

WASHINGTON, D.C.

Robert Rauschenberg

NATIONAL GALLERY
LE MARIE TRANIER
CORCORAN

Robert Rauschenberg, in all his frenetic genius, took Washington by storm this summer with three exhibitions that chronicled his insatiable quest for innovation. The largest outpouring of Rauschenberg eclecticism was at the National Gallery of Art. There the Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Interchange, mandated to promote peace and understanding through the arts, staged its American finale, ROCI USA, after having evolved through exhibitions held in Mexico, Cuba, Venezuela, Japan, Germany, the Soviet Union, China, and Malaysia.

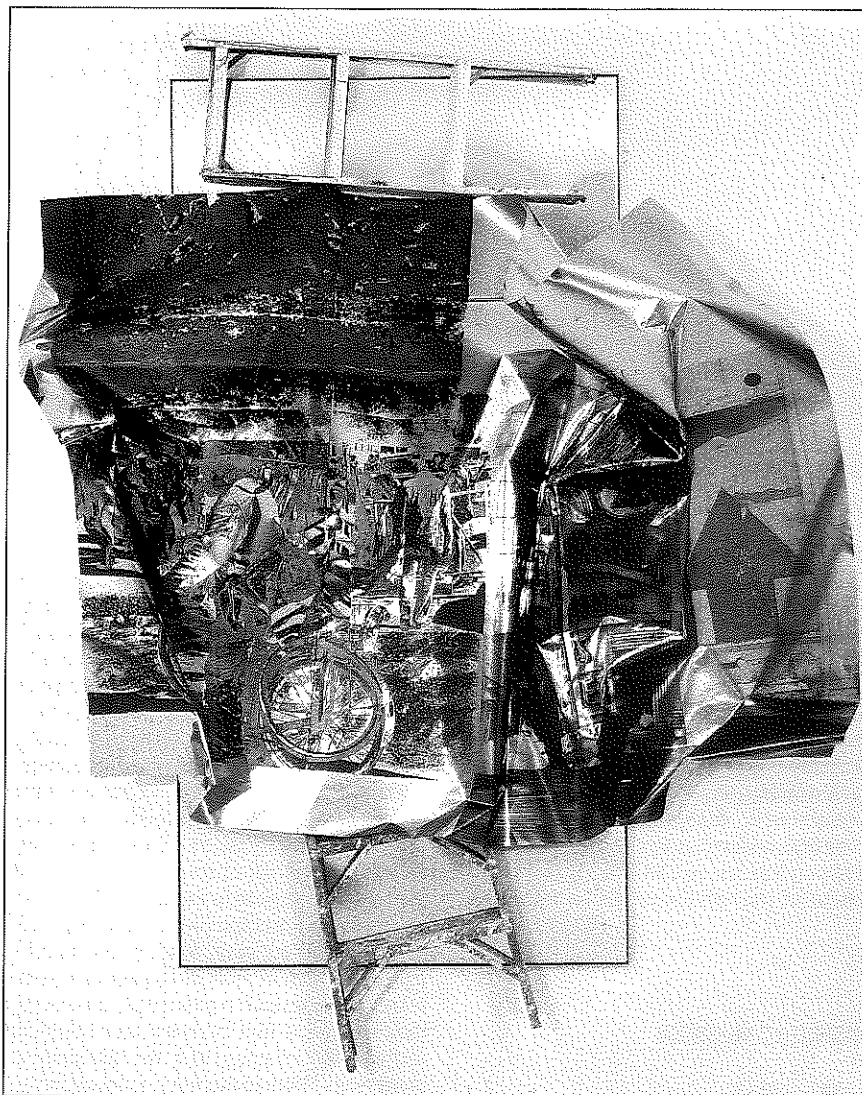
The showing at the National Gallery encompassed an ambitious 150-piece compilation of large-scale mixed-media assemblages, sculpture, and editioned pieces prepared exclusively for the venue; samples from each country's exhibition; photographs and videotapes recording his journeys through the various lands; as well as selections from the '70s and early '80s.

The result was a compilation as auspicious and chaotic as it sounds. But from his all-white and all-black paintings of the early '50s to the juxtaposition of found objects in his series of combines, collages, and set designs throughout the decades that followed, Rauschenberg has long proven his mastery in merging discordant themes. Nature coexists with urban blight within his work; peace with disharmony.

In ROCI USA, Rauschenberg has lifted his visual language to new heights, particularly in the encaustic technique and his newly emboldened neon palette.

A silk-screened image of a bicycle features prominently in the mirrored aluminum and stainless-steel assemblage *In-Dependents*, as do actual ladders, elements that symbolize motion. That impression of perpetual suspended movement recurred throughout the exhibition, captured by a tireless red Rocket bicycle outlined in neon lights, by a kite that soared above a stairwell, in the spokes of the free-standing circular multimedia construction *28 Famous Murders with Poems*, and through a flurry of spliced images interwoven with the works and appearing on videotapes of scenes gathered from the artist's various ROCI scouting trips. Indigenous fabrics mingled with architectural remnants within works from most of the countries.

While Rauschenberg funded ROCI almost exclusively, it was the National Gallery that provided its physical launchpad



Robert Rauschenberg, *In-Dependents/ROCI USA (Wax Fire Works)*, 1990, acrylic, enamel, fire wax, and ladders on aluminum and stainless steel, 113 by 87 by 25½ inches. National Gallery.

and homecoming, committing in 1985 to present the undertaking upon its completion. This was the third exhibition of selections of work by a living artist—following Andrew Wyeth and Jasper Johns—in the museum's history. In keeping with his promise to foster intercultural bonds, Rauschenberg donated to each host country a work from each exhibition. The National Gallery of Art received 29 paintings, sculpture, mixed-media works, and ROCI samplings, which arrived in time to commemorate the museum's 50th anniversary.

Echoing the artist's preoccupation with travel, the Rauschenberg exhibition at Le Marie Tranier Gallery presented his "Chinese Summerhall" collages, his airport series of the 1970s, and the first gallery showing of four editioned ROCI USA mixed-media works. Captivating studies for "Chinese Summerhall" provided a welcome distraction from the glaring repetitive-

ness of the National Gallery ROCI editions, as did the freestyle fusion of fabric, newspaper swatches, and found objects gathered for the five works in the airport suite.

For "Robert Rauschenberg: The Early 1950s," the Corcoran Gallery of Art gathered together 100 works from 1949 to 1953, the first major period of the artist's career. Among the works in the show were pieces reflecting Abstract Expressionism, evidenced in black paintings, white paintings, and red paintings; as well as those from his textured "Night Blooming" series—paintings recognizable by small orbs that hover near the top of the canvas.

Also showcased were his early Imagist collages and assemblages composed of found objects and protoconceptual works, such as his *Erased de Kooning Drawing*.

Rauschenberg received his earliest recognition, however, not through his paintings but through the photographs he produced

Weekend's Best

SPECIAL EVENTS • CHEAP DATES

By Larry Fox

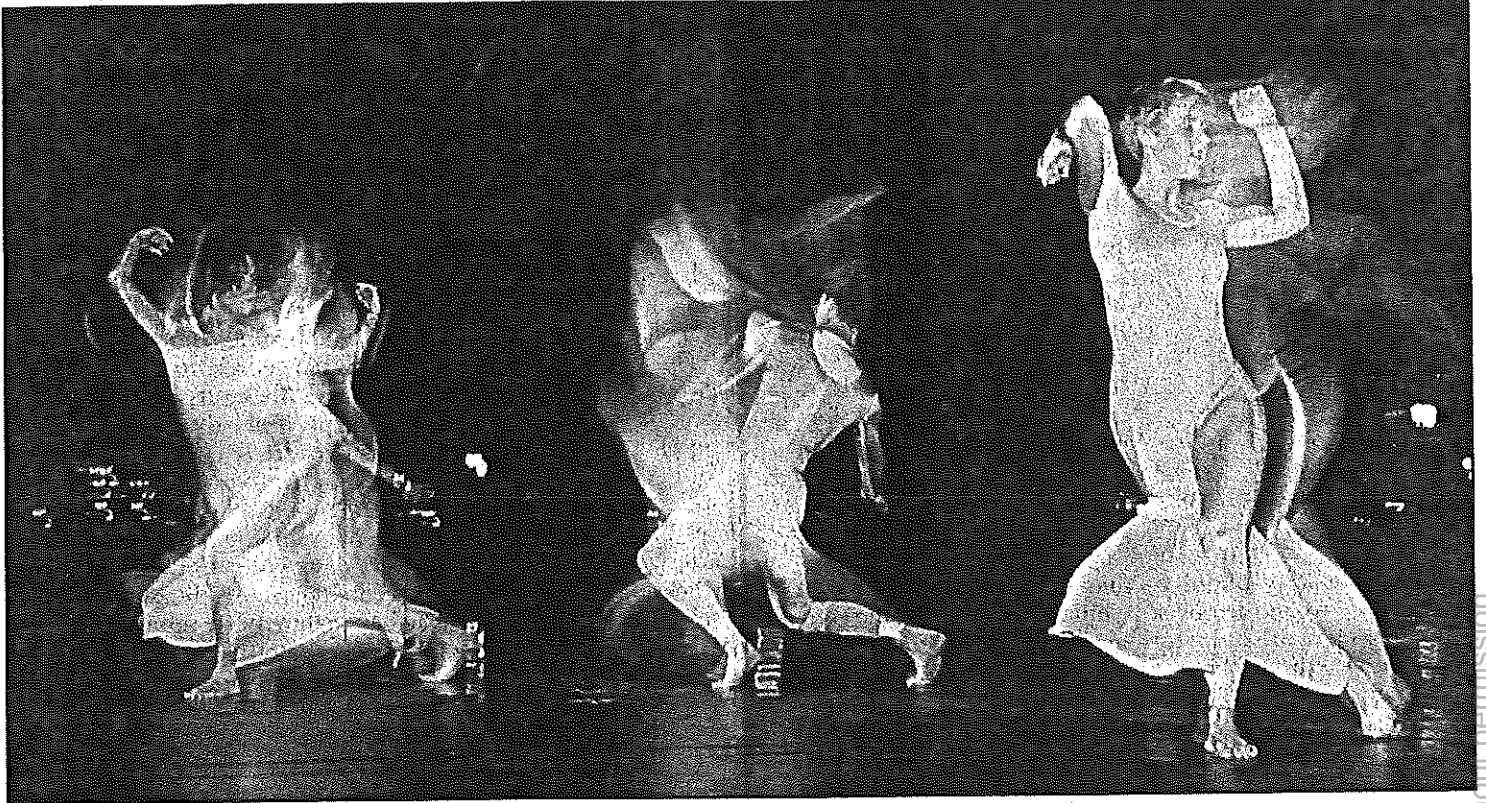


Trisha Brown's Dance Company performs on the Mall by the National Gallery of Art this weekend.

NEW STEPS ON THE MALL

Take a seat on the steps to watch some new steps at the world premiere of "Astral Converted (50")," by choreographer Trisha Brown, artist Robert Rauschenberg and composer John Cage. Brown's dance company performs at 8:45 Friday and Saturday behind the National Gallery of Art's West Building at Seventh Street and Constitution Avenue NW (Metro: Archives). Seating, on the West Building's Mall-side steps, begins at 7:30. In the East Building, the exhibition "Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange" is on display through Sept. 2. (East Building hours are extended to 8:30 Friday and Saturday.) Free; call 202/842-6690.

PHOTOS BY MELANIE STETSON FREEMAN - STAFF



ON THE MALL: The Trisha Brown Dance Company performed 'Astral Converted (50')' as part of the National Gallery's Rauschenberg exhibition.

'Stellar' Dancing on the Mall

By Louise Sweeney

Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

WASHINGTON

THE night sky was full of big, pointy silver stars as "Astral Converted (50)" a multimedia dance collaboration, flowed out in an open-air performance on the Mall in front of the National Gallery of Art.

Members of the Trisha Brown Dance Company slithered, leaped, hovered, and quivered in moonbeam-colored costumes in this collaboration between choreographer Brown, composer John Cage, and artist Robert Rauschenberg.

The world premiere of the work was commissioned by The Circle of the National Gallery; the audience sat or sprawled on the stone steps of the Gallery's West Building, facing the Mall and the lights of the Air and Space Mu-

seum across the way.

This was the first time that the three artists had worked together, although Mr. Rauschenberg had collaborated separately with Ms. Brown and Mr. Cage before. The premiere was to honor the exhibition "Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Interchange" that runs through Sept. 2 at the National Gallery. [A review of the show ran May 20.]

For art lovers or Washington lovers, it was a heady night: first a long lavender twilight falling on the dark trees lining the Mall, then the navy blue night with its scents and sounds. A persistent, small breeze brought the scent of azaleas mixed with the salt tang of the Tidal Basin.

