language of art that he'd just announced to the world at the United Nations.

By then, Rauschenberg and his friend and GraphicStudio director, Don Saff, had already formulated the process that R.O.C.I. would follow. First, Saff would visit each potential host country to evaluate their interest, search for places to make and exhibit art, and arrange for authors, poets and local artists to assist not only in the creative process and but in putting together a catalogue of poetry, essays and photos for each show. Once plans had been finalized, Bob and a team of studio assistants would visit the country for 10 to 15 days, working with local creatives and travelling extensively to photograph and videotape the surrounding environs. During this time, Bob would also meet with dignitaries, teachers, intellectuals, artists and artisans, often footing the bill for dinners, drinks and associated entertainment. Then he would return to his studio in Captiva or go to GraphicStudio in Tampa to convert the knowledge of local customs and materials he'd gleaned as well as the volume of photos and video footage into culturally-based artworks like *Chinese Summerhall* or the 230 immense pieces he imprinted with flamboyant colors and myriad religious symbols he discovered during his visit to Mexico.

Once the works were completed, Rauschenberg would return to the host country. Sometimes there were so many pieces that they filled an entire Boeing 747 cargo jet. Bob not only supervised their installation, he presided as master of ceremonies during the opening receptions, participated in formal dinners, and gave lectures, Q&As and gallery talks to a legion of artists, art instructors, students and other while Saff and other members of Rauschenberg's staff were scouting out the next destination.

The cost was immense and it proved impossible to attract corporate or government sponsors for the trip. "To be government sponsored would defeat the idea of the project," Rauschenberg explained at one point. "It has to be from people to people." With neither grants nor sponsorships at his disposal, Rauschenberg had no choice. He mortgaged his beloved home and studio on Captiva and instructed Saff to sell the majority of his personal art collection. "Bob had me sell his wonderful Twombly, his Jasper Johns and other works," Saff concedes, "and thus he raised several plus million dollars to produce the show. And," Saff hastens to add, "he didn't sell any works because R.O.C.I. was not a commercial venture. It was cultural – intended to reach people through a cultural language, not a political language."

It's possible that Rauschenberg anticipated recouping some of this cost after R.O.C.I. ended, but the works were so large and culturally based that little market evolved for the works in the years following the tour's end. R.O.C.I.'s symbol fittingly became a turtle carrying the world on its back, with Bob playing the turtle. "My pockets are empty," he told an audience in Japan good naturedly even though he was on the verge of bankruptcy by then. "But to be government sponsored would defeat the idea of the project," he reconciled. "It has to be from people to people."

But Rauschenberg nonetheless landed on his feet. By the time of his death in 2008, his estate was reported to be worth in excess of \$600 million. But for Bob, the money was besides the point. Rauschenberg had something important to say and, as R.O.C.I. so amply demonstrated, he was one artist who was always willing to put his money where his mouth was. ■