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***Chinese Summerhall* by Robert Rauschenberg**

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Robert Rauschenberg's 100-foot photograph *Chinese Summerhall* is on display at the [Bob Rauschenberg Gallery](#) in Fort Myers through January 24, 2015. On loan from the [USFCAM permanent collection](#), this is the first installation of *Chinese Summerhall* in thirteen years. Copublished in 1982 by USF's [Graphicstudio](#) and [Gemini G.E.L.](#), the story of *Chinese Summerhall* is a fascinating look into Rauschenberg's creative process. To commemorate and contextualize this installation, here is an investigation into how this monumental work was created, written by Ruth E. Fine, curator for the National Gallery of Art.

I mostly sleep on the beach side in my place in Captiva, and it's just the roll, constantly the roll, of the waves. But my hide-away is on the Bay side, where each fish jumps separately, and each bird calls from a different place. China is more like the Bay side.

- Robert Rauschenberg, Graphicstudio videotape, 1983



[Robert Rauschenberg](#)

Photo: Graphicstudio

Chinese Summerhall, the hundred-foot-long photograph produced from photographs taken by Rauschenberg during a trip to China in 1982, was the artist's first use of color photography in an edition.³ Its compelling hundred-foot length demands that the viewer move along its full span to absorb its imagery—one cannot remain stationary in front of the composition.



The installation of *Chinese Summerhall* at the [Bob Rauschenberg Gallery](#) in Ft. Myers, October 2014
Photo: Peter Foe/USFCAM

Rauschenberg's work in photography dates back to his studies at [Black Mountain College](#), and his first work acquired by the Museum of Modern Art in New York was, in fact, [a photograph brought to the collection](#) by Edward Steichen in 1952.² At Black Mountain, Rauschenberg found himself torn between photography and painting, settling on painting when he recognized that the project he would most like to fulfill as a photographer—a colossal “survey” of the United States composed of photographs of every square inch of ground—was unrealizable.³ In 1979 he began to use his own photographs in his work, allowing them to suggest their own possibilities: “I think of the camera as my permission to walk into every shadow or watch while any light changes. Mine is the need to be where it will always never be the same again; a kind of archeology in time only, forcing one to see whatever the light or the darkness touches, and care. My concern is to move at a speed within which to act.”⁴



George Holzer preparing the negatives for *Chinese Summerhall*, 1982
Photo: George Holzer, Graphicstudio

In June 1982 Rauschenberg traveled to China on a trip arranged by Stanley Grinstein of [Gemini G.E.L.](#) for the purpose of collaborating with Xuan papermakers at the Jingxian paper mill in Anhui Province.⁵ During this time he took over five hundred photographs, fifty-two of which were incorporated in the monumental *Chinese Summerhall*.⁶ After returning to the United States, Rauschenberg began the process of selecting images for possible inclusion in *Chinese Summerhall*. George Holzer recalls that there were approximately fifty rolls of film, twelve exposures each. Holzer printed 11-by-14-inch color photographs of each negative and sent them to Rauschenberg for review. Rauschenberg made his choices, marking each photograph with the size to which it was to be enlarged—ranging from about 20-by-24 to 30-by-40 inches. From these enlargements, images were then cut and pasted to make the full-scale, hundred-foot mock-up.



Production studio for *Chinese Summerhall*, 1982
Photo: George Holzer, Graphicstudio

With the mock-up complete, actual production of the photograph still could not begin until individual prints were made of certain images that Rauschenberg had selected for editioning as studies. The finality of the imminent destruction of the negatives, which needed to be cut or trimmed in order to duplicate the images as Rauschenberg had collaged them in the mock-up, prompted the artist to rethink his original intention to edition only six studies as individual photographs. In the end, twenty-eight photographs were editioned individually. Five additional sections, approximately eight feet in length, were later taken, with slight variations, from the full image and were editioned as studies at Graphicstudio and copublished by Graphicstudio and Gemini G.E.L.