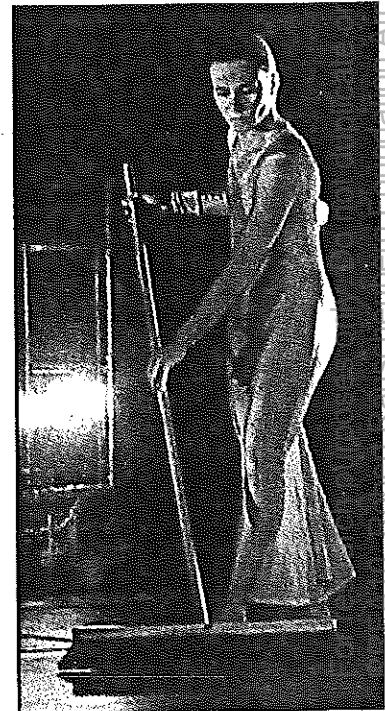
Rauschenberg's "set" of eight free-standing aluminum towers, two to eight feet tall, housed the equipment for the sound and light show. The dancers' movements were picked up by sensors in the towers that converted them

into sounds.

Stare into the darkness and listen as you would, you could never determine what movement caused what sound, whether peep or rumble. Rauschenberg also designed the costumes, made of a light-reflecting fabric. Joining in the sound and light were the headlights and tail lights from passing cars, the thunder of jets from National Airport, the wail of a fire siren, and the honking of horns.

Even the people on the Mall paths - bicycling, walking, pushing strollers - served as a backdrop to the airy stage.

The Trisha Brown dancers in their silvery leotards moved sinuously to the atonal music. Sometimes they seemed to pour toward one another, so liquid was their dancing. And sometimes, moving with long-handled street sweepers' brooms, they seemed to be sweeping up stars from "Astral."



DANCING WITH RAUSCHENBERG'S SETS: A dancer pushes a broom as if sweeping up a meteor shower.

TV CLIPS

DATE May 9, 1991
TIME 6:30-9:00 AM
STATION WTTG-TV(Fox) Channel Five
LOCATION Washington
PROGRAM Fox Morning News

Lark McCarthy, co-anchor:

As artist Robert Rauschenberg wandered from country to country, he didn't simply take a photograph, he created a piece of art that he felt symbolized the best of that nation's culture. Some of those works are now on display at the National Gallery of Art's East Building, like this witty chair sculpture from Tibet or this high-flying kite from Japan. Rauschenberg's more traditional paintings of Mexico round out the viewing. The artist developed the exhibit through the Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Interchange, a project which did not rely on any government funding.

Robert Rauschenberg (Artist): I think that--that ROCI got a lot closer to the truth than--than--than it ever would have been if it was funded by the government, because then there would have been ideas about it.

McCarthy: The exhibit, part of the Gallery's fiftieth birthday celebration, officially opens to the public on Sunday. It runs through September 2nd.

* * *

McCarthy: It's been said that art is one way to communicate to different cultures. The National Gallery of Art is opening a new exhibit with that specific purpose in mind. The exhibit is a multi-media experience of world culture, as seen through the eyes of one of America's leading contemporary artists. Channel Five's Jackie Stone has the story.

Jackie Stone reporting:

Robert Rauschenberg is considered a living legend in the world of art. Now the National Gallery is exhibiting what it describes as Rauschenberg's best and most colorful creations, the Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Interchange, or ROCI.

Rauschenberg: ROCI was conceived about nine years ago as an art piece that would translate, without translation, to difficult countries.

Stone: For inspiration, Rauschenberg visited countries like Mexico, Chile, Beijing, Germany, Malaysia, Japan and Tibet, meeting local artists and native people, gathering images and materials. Rauschenberg also inspires performance artists, like choreographer Trisha Brown.

Trisha Brown (Dancer/Choreographer): We're doing a premier of a new piece that is a combination of an earlier work called "Astro Convertible," and it's been extended another twenty minutes--thirty minutes and it's called "Astro

TV
CLIPS

Converted." It has set and costumes by Bob Rauschenberg, and a--a score by John Cage.

Stone: Like most artists, Brown says there is not enough government funding to support non-commercial ventures. Senator Howard Metzenbaum, a long-time friend of Rauschenberg's, would like to see that change.

Senator Howard Metzenbaum (D-Ohio): I think that the government is prepared to provide--provide a certain amount of funding for the arts. I think the government should. I think it has much to do with what we leave to our children, our grandchildren and many others who come after us. And so I think that some funding is appropriate. There are limits, of course, because we've got budget constraints.

Stone: Ironically, Rauschenberg says the lack of government funding helped make ROCI more successful.

Rauschenberg: We would not have been able to get behind, what they call, the Iron Curtain if we had had government sponsorship. And it seems like they don't give anything for arts anyway, you know. We didn't lose much. We just gained more geography.

ussr world - rauschenberg recalls the moscow exhibit
(w/ff)

washington, may 10 (nca/robert lyle) - as part of the presentation of robert rauschenberg's roci exhibition opening in washington this week-end, the national gallery of art released parts of a conversation recorded in november, 1990 between rauschenberg and the show's artistic director, donald saff. in the following excerpts, they recall the moscow show february 2-march 5, 1989:

saff - "tahir salakhov, head of the artists' union, entered into an agreement with us on a handshake and everything. he said he would do, he did. the militia waited at the border to escort the work. a grand exhibition facility was made available to roci at the tretiakov gallery."

rauschenberg - "with galleries right next to malevich, who is an idol of mine."

saff - "i believe trisha brown was performing 'astral convertible' for the first time publicly while in the soviet union. the lighting for this work runs on car batteries. there were calls to us from the dance company's staff saying they needed twelve batteries but had only six. you suggested we go out, find taxi cabs, take their batteries and invite the cab drivers to the performance so the event could take place. only then did you discover that an automobile factory was across the street. the batteries were provided at the very last minute."

rauschenberg - "the first six batteries were provided by the american embassy, the rest we got from the factory to power the lights and sound triggered by the movement on the stage. but when trisha went back the next night, she found half of the sound cassette tapes had been stolen. so we went on with half of the possibilities of the sound. in russia, there's just no way you run out to the local tape store."

saff - "the artists' union space was painted a color they called universal beige. we painted it with with a truckload of paint from berlin. we installed the gallery lighting. we wired the place. we asked yevgeny yevtushenko to write the introduction for the catalogue."

rauschenberg - "he's a great poet, makes his own wine, and has a spirit that can't be beat in any nationality....for example, after a long dinner and dancing with the yevtushenkos and the salakhovs, yevtushenko wanted us to see his collection of work by young russian artists. it was a cold, icy night and after some slippery, swerving driving, we got to his apartment. but there had been a mix-up with the keys and we were locked out. so we decided to go out to the cemetery and finish his wine at boris pasternak's grave."

saff - "as we left, he wrote a note for someone coming later to the apartment and gave it to the aged, stooped concierge who proceeded to correct his russian, much to his consternation. he looked at us and said, 'can you believe it?'"

rauschenberg - "it just wasn't his night. we started driving again and we were pulled over by the police. he was driving without his lights on, plus his name was still not too welcome with the authorities. he barely got off without going to jail and he's the leading poet there. the policeman, as i heard the next day, told him it was a good thing he was such a good poet, because nobody else could have lied so well. seems to me that the policeman was pretty good there, too."

saff - "what happens to someone like yevtushenko in a society where he was such a force behind change now that the change has taken place?"

rauschenberg - "you want the parable about jasper johns? it's the same thing...he's in the most dangerous position in art that anyone has ever been in. he's walking a tightrope and it's on the ground and there is no place to fall. yevtushenko still has many causes to write about and to inspire him because i think the problems have just begun in russia."

'Most Living Artist' wages peace with historic mix of art, culture

By Teresa Annas
Staff writer

THE EVENING SOIREE looked every bit the big family wedding. Lots of hugging and joyful reunions, flowing champagne and fancy foods.

At the center of all this celebrative hubbub was Robert Rauschenberg — "the most living artist," as Time magazine once called him.

LOCAL TIES TO RAUSCHENBERG/G7

An effusive Rauschenberg managed to stand still for an hour or so as he greeted some 500 guests May 8 at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. He was kissing everything in sight — men, women, even the microphone after making his little speech.

"I love this party, and I love all of you," gushed the Texas-born artist.

Friends, family members and art world luminaries — from choreographer Trisha Brown to legendary New York dealer Leo Castelli — had come to preview the grand finale showing of the "Rauschenberg Overseas



"Song for Tibetan Saga/ROCI" by

Robert Rauschenberg.

Culture Interchange."

Dubbed ROCI and named for the artist's ancient pet turtle, the show contains 171 artworks inspired by Rauschenberg's visits to other countries. It's also something of a break from the National Gallery's longstanding policy of not mounting solo shows by living artists.

It's a landmark event on numerous counts. Not that Rauschenberg needs a boost. At 65, he's already experienced a formidable career.

In the late 1950s, his "combines" paved the way for everything from bed covers to stuffed goats to be accepted as art material. And his much-ballyhooed 1964 win at the Venice Biennale art competition signaled no less than the shift of the art world's center from Europe to America.

Here's one artist who purposely strives to reduce his ego by working collaboratively — for years with choreographer Merce Cunningham and recently with the Trisha Brown Dance Company. Brown's troupe, which performed this month in Norfolk, offered free performances in Washington of her latest collaboration with Rauschenberg, "Astral Converted (50")."

Castelli has known Rauschenberg for four decades, and was his longtime dealer until two years ago. "He's had an extraordinary career," Castelli said at the private, black-tie reception. "As it develops, you realize how brilliant it is.

"Now, of course, he has reached maybe his peak. With this show, maybe he will get the recognition for greatness he deserves."

J. Carter Brown, the museum's distinguished director, stood next to Rauschenberg in the receiving line along with the artist's sister and son Christopher, an art photographer who lives in Portland, Ore.

Usually as staid as his institution, Brown laughed loudly as he bounced against the backdrop wall, the way kids do in the back seats of cars.

Two days before, he told a group of reporters just how "absolutely over the moon" he was about the ROCI show.

"I cannot remember," Brown said, "a time when the director, trustees and staff took a bigger gamble than when we said, 'Sure, we'll do a show seven years from now consisting of objects we haven't seen and many of which have not yet been created.'"

"The gamble paid off so brilliantly."

Historic

As art shows go, ROCI seemed historic from the beginning.

The National Gallery had committed to ROCI/USA when Rauschenberg's round-the-world art project was announced in late 1984 at the United Nations. His audiences then were diplomats and political luminaries — hardly the usual start for an exhibit.

As it developed, ROCI was more like a progressive dinner party than some static showing. Rauschenberg traveled from one country to another, taking photographs and spending time with local artists. Then, working with indigenous materials, he created art based on his observations.

The new pieces were added to the show as he moved from Mexico to Venezuela to China. All in all, he brought his curiosity and charisma to 10 countries, mostly underdeveloped or disfavored nations such as Cuba.

While traveling, Rauschenberg remained as wide open to experiences as he is liberal with art materials.

This worried his elderly mother, Dora Rauschenberg of Lafayette, La. "I've been nervous about him going to some of those countries, those South American countries where they come at you with cannons," she said at the reception.

WHILE THERE

■ **What:** "Art for the Nation," 320 works donated to the National Gallery in honor of its 50th anniversary.

■ **Included:** Paul Cezanne's "Boy in a Red Waistcoat" (1888-90); Vincent van Gogh's "Roses" (1890); and Winslow Homer's "Dad's Coming" (1873).

■ **When:** Through June 16.

■ **Information:** (202) 737-4215

The artist was undaunted. In Malaysia, he slept with headhunters. In Cuba, he discussed cooking with Fidel Castro and extended the first invitation to America the Cuban leader said he had received in 26 years.

"(Castro) had humor and hospitality and a delicate sensitivity to everything that was around him," Rauschenberg told Donald Saff, his curator for ROCI. "It was impossible to think of him as any kind of enemy."

The artist made it clear from the start that ROCI is a peace mission. The idea, he told ARTnews magazine in 1989, was to "contribute peace by communicating with my art to the people of the world an awareness of each other."

And he gave away artworks to each country, a goodwill gesture appreciated by the host sites.

"The reaction in Moscow was very good. And very important, he presented seven works to the country," said Tair Salachov, head of the Soviet artists' union, who attended the reception.

For the Moscow show, held in 1989, Rauschenberg devised huge photogravures mixing seemingly random imagery from American and Soviet culture — a zodiac clock in a Moscow subway station and New York's World Trade Center, a statue of Lenin and Halloween costumes in a New York shop.

"It was really wonderful," Salachov said. "He documented in his work those changes that are now history. You saw that monument to Lenin in his work? It was in Georgia. But now, you won't find it there anymore."

