

## Rauschenberg's influence on Chinese art nearly snuffed by government crackdown following Tiananmen Square demonstrations

By TOM HALL  
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According to Bob Rauschenberg Gallery Director Jade Dellinger, Chinese artists to this day speak in terms of art “before and after Robert Rauschenberg.” But the immediate, short-term impact of his 1985 R.O.C.I. exhibition at the National Art Gallery in Beijing was very nearly snuffed by the government crackdown and cultural repression that followed the demonstrations in Tiananmen Square that ended in bloodshed on June 4, 1989.

At the time of Rauschenberg’s visit in 1982, pockets of avant-garde artists were practicing experimental art throughout China. In a culture which valued the collective good over the happiness and welfare of its individual citizens, the personal expression implicit in and underlying modernism was anathema. Not surprisingly, Chinese experimental artists experienced pushback from the government, which regarded their efforts as “spiritually corrupting” in much the same way as Adolf Hitler and the Nazis sought to purge “degenerate art” from *ante bellum* Germany 50 years before.

Among the 70,000 people who flocked to the National Art Gallery to see R.O.C.I. in its first week and the 300,000 who saw the show before it closed six weeks later were undoubtedly many of the artists who were participating in the avant-garde movement. “[N]ot only did Rauschenberg’s actual presence prove that they were not forgotten by the outside world, it signaled that there was more than a glimmer of possibility that those other, powerful modern countries were also interested in *them* and *their* art,” writes Georgetown masters candidate Tidings Chan.

Bolstered by this perceived validation, this new wave of Chinese artists continued to explore ways to change and depart from the staid and stale means of traditional artistic media, motif and expression, just as Rauschenberg had hoped they would. “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,” explains Donald Saff, who not only accompanied Rauschenberg to China in 1982, but subsequently served as R.O.C.I.’s artistic director. “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.”

“Although inspired by new ideas from the West,” adds Chinese art critic Fei Dawei, “Chinese artists in the 1980s had begun to write their own story, and this was the real beginning of Chinese contemporary art.” So empowered, artists like Xu Bing, Wu Shan Zhuan, Huang Yong Ping, Gu Wenda and Yang Zhigun staged an exhibition at the National Art Gallery in 1989 of avant-garde works created between 1985 and 1987. Called *China/Avant-Garde*, the logo for the socially-critical, highly incendiary show was a giant “No U-Turn” traffic sign signal emblazoned on the black carpet leading from the street into the exhibition hall. True enough, there was no turning back now for the Chinese experimental artists.

*China/Avant-Garde* included 297 paintings, sculptures, videos and installations produced by 186 artists. Every province in China was represented. “Some of these works were influenced by and critical of such Western modes as Dada, Surrealism and Pop, while others sought inspiration by looking backwards to ancient Chinese forms of expression rooted in Taoist philosophy and mysticism,” Tidings Chan observes. Some of the works were outrageously scurrilous, such as a flesh-colored inflatable object with obvious sexual connotations, flanked by blown up condoms and surgical gloves. “Receiving the most attention were three portraits of Chairman Mao with pane patterns on the paintings by Wang Guangyi.”

Artists excluded from the exhibition set up in the street outside the exhibition hall. One artist borrowed 100 times his monthly salary just so he could be part of the happening. Seeing that it was losing its vice grip on Chinese art (which for centuries had been employed solely to express moral themes and political propaganda), the government was quick to close the exhibition when two performance artists fired gunshots at their own installation, a piece called *Dialogue* that consisted of two telephone boxes with a mirrored panel in between.

Although *China/Avant-Garde* was later re-opened, the government permanently shut the exhibition down after bomb threats were purportedly received by the National Art Gallery, the local city government and the Beijing Security Bureau. Three months later, many of *China/Avant-Garde*’s organizers and artists participated in pro-democracy demonstrations in Tiananmen Square. Some were arrested and incarcerated. The rest were driven underground.

But as the exhibition’s logo attested, there really was no turning back for Chinese artists or art, and as Jade Dellinger now notes, Bob Rauschenberg’s 1985 R.O.C.I. show marks a sharp dividing line between traditional and contemporary Chinese art.

You can see examples of the art that sparked these changes in *RAUSCHENBERG: China/America Mix* at the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery on the Lee campus of Florida SouthWestern State College now through December 17. The show includes selections from *Seven Characters* (seven suites of 74 works, each containing silk, ribbon, paper pulp relief and gold on handmade Xuan paper that is embedded with collages of Rauschenberg imagery and Chinese characters) and *Chinese Summerhall*, the famous 100-foot-long collaged color photograph that Rauschenberg created at GraphicStudio at USF in Tampa following his return in 1982 from Jingxian, China.

For more information or gallery days, times and hours, please telephone 239-489-9313 or visit <http://RauschenbergGallery.com> ■