The first installation of *Chinese Summerhall*, at [Castelli Gallery](#), December 31, 1982

Once production of the hundred-foot photograph began, a small-scale mock-up was made from the contact prints of the negatives so that the cumbersome, and somewhat fragile, full-scale mock-up would not have to be repeatedly rolled out. The fifty-two individual negatives were trimmed, masked, and carefully sealed into glass carriers. Each of the carriers could then be proofed separately, and adjustments made for color balance and exposure. Proofing of the photograph itself was carried out one fifteen-foot section at a time in Saff's studio, using up to five enlargers. Exposing the full one hundred feet took an average of eight to nine hours, and like the proofing, this was accomplished in sections. A dispenser was designed to hold the unexposed roll of photographic paper; after the exposure of a section, the paper would be rolled onto a core as the next section of paper moved into position. The first of the five prints in the edition was finished one day before it was needed at the [Castelli Gallery](#) for the Rauschenberg exhibition scheduled to open there on [New Year's Eve, 1982](#).⁷



Detail image of *Chinese Summerhall*
Photo: Will Lytch/Graphicstudio

A composite of vignettes from daily life in China, Rauschenberg's hundred-foot photograph reflects the vicissitudes of life—the protean, unsettled, kaleidoscopic *mélange* of thoughts, opinions, tasks, goals and events that characterize human experience in modern society. As Rauschenberg explained, the country “was very rich texturally. In China, images seemed to isolate themselves.”⁸ As a visual montage, *Chinese Summerhall* reflects in part the perception of the reality of modern life as seen through the lens of the mass media (in the age of thirty-second commercials and ten-second sound bites). Images—cropped, trimmed, soft-focused, sharp-focused, close-up, panoramic, sideways, dissolved into other images—fill one's vision as one traverses the hundred-foot expanse. New connections resonate among the images as they interact in new ways with one another. There are incongruities: a blindfolded bull juxtaposed with a row of glass bottles;⁹ the Great Wall dwarfed by a set of wheels—an immovable barrier versus the freedom of movement. There are also analogies: chickens scratch for their dinner, while nearby passengers commute on mass transit.



RAUSCHENBERG 1983

Bottles from the [Studies for Chinese Summerhall series](#). 40" x 30" Kodak Ektacolor paper.

Photo: Will Lytch/Graphicstudio

Rauschenberg views the scroll as a “compositional tale”: “Colors and materials are the characters, and the piece unfolds according to its own appetite—what is already there dictates what goes next. I had no particular program about executing my feelings about China. I let the camera be my witness, as opposed to editorializing.”¹⁰ Rauschenberg’s art has always charted unexplored territory, reached beyond the known limits. Monumental scale has frequently been integral to this process.¹¹ About his [Quarter Mile Piece](#),¹² a work that was in progress at approximately the same time as *Chinese Summerhall*, Rauschenberg offers this insight: “You can never measure the effect scale has, but it does seem to be something permanent. If I had been born in Connecticut, I wouldn’t have had the idea of doing a painting that is a quarter of a mile long.”¹³

- Ruth E. Fine

Taken from *Graphicstudio, Contemporary Art from the Collaborative Workshop at the University of South Florida*, the catalogue from the exhibition at the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, 15 September 1991–5 January 1992.

Notes:

1. Confirmed in a telephone conversation with David White, Rauschenberg’s curator, 29 January 1991.
2. See Smith 1983, 183, for a review of [Rauschenberg: Photographs, New York 1981](#); [Photos In and Out City Limits: Boston](#) (West Islip, NY, 1981); and [Photos In and Out City Limits: New York C.](#) (West Islip, NY, 1982)
3. See Alain Sayag, “Interview with Robert Rauschenberg,” in New York 1981.
4. Rauschenberg, in New York 1981. See Clifford Ackley, introduction to West Islip 1981, for discussion of Rauschenberg’s involvement with photography.
5. For an account of the trip, see Donald Saff’s essay in Los Angeles 1983. See also Fine 1984, 123-125.
6. George Holzer, conversation with Corlett, 23 August 1990.
7. Information concerning the progression of this project is taken from conversations between Holzer and Corlett, 23 August 1990 and 1 November 1990.
8. Rauschenberg, Graphicstudio videotape, January 1983.
9. Saff explained, in a conversation with Fine, 21 March 1991, that the blindfolded bull may be seen as a metaphor for Rauschenberg in China.
10. Herrera 1983, 57.
11. Early in his career Rauschenberg produced such large-scale works as [Autobiography](#) (1968), seventeen feet long; [Automobile Tire Print](#) (1951), around twenty-two feet long; and [Barge](#) (1963), thirty-two feet long. See also [Booster](#) (1967), “largest lithograph ever made on a hand-operated press” (Young 1974, 26); [Sky Garden](#) (1969), “largest, hand-rolled print in existence—a color lithograph and silkscreen on paper” (Greun 1977, 45); and [Currents](#) (1970), a fifty-four-foot screenprint.
12. [A segment of Quarter Mile Piece was shown at Edison Community College in Fort Myers in 1982.](#)
13. Rauschenberg 1986, 60.