Documentation, yes. But art as peacemonger?

Absolutely, Salachov said. "I think when the different cultures know each other, connect with each other, this is the best politics," he said. "You know, art and culture make people closer to each other. The culture, the art, is very human."

His own money

Rauschenberg believed strongly enough in the project to pay for it out of his own pocket. To raise the \$4 million or so needed, he sold works from his personal collection, including early pieces by Jasper Johns and Andy Warhol. He even mortgaged his house on the tiny island of Captiva off the Gulf Coast of Florida.

He initially planned to seek private underwriting, but as it turned out, having no corporate or governmental ties gave Rauschenberg and his entourage greater freedom and respect in the countries they visited.

The artist told curator Saff: "In the dialogues with the public in the various countries, one of the first questions was, 'Who is paying for this? Who is behind this?' Somehow ROCI maintained its integrity by my being able to say, 'I did, through my work or selling my collection of my favorite things.'

"Continuing ROCI was definitely worth it, and this was a decision I had to remake every time I parted with something I loved so much."

Rauschenberg, who once considered being a preacher in his small hometown of Port Arthur, Texas, has a long history of altruism.

He's thrown energy and money behind the artists' rights movement, which lobbied for artists to get a percentage of the resale value of their works, and funding for artists with cash trouble.

Now that he's formed his Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, he's planning other projects: a park for endangered animals, funds for AIDS research, help for the Kurds.

As his wheelchair-bound mom said at the opening: "He's got a real good heart. Even as a child, he was tenderhearted. You know how some kids are cruel? He wouldn't hurt a dog."

"I've given up on politicians," Rauschenberg told a group in Havana three years ago. "Now it's up to the artists to wage peace."

The "Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange" continues through Sept. 2 at the National Gallery of Art, East Building, in Washington, D.C. Hours: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Saturday and 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Sunday. Beginning June 17, open daily until 7 p.m. Admission is free; call (202) 737-4215.

National Gallery of Art
presents the

Trisha Brown Dance Company

in the World Premiere of

A STRAL CONVERTED (50")



Choreography by Trisha Brown

Set and design by Robert Rauschenberg

Music score by John Cage

This is the first time that these three stellar
artists have all worked together.

May 14-18

Outdoor performances begin at 8:45 p.m.
Seating begins at 7:30 p.m. on the Mall steps
of the National Gallery of Art, West Building
Madison Drive, between 4th and 7th Streets, NW
FREE ADMISSION. First-come, first-served.

The Terrace Café in the East Building at 4th St. and Constitution Ave., NW
is open until 8:00 p.m. each performance night.

The East Building is also open until 8:30 p.m. for viewing of the exhibition
Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange.
(on view May 12 through September 2, 1991).

In case of inclement weather, call (202) 842-6684 after
4:30 p.m. for performance information.

Dance

In *Astral Converted (50")*, eight free-standing towers equipped with sensors react to dancers' movements to produce changes in light and sound. That's because *Astral*'s the result of a collaboration between choreographer **Trisha Brown**, **John Cage**, and **Robert Rauschenberg** (whose "Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange" exhibit opened Sunday at the National Gallery of Art). Tonight through Saturday at 8:30 p.m. outdoors at the National Gallery of Art's West Building and the Mall, at Madison Dr. between 4th & 7th Sts. NW. **FREE**. (202) 842-6690. (RB)

• **TRISHA BROWN DANCE CO.** Outdoor performances of the world premiere of *Astral Convertible II*, a collaborative work choreographed by Brown, with sets and costumes designed by Robert Rauschenberg, and a "musical sound score" by John Cage. At the National Gallery of Art West Building and the Mall, at Madison Dr. between 4th & 7th Sts. NW. May 14-18 at 8:30 p.m. **FREE**. (202) 842-6690.

Washington

ROCI and roll

“One-to-one contact through art contains potent peaceful powers”, says artist

The Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange ends its six year world tour at the National Gallery, Washington.

WASHINGTON. In its fiftieth anniversary year, the National Gallery, Washington, will host the last leg of one of the few world tours in recent years that has managed to avoid being sponsored by Pepsico, or some other marauding multinational. The Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange (ROCI), which has toured to Mexico, Chile, Venezuela, China, Tibet, Japan, Cuba, the Soviet Union, Berlin and Malaysia since 1985, is almost entirely funded by Robert Rauschenberg, to the tune of more than \$6 million (£3.4 million).

In each venue Rauschenberg has met local artists, gathered images and materials, and taken photographs, while his entourage videotape him in action. An exhibition would then be held, including both earlier works and works made in situ, one of which was donated to the host country. Now twenty-nine

ROCI works have been donated to the National Gallery, giving it the broadest holdings of Rauschenberg's work. These are included in a show of some 150 ROCI paintings, drawings, sculptures, photographs, and videotapes, to be held from 12 May until 2 September. Rauschenberg will also collaborate with Trisha Brown on a dance piece from 15 to 18 May.

He has written: "I feel strong in my belief, based on my varied and widely travelled collaborations, that a one-to-one contact through art contains potent peaceful powers, and is the most non-elitist way to share exotic and common information, hopefully seducing us into creative mutual understandings for the benefit of all".

ROCI follows on from projects like CHANGE, set up by Rauschenberg in 1970 to enable artists to pay for medical treatment with artworks.

Nonetheless, he is relieved it is all coming to an end: "I'll admit with some embarrassment that I'm looking forward to winding it up because I have great curiosity about the exploration of unprogrammed activities again. I took on a great responsibility: in Russia fifteen to twenty thousand people a day queued up to enter. It was the first exhibition ever held running in Tibet. In China we had the entire National Museum and fifteen videos simultaneously, things that people had not experienced before".

The National Gallery's Curator of Twentieth-Century Art, Jack Cowart, is quoted in the press release as saying that the show includes some of "the best work Robert Rauschenberg has produced in decades". Curiously enough, he seems to be saying that the ROCI works will revive a flagging career.

James Hall

ROBERT *TRISHA* *JOHN*
RAUSCHENBERG BROWN CAGE

★ A S T R A L C O N V E R T I B L E I I ★

May 14–18, 1991

Seating begins at 7:30 p.m.

Performances begin nightly at 8:45 p.m. or at dark
and run one hour

National Gallery of Art, West Building steps
Madison Avenue between 4th and 7th Streets, N.W.

The entire *Trisha Brown Dance Co.* will perform outdoors the startling and stunning world premiere of *Astral Convertible II*, with choreography by *Trisha Brown*, costumes and sets by *Robert Rauschenberg*, and sound score by *John Cage*. This is the first time these three world-renowned artists have all worked together.

Free admission. No tickets necessary Call (202) 842–6690 for information

At The Museums

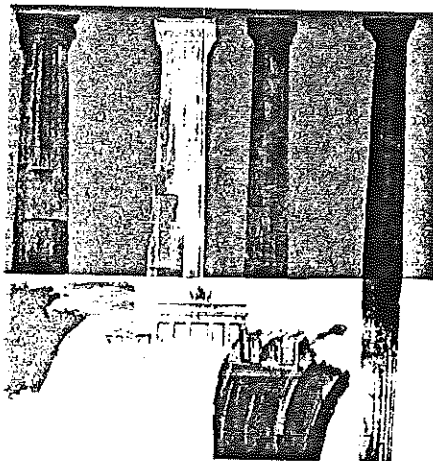
National Gallery of Art (Const. Ave. at 4th St., NW; 737-4215 / Summer hours to Sep. 2: daily, incl. Sun., 10am-7pm). One of Robert Rauschenberg's strengths, namely, his exploration of commercialism within cultures, creates either brilliance or mere formula. In this multi-media exhibition, styled as the "Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Exchange" (ROCI for short), which was inspired by the artist's recent around-the-world travels, examples of his creative energy abound. For example: neon and quartz lighting lyrically traced around a rusted bicycle; a collaged metallic frame wraps a colossal painting with dazzling delight; his Sri Lanka series contains the colors of joy; his Japanese series dips into the fantastic with wooden umbrellas tipping away from the surface of the large work. Yet, in many cases of his ROCI series the Rauschenberg formula becomes too predictable and too repetitive in terms of transferred images and the usual colors with far too little invested brushwork by the artist.

While very successful with color and image in a few of his Russian ROCI series, nonetheless, Rauschenberg could use more expressiveness from his own hand. Perhaps a more irrational side needs to emerge. He needs to walk beyond his own rooms into the gallery's permanent exhibit of 20th century art and encounter Dubuffet's examples of Art Brut. Indeed, while very capable and imaginative, Rauschenberg has allowed his process art to become over-processed and less inspired. The public should demand more of what they remember Rauschenberg for; and Rauschenberg, you need to return to your action painting and do some serious introspection. This show of highly irregular quality continues through September 2.

AGENDA

MULTIMEDIA

"Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange," at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., May 12-September 2; 202-842-6353. This comprehensive look at the artist, including recent pieces (below, *Bach's*



Rocks, 1990) and multimedia experiments in video and dance (co-choreographed with Trisha Brown), makes its final layover after a five-year journey around the world.

By Helen Dudar

The artist who wants to embrace the whole world

After six years, \$7 million and ten foreign countries, the Rauschenberg Overseas

Culture Interchange is a dream come true

Early one winter evening, Robert Rauschenberg was to be found standing—he never sits when he can stand—in the kitchen of the cavernous 19th-century building he owns and rarely inhabits in the part of New York City known as NoHo (north of Houston Street). As always, one hand held a tall, iced glass of amber liquid. As always, the big television screen, muted and unwatched yet insistently present, played on. Rauschenberg was trying to explain what has fed a whale-size appetite for seizing and recording imagery on canvas, paper, cloth, plywood and most recently on such resonant surfaces as copper and brass. Yes, he has drawn on the ceaseless pulse of pictures from the video screen. And of course, there was tabloid photography. And, in recent years, objects frozen on film by his own camera. And, eternally, the changing view out the open window. Suddenly he remembered an art critic's comment about some American work turned out during a time when our country was at war; she said it looked as if the blood of battles had seeped under

studio doors. "Who," an amazed Rauschenberg wondered, "paints with their studio door closed?"

He works and lives as if only the presence of other warm bodies confirmed existence. A conversation with Rauschenberg is invariably punctuated by physical contact: a pat, a squeeze, a hug if he has known you for more than ten minutes. For many years, Rauschenberg's art has been made on the island of Captiva, a semitropical haven off the west coast of Florida where he has accumulated land and buildings. When he works, there is always an audience—visiting friends, assistants to help with often complex processes, other members of the sizable staff paid to keep track of an overcomplicated professional life and to fend off intrusions. Of course he knows there are artists who prefer to labor in solitude. "That's because they're so crazy about themselves," he says, his mouth broadening into a kid's grin. "I'd rather have friends."

Friends there are, and a wide swath of admirers. Our nerviest explorer of the outer limits of midcentury art turned 65 last October, and the occasion seems to have inspired a barrage of celebrations: seven gallery and museum exhibitions from Zurich to New York, including a major event in Washington, D.C.; seven occasions guaranteed to wrap the artist in equal portions of pleasure and panic.

The night before the New York stop, he had been in Pittsburgh. "Pittsburgher," he called it, because the locals he encountered had persisted in addressing him as "Rauschenberger." A lifelong supporter of and participant in avant-garde dance, he had traveled there with the Trisha Brown Company, for which he had designed the sets. Just before that excursion he had been at work in Captiva, producing, in one febrile week, 17 paintings in an entirely new mode. Two days after the kitchen conversation he would be the center of a spruce crowd at the Knoedler Gallery just off Madison Avenue. There, surrounded by yards of recent Rauschenbergs and old friends, he would hug and kiss and effervesce. Although his everyday style runs to

Around the world with ROCI

neat jeans and casual shirts, he would be dressed in one of several gorgeously stagy costumes reserved for these occasions: a deep-purple silk suit. And almost no one would know that the afternoon had begun with the usual anxiety attack, the kind of physical assault that precedes curtain time, and that, after 40 years of public life, still arrives on opening day.

Purple costume and performance nerves are entirely appropriate to this man who, more than any other figure of his fecund generation, has pursued art as if it were improvisational theater. The white paintings, the black paintings, the stuffed goat with the tire around its middle, the erased de Kooning drawing, the sculpture and wall pieces assembled out of junk and cardboard boxes scavenged from the street, the "combines" with chairs or stuffed fowl or clocks or sneakers attached to canvas—they are all now part of contemporary art history. Years ago, when he was sharing life with Jasper Johns (SMITHSONIAN, June 1990), and the two of them were encouraging each other in their search for pathways out of the dominant Abstract Expressionist modes of the period, Johns, he recalls, would sometimes gaze at a new Rauschenberg and murmur, "I don't know. I think you've gone too far this time."

Each man went farther than he could have imagined in the days they lived on nickels and dreams. In the admiring view of William Lieberman, curator of 20th-century art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, they are the two American artists working in this country today who sit atop the pyramid. Except Rauschenberg, as has been noted, doesn't sit. He darts about the globe. Unquenchably openhanded and civic-minded, he finances crusades in support of hope, charity, peace, and the marriage of art and technology. He has myriad exhibitions, more than seem possible for one artist; in 40 years, there have been more than 300 one-man Rauschenberg shows.

An endless trail of exhibitions

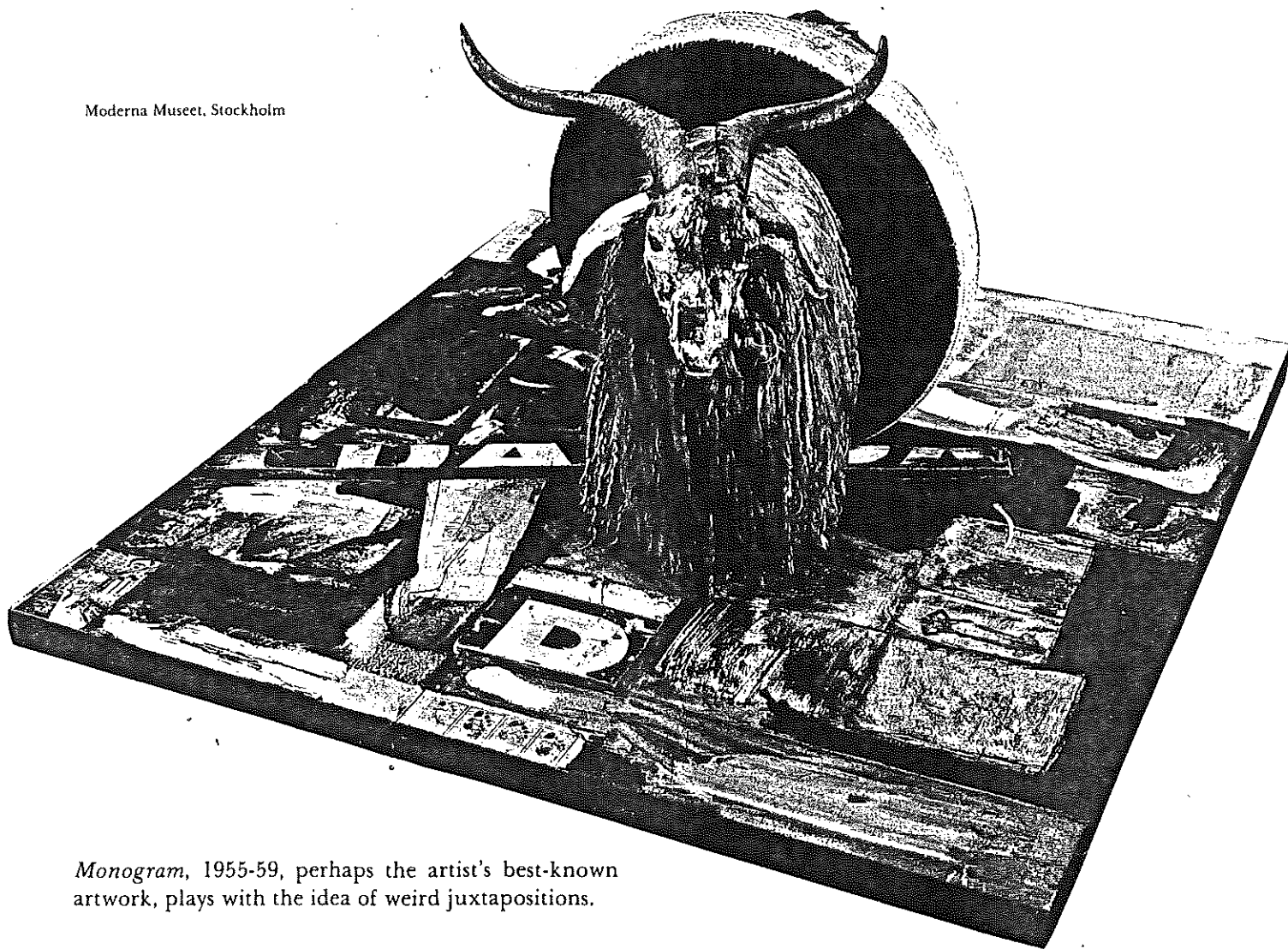
The Knoedler event followed the opening of a show at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York of large, masterful silkscreen works produced from 1962 to 1964. In April, the Pace/MacGill Gallery in New York opened a show of Rauschenberg photographs. A show of serial works opens May 12 at Washington's Le Marié Tranier Gallery, and next month there will be two more exhibitions: new art at the Galerie Jamileh Weber in Zurich, and pieces from 1949 to 1953 at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, from June 15 to August 11. The work at the Corcoran was assembled by the Menil Collection of Houston, Texas, which will begin showing it in the fall.

The centerpiece of this Rauschenberg year is the exhibition titled "Rauschenberg Overseas Culture In-



Casually elegant, Robert Rauschenberg pauses amid an installation of his work to flash his ready smile.

Moderna Museet, Stockholm



Monogram, 1955-59, perhaps the artist's best-known artwork, plays with the idea of weird juxtapositions.

terchange" at the National Gallery of Art in Washington from May 12 through September 2. For easy reference the show, and the project it is named for, is known as ROCI, sly homage to Rauschenberg's old pet turtle, Rocky, which can be seen and heard laboriously clunking around the New York house.

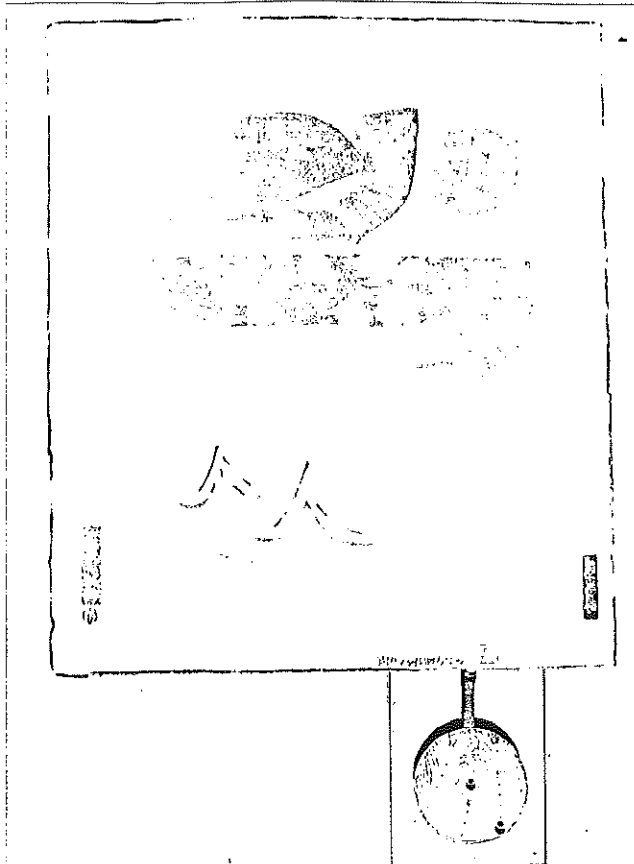
It is hard to imagine a project more quixotic and less feasible than ROCI. This was Rauschenberg's personal "nonpolitical" gesture, his way of reaching out to other lands, to peoples who may not have friendly feelings about the United States. His nomadic art project, inspired by a 1982 working trip to one of the world's oldest paper mills, in China, was meant to last four years and take him to 22 countries. When it was over, it had consumed more than six years, and he had made and shown his art in ten foreign lands. At least two million people had seen his works, and he had talked to many of them—other artists, poets, the average José or Ivan who finds joy in museums. The climactic

The author, a frequent contributor to these pages, wrote about the Fauve artists in October 1990, and Freud's art collection in the August 1990 issue.

show at the National Gallery, organized by Jack Cowart, curator of 20th-century art, includes about 150 works: ROCI paintings, sculpture, Rauschenberg's photography made for use in his silkscreen art, videotapes of the places he visited, and the premiere of a dance piece he collaborated on with Trisha Brown.

Twenty-nine works will remain with the museum as gifts, presumably for its encouragement, which is much more than the ROCI project got from the American art establishment. Actually, labeling it a "project" borders on flattery. As Donald Saff, ROCI's artistic director, summed it up recently, "It was always in a state of falling apart financially. It was received with skepticism by friends, collectors, museums, dealers. It was seen as too impractical and too expensive. It was logistically impossible in the beginning and absolutely without funds. And those are probably the good parts." Major corporations usually eager to put their names and money behind a prestigious art event were politely noncommittal. Two other museums were interested, but involvement required structure—the equivalent of telling Rauschenberg he must dine at a normal hour instead of midnight. For a brief period, ROCI had

Collection the artist



Individual (7 Characters), 1982, was made in China using handmade paper prior to start of ROCI project.

a pledge of \$3 million from a Los Angeles collector. The day before Rauschenberg formally announced his venture at the United Nations in December 1984, the agreement collapsed.

In the end, except for modest contributions from a couple of friends, Rauschenberg paid for ROCI himself, selling off treasured early works by Johns, Andy Warhol and Cy Twombly, and dipping into his own not-inconsiderable earnings. Saff guesses that the costs may have run to \$7 million. But finances did not finish ROCI. "You can run out of friends, you can run out of love, but money you can always make," Rauschenberg says. ROCI ended because, to use his own phrase, this "weirdest, loosest artist" finally grew restless working within the confines of assigned subject matter, in this case, the look and feel of places he chose to visit. At all events, "Peace and communication and understanding has always been my lifestyle. I thought I'd made the point."

Saff, an artist, academician, master printmaker and old Florida friend, who sees Rauschenberg as "introducing the world to itself," was ROCI's advance man. He was frequently the first ROCI ambassador to travel

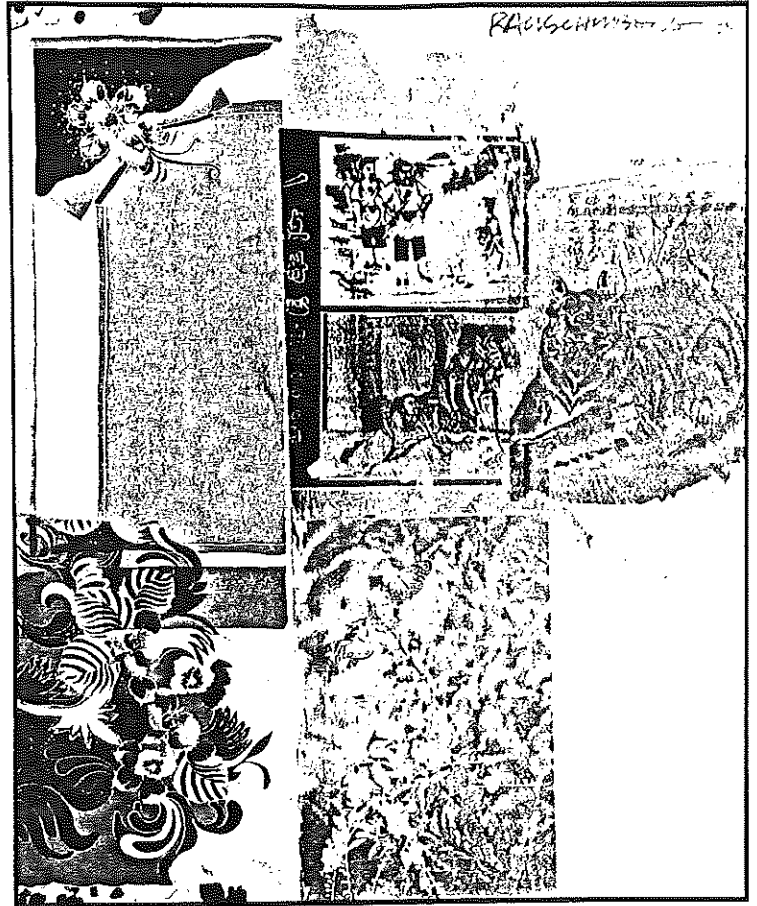
to a chosen country, making his way through the bureaucracy, talking to artists, museum people, writers, to determine whether a show would be welcome. If the reception was cordial, Rauschenberg and an assistant would follow, move about the country, absorbing images, collecting fabrics and street souvenirs—the preliminary process of what Jack Cowart felicitously calls making "deadline art." Rauschenberg thrives on, indeed, seems to need, that kind of pressure. Back in Florida, he would turn out works in colors and imagery that reflected his sense of the land he had just visited. Then he would hurry back with a planeload of new and old Rauschenberg art, an entourage of assistants, installation materials, and barrels of white paint to coat dingy museum walls. After a show ended, each country owned one Rauschenberg commemorating the exhibition, and the participants were left with a trail of scattered memories, something like the elegantly organized clutter of a Rauschenberg silkscreen piece.

Voyaging beyond Lost Horizon

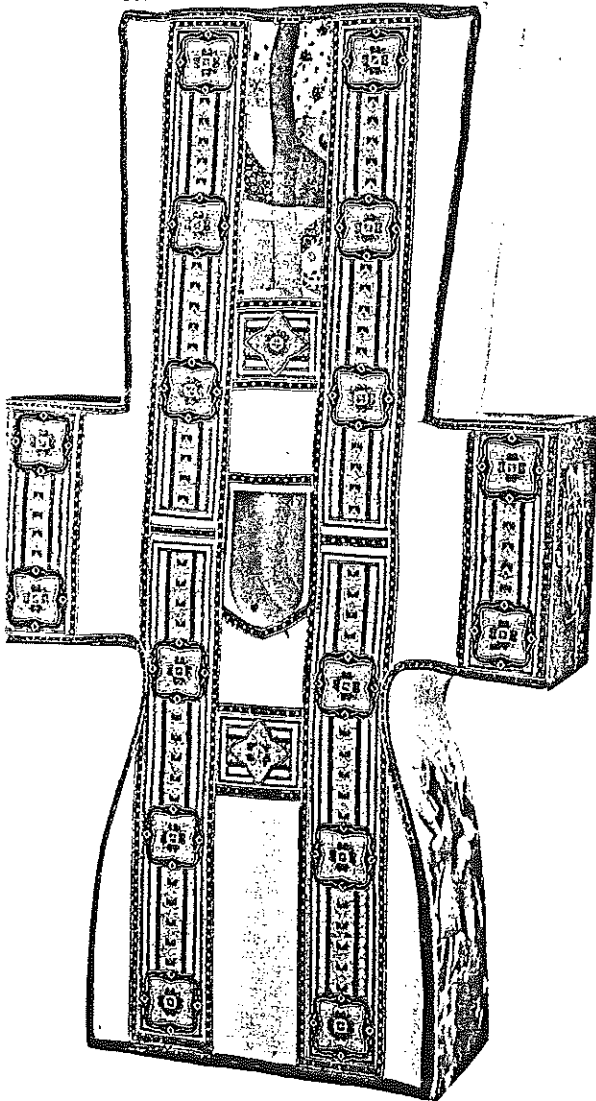
They crossed Peru off the list because, on Saff's exploratory visit, Lima turned out to be unremittingly anti-American, and his ROCI equipment vanished—stolen—in transit. They got to Cuba because Saff's brother Ed, a distinguished mathematician, happened to be traveling to Havana to lecture and agreed to get word about ROCI to the right quarters. Rauschenberg decided against South Africa when the government refused to consider linked simultaneous exhibitions in Soweto and Johannesburg. As Don Saff was leaving Tibet, a great favor was sought: Could he send a videotape of a film, set in a country patterned after Tibet, which they had been longing to see for many years, a 1937 movie called *Lost Horizon*? He did. The Mexico City catalog carried a tribute from the Nobelist Octavio Paz. The Santiago catalog bore a contribution by Chile's dissident poet José Donoso. This partly neutralized dissident forces who were unhappy that ROCI was using the national museum. Even so, there were hecklers at the opening.

Venezuela agreed to send two air force cargo planes to transport ROCI art from Santiago to Caracas; the crew took families on the excursion, came back loaded with Chilean souvenirs, foodstuffs and only part of the show, and ROCI had to scrounge up fuel money for a second trip. Berlin was unhappy with the painting Rauschenberg left behind as his gift; it naturally reflected the grayness of the city, but the city yearned for something in more vibrant colors. Germany was the stop before Malaysia, and Rauschenberg remembers crisscrossing the globe in a state of productive confusion as he sorted out images of two very disparate cultures. In the Soviet Union, visitors traveled to the

Collection the artist

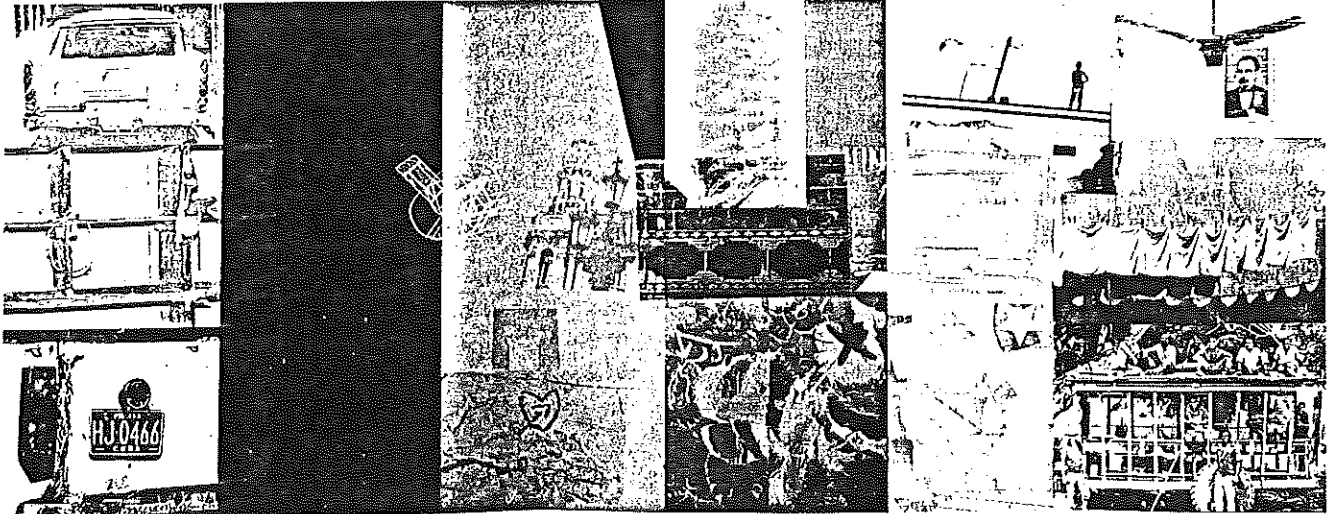


Collection the artist



Three works express Rauschenberg's impressions of countries that he visited for the ROCI project: *Altar Peace Chile/ROCI Chile* (at left), *Bunga Manggis/ROCI Malaysia* (above) and *Cuban Acre/ROCI Cuba* (below). In Chile he was struck by the role of the Catholic Church, in Malaysia by nature, in Cuba by old tail-finned American cars.

National Gallery of Art

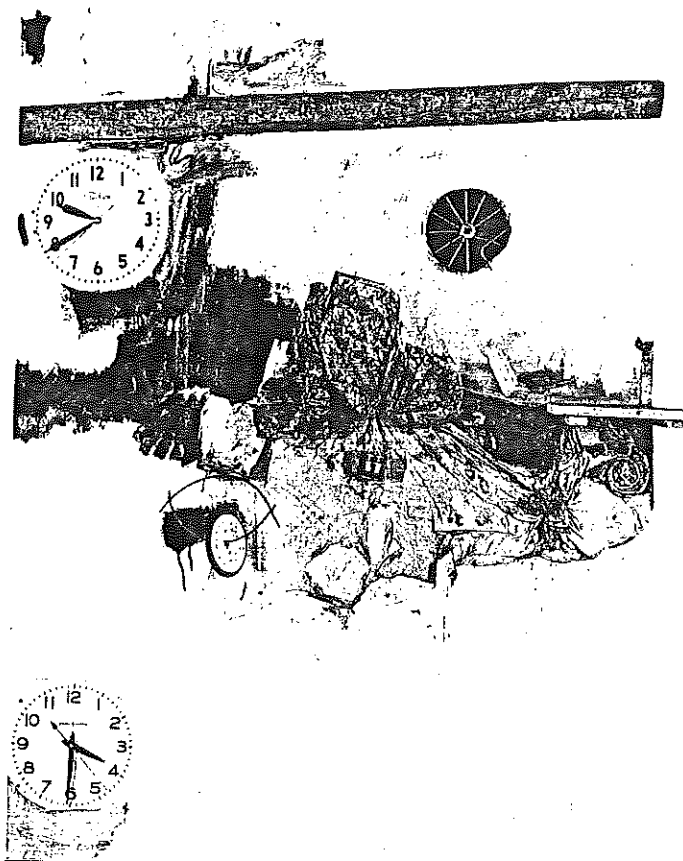


Collection the artist



Signs (detail) is a screenprint done in 1970; it sums up the tumultuous events of the preceding decade.

National Museum of American Art



In *Reservoir*, 1961, the clocks at upper and lower left record time that the work was started and finished.

Moscow show from regions as distant as Siberia and Uzbekistan. ROCI got to Russia with the help of the late Armand Hammer, who famously knew his way around the government; the price was Rauschenberg's agreement to switch from the Leo Castelli Gallery, after more than 30 years, to Knoedler, in which Hammer had an interest.

In Beijing, the ROCI visit left people talking of "art before Rauschenberg" and "art after Rauschenberg." And in Tokyo, someone wanted to know Rauschenberg's greatest fear. It is the kind of question he loves. "That I might run out of world," he said.

The Rauschenberg world began in Port Arthur, Texas, a dank, barren, oil-refining town that reeked of petroleum. He was born Milton Ernest Rauschenberg; "Bob" would be his gift to himself when he began studying art in young adulthood. On public display, Rauschenberg is usually such a sunny spirit that a casual observer can hardly imagine a dark side. But he broods about life's insults, and resentment surfaces when he remembers his vigil at his dying father's bedside years after he had left home.

"I was the only person who could stay up for 64 hours to hold his hand and keep him from pulling the tubes out, because I'd worked in a hospital. And his last words, after he tried to pull them out again and I put them back in, were 'I never liked you, you son of a bitch.' I was like the son that should not have come up in the morning."

The memory is offered without a hint of expression on the usually mobile face. The elder Rauschenberg worked for a utility company, but life's pleasures centered aggressively on hunting and fishing. His only son was nearsighted and had no interest in snuffing out small creatures. And, he seemed to be unteachable. Indeed, he "lived in fear of education."

It was many years before Rauschenberg understood that he was not dim-witted but afflicted with dyslexia, at the time a little-understood condition that, among other visual distortions, can make reading difficult. It is a problem that he shares with a regiment of famous figures including Leonardo, Robin Williams, Raphael, and Greg Louganis. A while back, Rauschenberg savored a ceremony in Washington at which he and

some other famous dyslexics were honored. To say that he was thrilled to be on a dais with Cher and Tom Cruise is an understatement. After a lifetime of fame, he is deeply star struck.

Back at his hotel, Rauschenberg was so excited about the day, that he fondly telephoned Dora Rauschenberg to report on it. "My mother still calls me Meelton—not Milton but Meelton." "'Isn't that somep'n, Meelton,'" he quotes her, assuming a Texas accent he has assiduously rid himself of. "'And all these years we just thought you was stupid.'"

If school was "horrible," young Milton somehow managed to sustain "a joy of living." He also managed to graduate and, by dint of intense cramming, gain admission to the University of Texas at Austin to study pharmacy, his parents' idea. School lasted until the day he was required to dissect a live frog in anatomy class. The frog escaped; he was expelled. It was 1943, and he was shortly drafted into the Navy. Anxious to avoid combat and killing, Rauschenberg trained as a neuropsychiatric technician and was assigned to a camp in Southern California to care for men who had been physically and emotionally maimed by the war.

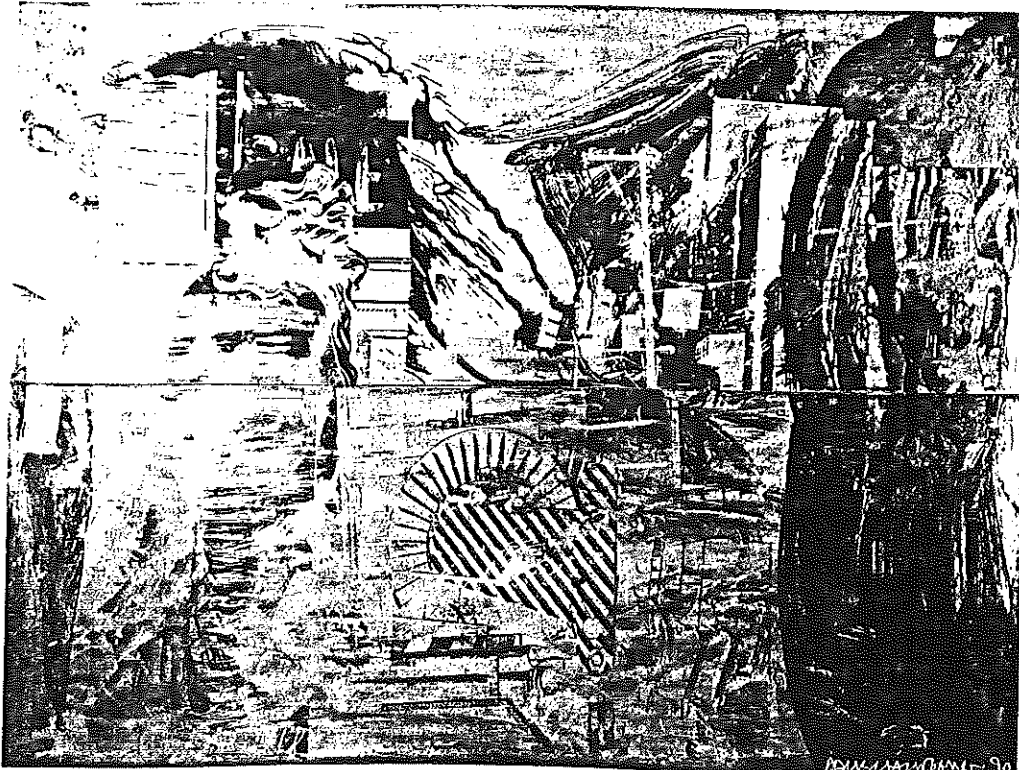
Although he had been drawing since childhood, it was only then that he would discover that art could actually be a vocation. One day, on a hitchhiking trip from his base, he went to see the cactus gardens in San Marino. The gardens were next door to the

Huntington Library, so he stepped inside. There he encountered his first *real* paintings: Thomas Gainsborough's *Blue Boy* and Sir Thomas Lawrence's *Pinkie*. Lightning struck.

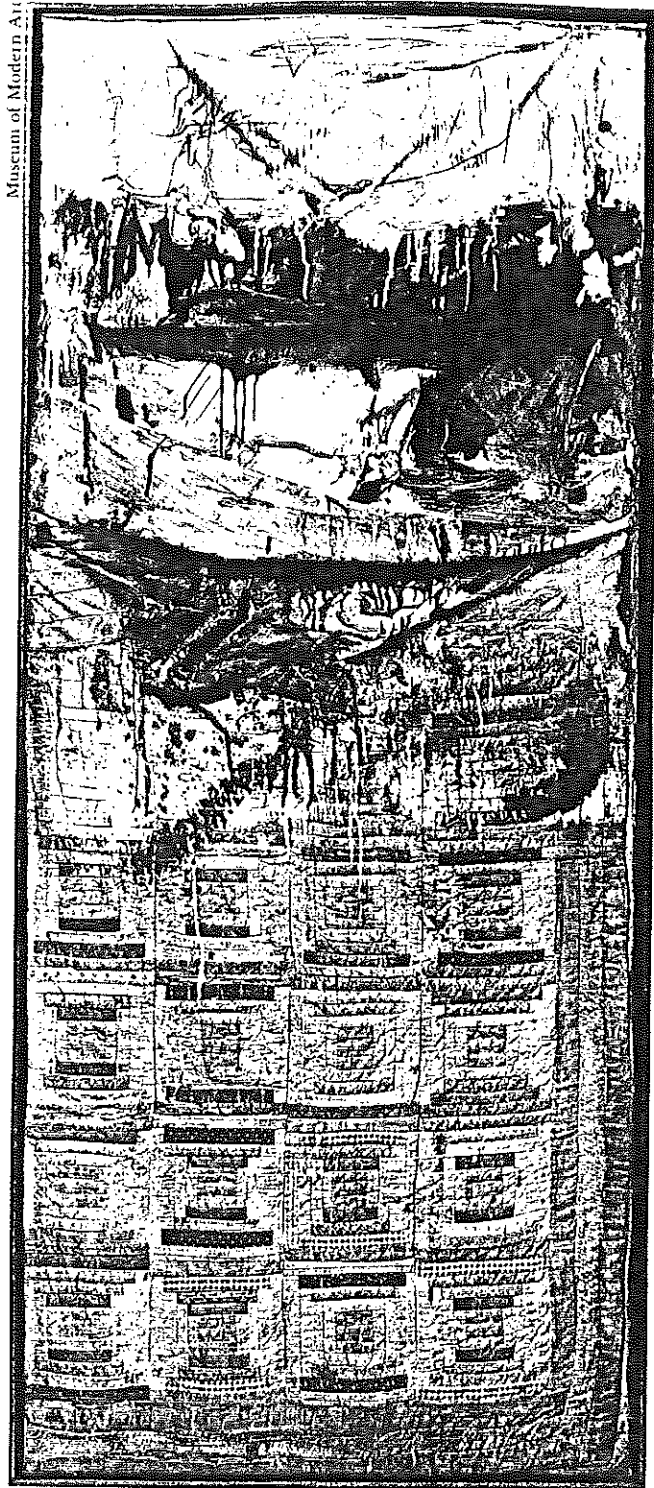
Out of uniform, Rauschenberg began to soak up an education in art—from the Kansas City Art Institute to Paris to Black Mountain College in North Carolina, a brief, memorable experiment in education. At Black Mountain he would strengthen important friendships with John Cage and Merce Cunningham, study photography, and learn to rebel against his teacher Josef Albers. He had been drawn to the school by Albers' reputation as a disciplinarian, but Albers disliked his work, and he was contemptuous of Albers' finicky approach to art: that legendary figure wore an ostentatiously spotless white suit while he painted his homages to the square.

In that period, Rauschenberg met and married another young artist, Susan Weil, fathered a son, Christopher, and soon divorced. By 1951, he was tentatively settled in New York and had found his way to the Cedar Tavern, the watering hole of some of the great Abstract Expressionists of the time. By 1953 he had also publicly shown his White Paintings. They were a preview of more startling things to come. Anybody who looked carefully discovered something beyond canvas coated in white paint: the paintings reflected the light in the room as well as picking up shadows of viewers,

Knoedler & Company, New York



In recent works such as *City Melange* (1990), Rauschenberg uses a technique of etching on brass surface by corrosion with acids.



Rauschenberg appropriated a quilt from artist friend Dorothea Rockburne for *Bed*, his first "combine."

inviting the surroundings into the work. Time and again, in similar fashion, Rauschenberg would compel the onlooker to collaborate in his art.

Reviewing his career in later years, some critics would assume that he had set out to invite notice by shocking the art world, a sort of born-again Dadaist wreaking havoc on contemporary values. But Rauschenberg was no ideologue, and his motives were less decipherable. "I pushed the White Paintings

through because it was both a reaction to the Abstract Expressionists and a hangover from Josef Albers," he says. "I had been brainwashed by Albers to where nearly nothing was possible. I just wanted to see how far you can go. All-white paintings were physically as close as I could push to the extreme. And I was a little bit disappointed because they were still something that had a *presence*."

Then he made the all-black paintings, a good example of what Rauschenberg likes to call his "schizophrenia," a rather hyperbolic description of an antic sensibility. Of course there are recognizable swings to his interests. Roni Feinstein, who organized the Whitney show, observes that years ago, using materials scrounged from window-decorating work, he produced a series of luscious collages in gold and silver leaf. They were snapped up for Christmas gifts. Yet at the same time he was also making less-salable art confectioned out of wispy stuff resembling toilet tissue.

Ghostly surfaces that require concentration

He may spend months or years turning out paintings crowded with images and aflame with color. Then one day he will set to work on studiously quiet, nearly monochromatic pieces. Some of his most recent works, for example, are a counterpoint to the excited bursts of color in the ROCI series. The surfaces—copper, bronze, brass—are rich and mysterious; their images are often etched into the metal without color and are so ghostly that they require hard concentration to be read. And again, the room and the viewer are pulled into the work.

Rauschenberg likes to boast that he does not repeat himself. Still, he frequently uses a pattern of design that Nan Rosenthal, a National Gallery curator and Rauschenberg scholar, calls "the syncopated grid composition." A Rauschenberg grid work will be neatly divided into rectangular sections. But some images will be set into the grid spaces askew or sideways or upside down. Some elements will jump out at the viewer while others recede into the wall, and the whole affair becomes a deft balancing act between order and chaos.

In Rauschenberg's early days in New York, finances were so precarious that, lodged in quarters without proper bathing facilities, he would go to parties in order to lock himself in the bathroom and take a fast shower. By the mid-'50s, his earnings had been improved by freelance jobs decorating Tiffany's windows, work he soon shared with Jasper Johns. They were an odd pair, the ebullient Rauschenberg, prone "to drown myself in everything around me," and the reserved, rigorously intellectual Johns who, somebody once said, kept a "keep out" doormat outside his door.

One day, Leo Castelli, who was starting a new gal-

lery, came to see Rauschenberg's work and stayed to thrill to Jasper Johns' art. Johns got his big show in 1958; it was an instant success, a virtual sellout. Rauschenberg's exhibition two months later was a succès de scandale, attracting more notice than sales. One of the gallery visitors was an old friend, Dorothea Rockburne, yet to make her own mark as an artist. She stood amazed with delight before a familiar object, soon to be one of the most famous works by Rauschenberg. At Black Mountain in the early '50s, she, Rauschenberg and Cy Twombly had been buddies. When her daughter was born, a teacher had marked the event with the gift of a fine regional quilt. She left it too long in the dryer of the communal laundry room, and it disappeared.

The next time Rockburne saw her quilt, it was hanging in Leo Castelli's gallery. "It was the first art of appropriation," she quipped later. As legend now has it, Rauschenberg had awakened one morning wanting to paint but without funds for canvas. So he had stretched the quilt on a frame, and added sheet, pillow and drips of color. At least one critic thought *Bed* echoed tabloid photography of bedroom murders. Rockburne, a woman without rancor or jealousy, found it "profound, beautiful and wonderful," a celebration of a place central to human life and human drama. Later, yet another critic would point out that the serial pattern of the quilt squares also managed brilliantly to evoke both rural domesticity and the abstract art that Rauschenberg had rejected.

Six years later, at the age of 38, Rauschenberg became the second American in history to win the Venice Biennale international prize. The applause was not universal. In fact the award stirred intense jealousy among some of his fellow artists who thought that Rauschenberg had pulled some strings or that Castelli, who had become a major figure in the art world, had somehow maneuvered the event.

By then, the Rauschenberg-Johns relationship had ruptured, with such bitterness that for years mutual friends avoided mentioning one to the other. Castelli speculates that possibly Johns felt a need to free himself from Rauschenberg's powerful personality. Eventually, a patchy kind of peace between them was achieved. They run into each other at art events and they are on speaking terms—or would be except, as Rauschenberg observes, "we practically have nothing to say to each other."

Rauschenberg does not read unless driven to print by the demands of art. When he wanted to turn out a series of paper works on Dante's *Inferno*, Rauschenberg bravely made his way through the John Ciardi English translation. More often, people read aloud to him: during some passages of Mary Lynn Kotz's recent biography, *Rauschenberg/Art and Life*, he was, she was told, moved to tears.

On the other hand, he has a conspicuous verbal dexterity, a gift for puns and phrases that are catchy even when they don't entirely make sense. Years ago, his contribution to a group-show catalog was: "Painting relates to both art and life. Neither can be made. (I try to act in that gap between the two.)" The statement has been repeated ad nauseam, although nearly two decades after he composed it he laughingly admitted to an interviewer that he no longer remembered what he meant by it.

His impact on other artists is incalculable. James Rosenquist, an old friend, says that Rauschenberg gave his generation of pop artists courage. "He is a risk-taker. Those boys who came before—Rothko and Newman and de Kooning—they all saw art with a capital *A*, almost like a religion. When I saw Bob's early work, I really felt opened up. Nothing was sacred; nothing was 'high art.'"

What impresses Rosenquist is that Rauschenberg has managed to avoid the lulls in creativity that often afflict artists in late middle age. He has never stopped, even when, perhaps, he should have. Once, Rosenquist was visiting Rauschenberg on Captiva, and at the bibulous hour of 3:30 A.M.—Rauschenberg seldom retires before sunrise—they walked over to the studio building to examine recent works. "There were beautiful things on the walls. And then on one wall he's got six bamboo poles with strings tied to tin cans." Rosenquist could not conceal his bewilderment. In a booming bourbon-fueled voice, Rauschenberg said defensively, "Now, you put a lot of things on the wall before you know what they are, too."

Often, he seems to drive himself with inspired sloganeering, statements that have helped build a personal mythology. That winter night in New York after Pittsburgh, he got to talking about the useful confusions of the ROCI travels, of his need to work in different places with different people and in different media. If he was scared of anything, he said, it was the notion that any single activity would ever be *the answer*. So, he was asked, is he better off with questions? Yes, he said, yes he is.

Avant-Garde Genius on the Mall: Trisha Brown, Robert Rauschenberg, John Cage

by Anne Pierce

ASTRAL CONVERTED (50"), a new dance work choreographed by Tricia Brown, had its world premiere here in May to celebrate the Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange (ROCI) at the National Gallery. The fifty minute-long piece is a collaboration between Brown, Robert Rauschenberg, (who did the costumes and the set) and composer John Cage.

These three artists participated in the dance/art/theater events known thirty years ago as "happenings." Rauschenberg and Brown met in 1960, and they collaborated off and on during the following thirty years. The two produced an earlier work called *Astral Convertible* in 1989, for which Rauschenberg designed a self-contained set that Brown could take into all sorts of public places. *Astral Converted* is the first collaboration of all three artists. Car batteries run the headlights on the eight aluminum towers that make up the set, and sensors in the towers trigger the lights, reacting to the flickers and movement around them.

Brown's experiments with weight and gesture allow her to create dances that are at once dreamy and utterly logical—*Astral Converted*, commissioned by the National Gallery and presented down at the front of the mall entrance to the older building, was a shimmering presentation in the middle of mountains of monuments and museum housing—the audience's perceptions teased around by jet screams and flashes of heat lightening, the work a marriage of product and possibility. Now in their fifties and sixties and beyond, these artists are continuing to seek and study: Brown looking at forms, planes and gravity, Rauschenberg supplying her with sets that respond to the system of the dance, and ice-blue costumes intended to do something with the light from the

towers, Cage creating a score that also shifts, filling out the piece with signals of sound.

Astral Converted proved to be reassuringly inexpensive-looking (and also rigorous, thank heaven), though by the time the evening of the opening of the fifty-minute performance piece came around, the local press had made a pretty big fuss over the excesses of Rauschenberg's companion exhibition at the National Gallery. Not an informed soul in attendance that night would have been surprised if *Astral Converted* had had costumes made out of lambfluff, crushed rubies and rare linen or if the dancers had pushed around glowing neon set structures instead of small cube-frame cart/towers fitted with ordinary car headlights and the sensors to pick up on movement and other light from other spaces. The music has a weight and shape of its own, creating distances by shifting from dense to light sound, surrounding the performers, who somehow managed to look both lazy and accomplished at the same time. Brown always surprises me in the way her dances mix acute mathematical interest with a dreamy sensuality—a distortion of function.

Just as the dancers seemed mostly indifferent to the equipment about the stage until they had to move them, there was an objectivity about the performance that kept it solidly low-key, in spite of the difficult balances and accumulating shapes and planes of Brown's formations. In *Astral Converted* weight seemed less of an issue than establishing those planes—on the floor (dancers curving over an ear or "walking" in horizontal position as they were dragged by one limb across the floor), or in the air (as always, Brown punctuates ordinary workmanlike movements with something unexpected...someone will push a broom around

and them bounce off the handle with her torso—two dancers will turn tandem cart-wheel and follow this with a shove or a pause.)

Without a doubt, all in the audience must have eventually found themselves at the mercy of the misery of those cold stone steps and the waiting for dark to arrive (over sixty minutes for many of us). Perhaps that was why *Astral Converted*, with its continuum of shifting explorations of movement by the dancers, didn't always hold your attention. I was grateful for its experimental quality...this way of working and the off-hand quality of the movement execution may by now be considered by some to be old news, but it was refreshing in this context for its contrasts of acute structure and randomness. There's a lot of neo-vaudevillian dance out there nowadays (I think I've been seeing too much of it lately), and we have always hovered on the verge of not being able to stand rigorous postmodern experiments, which should be fun, and always are, if one can remember how to look at them.

I don't understand the complaints that money has ruined Rauschenberg—obviously, we contradict ourselves at every corner when it comes to measuring or interpreting success—it isn't easy to reconcile why one incredible choreographer can grow old and die without ever experiencing the freedom and security to work with whatever is necessary, and another artist, with everything at his disposal, will be pointedly attacked for visibility and continuing desire to work out in front of the world. For all these reasons, I feel grateful for *Astral Converted*. I think it directly challenges the audience, who must look at the accumulations and sort them out independently—take apart the traffic in front of them, however they can. ■

Washington

Rauschenberg giramondo: finita la tournée di sei anni

Il «Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange» conclude la sua tournée

WASHINGTON. Per il suo cinquantesimo anniversario, festeggiato con mostre, donazioni e manifestazioni di vario tipo (cfr. Il Giornale dell'Arte n.86, p.23), la National Gallery ospita l'ultima tappa di uno dei pochi tour mondiali che, in anni recenti, se la sono cavata egregiamente senza la sponsorizzazione della Pepsicola o di equivalenti «predatori» multinazionali. Il Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange (Roci), che dal 1985 ha viaggiato attraverso Messico, Cile, Venezuela, Cina, Tibet, Giappone, Cuba, Unione Sovietica, Berlino e Malesia, è finanziato pressoché interamente da Robert Rauschenberg, che ha sborsato una somma pari a 6 milioni di dollari (oltre 7 miliardi di lire). In ogni tappa Rau-

schenberg, immortalato in videotape dal suo entourage, ha incontrato artisti locali, raccolto documenti e materiali, scattato fotografie. In seguito è stata allestita un'esposizione, con lavori di antica data e altri eseguiti in situ, uno dei quali veniva donato al Paese ospite. Con la recente donazione di 29 opere del Roci, la National Gallery entra in possesso della più ampia collezione di lavori di Rauschenberg; e la presenta, accanto a 150 tra dipinti, disegni, sculture, fotografie e video raccolti sempre dal Roci, in una esposizione che si apre il 12 maggio per proseguire fino al 2 settembre. In questo contesto, Rauschenberg collabora anche a uno spettacolo di danza di Trisha Brown, che si tiene dal 15 al 18 maggio. L'artista ame-

ricano ha scritto: «Credo fortemente nell'idea, basata sulle mie molteplici e disparate collaborazioni, che un contatto personale sviluppato attraverso l'arte abbia in sé una grande potenzialità di pace, e sia il modo meno elitario per partecipare informazioni esotiche o comuni, nella piena speranza che questo ci conduca a una conoscenza creativa e interattiva». Il Roci ha preso il via da altri progetti come «Change», ideato nel 1970 da Rauschenberg affinché gli artisti potessero pagare le cure mediche con opere d'arte. Ora, lo stesso artista rivela che tutto ciò si sta avvicinando alla fine: «Ammetterò con un certo imbarazzo che sto cercando di liquidarlo, poiché sono nuovamente molto incuriosito dalla sperimentazione di

attività non programmate. Col Roci, mi sono assunto una grande responsabilità: in Russia 1500-2000 persone facevano la coda ogni giorno per vederlo. È stata la prima esposizione itinerante mai passata per il Tibet. In Cina abbiamo occupato l'intero Museo Nazionale proiettando 15 video in simultanea, cose che i cinesi non avevano mai visto prima». Jack Cowart, curatore per l'arte del XX secolo alla National Gallery, ha affermato che l'esposizione presenta alcuni dei migliori lavori prodotti da Rauschenberg in diversi decenni; suscitando qualche perplessità, come se avesse detto che i lavori del Roci faranno rinviare una carriera avvizzita.

James Hall

GUIDE TO THE LIVELY ARTS

National Gallery of Art

presents the

TRISHA BROWN DANCE COMPANY

in the world premiere of
ASTRAL CONVERTED (50')

Choreography by
TRISHA BROWN

Set and design by
ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG

Music score by
JOHN CAGE

May 14 - 18 at 8:45

Seating begins at 7:30 pm
Outdoor performances on the Mall steps of
the National Gallery of Art, West Building
Madison Dr., between 4th & 7th Sts. NW

FREE ADMISSION

First-come, first-served

The Terrace Café in the East Building at
4th St. & Constitution Ave., NW is open
until 8 pm each performance night.
The East Building is also open until
8:30 pm for viewing of the exhibition
Rauschenberg Overseas
Cultural Interchange
(on view May 12 - September 2, 1991)

In case of inclement weather,
call (202) 842-6690 after 4:30 pm
for performance information.

INFO: (202) 842-6684

CRITICS' PICKS

The Washington Post critics choose their favorite shows of the week.

DANCE

■ A remarkable world premiere will take place this week at the Mall entrance to the National Gallery's West Building—the **Trisha Brown Dance Company** in Brown's "Astral Converted (50")," commissioned by the gallery, with sets and costumes by Robert Rauschenberg and a score by John Cage. It is Brown's first full-length opus, and the occasion marks her first Washington appearance in seven years. Admission is free for all performances, Tuesday through Saturday (weather permitting).

Brown's Dance for Open Skies

At the National Gallery,
An Outdoor Premiere

By Alan M. Kriegsman
Washington Post Staff Writer

It isn't every day of the week, or every year, for that matter, that as august an institution as the National Gallery of Art commissions a dance work—especially one that will be performed, *alfresco*, in front of its very doors and with no charge for admission.

Yet this is precisely what the gallery has done in bringing into being choreographer Trisha Brown's "Astral Converted (50')." It will be premiered tonight and will play nightly through Saturday, weather permitting, in front of the Mall entrance of the National Gallery's West Building, with seating on the front steps (estimated capacity, several thousand). Hence the "backdrop" for the dancers of the Trisha Brown Dance Company will be the Mall itself, along with ambient views of the National Air and Space Museum, the Washington Monument and the Capitol. Was ever a work of dance so visually favored from the outset?

The "hook," moreover, that occasioned the gallery's largess was the participation of Brown's artist collaborator, none other than Robert Rauschenberg, whom she has known and intermittently worked with for three decades. The commission, in fact, is intended to honor the gallery's major East Building exhibition, "Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Interchange (ROCI)," which opened Sunday and runs through early September. In addition to Brown's choreography and Rauschenberg's set and costumes, "Astral Converted (50')" will also have a new musical score by fellow iconoclast John Cage.

Tonight's premiere will represent three impressive firsts—Brown's first full-length dance work, which is in fact an expanded version of an earlier collaboration with Rauschenberg, titled "Astral Convertible" (1989); the first time



BY FRED SWEETS—THE WASHINGTON POST

Choreographer Trisha Brown.

Brown, Rauschenberg and Cage have worked together; and the first time the gallery has commissioned a piece of choreography (it thus earns a place alongside the Library of Congress, which in the past commissioned, among other things, the celebrated Martha Graham-Aaron Copland "Appalachian Spring," and the score and first choreographic version of Stravinsky's "Apollo").

For Brown, who has long been recognized internationally as one of the so-called postmodern generation, the idea for the present Rauschenberg collaboration had its origins in a lunch in Madrid four or five years ago, a lunch with a dance impresario eager to present Brown's company in hitherto unvisited locations throughout Spain.

"These were really extraordinary venues she was talking about," says Brown. "Village plazas, out-of-the-way hamlets, places I knew we'd have to reach by trucking in and out, and I couldn't do that then because my touring repertory had all these lavish sets. I thought, this is ridiculous, I shouldn't be left out because I'm successful in the theater. These were places where the patrons would include grandmothers, kids, the town goats. It just seemed like too wonderful an audience to be excluded."

The solution came, eventually, from Rauschenberg, who devised a set for "Astral Convertible" that

would be easily portable, could be set up anywhere and would be independent of theatrical hardware and technology.

Brown, a native of Aberdeen, Wash. now in her mid-fifties, met Rauschenberg in 1960 after she moved to New York to take classes at Merce Cunningham's studio. In the era of the explosively radical Judson Dance Theatre (the early '60s), the two frequently crossed paths. "He performed in pieces of mine, and I in his," Brown recalls.

Rauschenberg, wild about dancing from an early age, had already designed for choreographers Paul Taylor and Cunningham, and served as artistic director of Cunningham's troupe from 1954 to 1964. Deeply involved with Judson projects, he also created choreography of his own (e.g., "Pelican," for Alice Denney's Pop Art festival in Washington) and performed in it. When Brown established a troupe of her own in 1970, Rauschenberg signed on as her board chairman, a position he's held ever since.

In the late '70s, Brown's choreography took a new turn toward theatrical elaboration and collaborative projects with composers and visual artists. Her "Glacial Decoy" (1979) marked the start of this period and her first major project with Rauschenberg; others since have included "Set and Reset" in 1983, "Astral Convertible" and last year's "Foray Forest."

When, in the wake of her Madrid lunch and its frustrations, Brown got to thinking about "Astral Convertible" and an everywhere-adaptable production, she approached Rauschenberg and asked him if he would design an inflatable set. Saying it would blow away, he soon nixed the idea, but came up with the concept of metal towers—objects, he told her, that would be "as plain as refrigerators."

"That was the birth of the 'Astral Convertible' set, and now 'Astral Converted (50')," Brown notes. "The whole point was that these towers could house all the business a dance company needs to put on a theatrical production, all the sound and light we needed, in the absence of existing theatrical facilities."

Rauschenberg's set consists of eight aluminum towers, varying in height from two to eight feet.

"The power source consists of car batteries, and the lights are auto headlights," Brown points out. "In addition, the towers carry photoelectric sensors that respond to the passage of dancers across the playing area and in turn trigger the sound system and lighting. It's not, however, a simple one-to-one correspondence. People sometimes watch the dance trying to figure out the relations between the towers and what the dancers are doing, but it's more complex than that, a kind of chain reaction. If a dancer triggers a change in the lighting, that new light can also trigger another sensor and so initiate a whole new sequence of reactions."

The costumes Rauschenberg designed are made of a light-reflective material, and so figure in the sound-light interaction.

When the National Gallery came to Brown with the commission for a new opus, she felt that Rauschenberg had already filled the prescription with his "Astral Convertible" set, which could precisely fit the requirements of a gallery space (as opposed to a theater) or, as it turned out, an outdoor performance. "I didn't think I could ask Bob to do this again," she says, "so instead I proposed asking a new composer ["Astral Convertible" had a score by Richard Landry] to do the music and extend 'Convertible' to evening length, which had been my original concept anyway."

Cage, true to his own methodology, agreed to do the music, but asked that it be separate from the system of sensors. He created eight tapes for the purpose, one for each tower. "Wouldn't you know," Brown says, "he'd choose to detach from the randomizing process—he's got his own." Her acquaintance with Cage goes back to a lecture on his concept of indeterminacy that she attended at Connecticut College before her move to New York. "His ideas have always been very influential on my own work."

For her part, Brown took the choreography of "Astral Convertible" as her starting point. Rauschenberg had coined the title, to embrace the idea of a dance work that could be changed over time. "When you're faced with the prospect, however, of changing perfectly fine choreography [i.e., that of 'Astral Convertible'], it's a little daunting. I made a lot of new material, lots more than the 20 minutes we needed, and edited it down, and then I went back to the earlier work and wove new things into it. I also found that the new overall time of 50 minutes creates a different way of looking at the whole dance, and that also shaped what I did. The older piece, by the way, won't be discarded; both 'Convertible' and 'Converted' will stay in the company's repertory."

The new work may well mirror thoughts Brown has expressed about the drift of her creative work in recent years. "So much of my recent work has been about experimentation. I'm always trying to press forward and outward the boundary of what I know. I'm trying to expand my vocabulary of movement, and trying to leave myself open to impulse and accident. I don't want ever to be just automatically making a fixed product. I want constantly to keep open a dialogue with my collaborators."

As for Rauschenberg in particular as a collaborator, Brown declares that from the start she's felt "an uncanny and profound rapport" with him.

Dance

'Astral': Starry Night

Trisha Brown's Monumental Collaboration

By Alan M. Kriegsman
Washington Post Staff Writer

How is it possible to describe the pure, thrilling wondrousness of Trisha Brown's dance movement, as manifest in her new "Astral Converted (50)"?

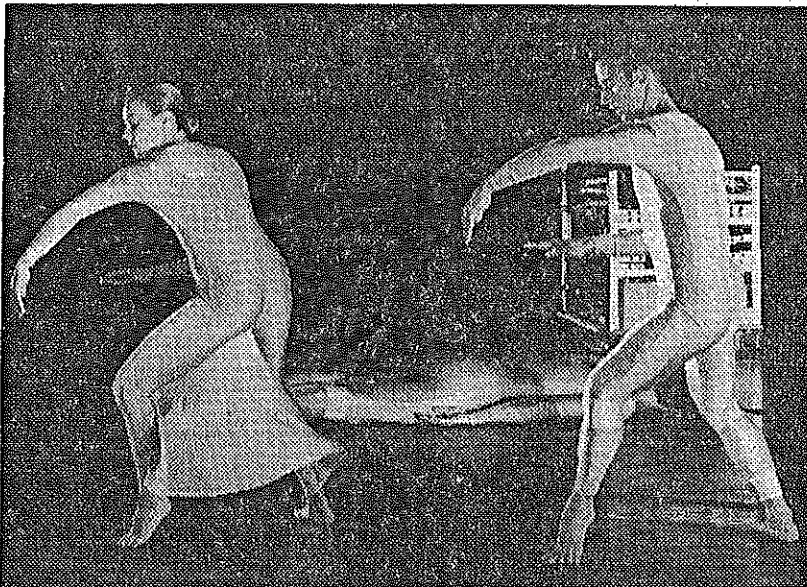
It's times like this when a writer, or this writer at least, is brought up short once more by the stubby discreteness of words, their confinement, their earthbound poverty. The dance flows, gushes and pours; words march along in a flat, knock-kneed staccato. A poet, perhaps, could make words sing, swing and vault enough to approximate the spell of the dance. Otherwise, it's a losing proposition.

For all that, the attempt must be made. Last night's premiere of the new work—an expanded and transformed version of Brown's earlier "Astral Convertible"—was commissioned by the National Gallery of Art in honor of its current Robert Rauschenberg show (in the East Gallery). The mobile aluminum towers, bedecked with auto headlights and powered by car batteries, that Rauschenberg created for "Convertible" in 1989 again serve as the set for the new, extended opus. The Richard Landry score for the earlier piece, though, has been replaced by newly composed music by John Cage.

Sitting amid an audience of about 2,000 on the Gallery steps, looking down on the specially constructed black platform, on Mall level, that served as a stage, were, side by side, Gallery director J. Carter Brown, Cage, Brown and Rauschenberg. For the three artists, it marked a first-time collaboration, though Cage and Rauschenberg's association goes back to the Black Mountain College "happenings" of the '50s, and Rauschenberg and Brown have worked together on four previous major choreographic projects. For Washington, and the dance world in general, the event was as momentous as any in easy reach of memory.

Walking through the Rauschenberg exhibit (the "Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange," or ROCI) one is overwhelmed by the sense of perception as a palimpsest—a world of experience transmuted into overlapping, rival layers, each clamoring for separate attention but outflanked by the much greater impact of the whole. The same principle ruled "Astral Converted," the more so because of the unique and inescapably powerful environment of last night's performance.

Picture it: the crowd on the stone steps; the oblong stage, with the 10 dancers of the Trisha Brown Dance Company moving stealthily among the gleaming towers; and beyond, the darkened greenery and trees of the



BY FRANK JOHNSTON—THE WASHINGTON POST

Diane Madden and Lance Gries in "Astral Converted (50)."

Mall itself, bordered by the Capitol, the Washington Monument, and directly across, the National Air & Space Museum; the passing traffic on the cross streets, the flickering signals, stray joggers and strollers, the roar of jets, the wail of sirens. Cage's philosophy of all-inclusiveness and unpredictability, shared at the root by his collaborators, could not have been more ideally served had he personally programmed it all. As for Rauschenberg's "ennobling of the ordinary"—another article of shared faith—it was given perfect expression by a lit public phone booth just behind the stage that became—for the duration of the performance—as magical and evocative an esthetic apparition as Rauschenberg's towers and the flux of Brown's dance.

The movement Brown has devised, in common with that of her earlier works, has a "found" look that conforms to no traditions other than her

own. The Brownian quality of fluid undulation, as if someone had oiled the air grooves, is much in evidence. The work has some especially serendipitous aspects, as in an extended passage in which several dancers sweep the floor with large push-brooms that then become enmeshed in the dancer-to-dancer interaction. As a whole, the anarchic falls, soft leaps, equilibrium-defying balances, loppings, creepings and frisky jumps of the composition bind together into a panoramic choreographic adventure. If it seems less mysterious and mythic than "Astral Convertible" (at least, as seen in a conventional theatrical space), this is partly because it is inevitably assimilated into its grandiose surroundings; the dance itself becomes landscape.

In the Mall context, Rauschenberg's towers, suggestive to start with of grids, girders, lighthouses and all manner of skeletal scaffoldings,

strongly take on the aspect of space launch gantries—what better image for a piece labeled "astral"? Cage surprises, as is his wont, by using not synthesizers or ambient sound, but traditional instruments—brass and woodwinds—to fashion a spare, intermittent soundscape of great beauty, a splendid complement to its visual and kinetic partners.

The dancers—as sleek and true individually as they are in ensemble—are Liz Carpenter, Lance Gries, Nicole Juralewicz, Kevin Kortan, Gregory Lara, Carolyn Lucas, Diane Madden, Trish Oesterling, Lisa Schmidt, Wil Swanson and David Thomson. The performance, free of charge, will be repeated nightly (weather permitting) through Saturday.

File

11 June 91

Dear Bob,

My husband Jerry wrote
this in response to RDC1
which he (or I) was
very moved by. I

thought you'd want
to see it.

Hope Europe went
well. Look forward to

Friday at the Crown.

All best -

Paul Fine

The Celebration of Otherness

First off, you cannot go to a Rauschenberg exhibition without some sort of mind set unless you know nothing of contemporary art. This causes a couple of major problems: 1) you recognize Rauschenberg's modes and methods and there is a tendency to think "more of the same" and see no further; and 2) you remember particular pieces from the past and think "I like those more" and see no further. That this is a problem with any famous living artist is obvious, but when the artist was or is associated with some sort of youthful exuberance and abandon the problem seems greater but for some reason more easily ignored.

At most museum openings or exhibitions there are two easily spotted types: 1) the sophisticated -- those who know what they know; and 2) the innocent -- those who don't know what they know. Sophistication unless tempered by humility can create pompousness and blindness; and innocence unless tempered by curiosity can create stupidity and blindness. The problems of how to deal with our knowledge and how to deal with our capabilities of alignments and structuring are what keep us going and growing. In a very real sense this is what Rauschenberg's work is about.

As one walks through the ROCI exhibition, quickly at first, just to get an overall look, and then slowly, seeing particulars and details, one can quite easily come to the conclusion that the show is a work having the same general characteristics as the individual units within it. In Rauschenberg's work there are, and have always been, units, clearly defined units that coexist with other clearly defined units -- images that have within themselves their definitions and "things" that maintain their thingness. There have always been commitments to

co-existence and the belief that co-existence is the only true and meaningful existence.

ROCI stands for Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange, and like the works in which the units maintain identity and cohesion, each word in the title must be taken seriously and fully. It is truly about interchange -- encounter, puzzlement, dialogue, and recognition -- and it certainly is a response to culture and cultures. In order to have validity the show has to be about the individual as well as the group, however, so the presence throughout of Rauschenberg -- witness and guide -- makes possible our own individual entries and shapings, our interchanges, public and private, with the exhibition's world.

Public and private; Rauschenberg has always been aware that they are not mutually exclusive. Opposites are just that, and at the same time they belong to each other: Elegance and Vulgarity; Two-dimensionality and Three-dimensionality; Mechanical and Natural; Inside and Outside: Black and White and Color.

As Rauschenberg pulls apart and brings together, it is the bringing together that is always the bottom line. If the show, the whole vast activity called ROCI is about peace, it is because most of the evil in the world today, the brutality and the destruction, grows out of the hatred and fear of otherness. And if there is a center around which the work in the show revolves it is the acknowledging and embracing of the other and the awareness that we grow and are transformed by that embrace.

Each of us coming to the exhibition brings to it our experiences, our memories, and our connections. After walking through the show the first time and then going into the Early Italian section of the National

Gallery I was struck by what seemed to be a similarity of sensibility between Rauschenberg and Agnolo Gaddi. And one thinks of Francis Ponge whose poetry addresses things in a way that makes you and Thing a kind of key; and Herakleitos who pointed out the necessity of opposites to create harmony and who said that nature loves to hide, that if you don't seek you are not going to find anything even if it is right in front of you.

ROCI is both a seeking and a finding. One is always struck, but not always immediately, by the appropriateness of the images Rauschenberg uses. What often looks haphazard at first sight seems in time to be just right. Part of this is the personality of Rauschenberg as expressed in the structure of each piece. For example, in Guardian Light/ROCI Cuba the red band going up the entire length of the work seems to stabilize the surface while the light colored panel, slightly askew, seems active, rising to the right. The dark bands and areas seem to move downward, and this visual activity goes on while the images address the title, and slowly, each other, as one recognizes their connectedness and their positionings.

One could call this a typical work but it is hard to imagine an untypical Rauschenberg. In each piece one can picture the artist's response to the place, the country and its culture, the seeking and the finding of images and then the seeking and the finding of the format significant to the joining of sensibility's inner and outer forces.

There is in the work the authority of maturity -- its self-knowledge and onwardness. There are in the photographs affirmations of vision and process but these examples and evidences in

the world have been made available by the mind's formulating lens and point to the inexhaustableness of the artist's central idea. As Matisse said, "you know, you have one idea, you are born with it, and all your life you develop your fixed idea, you make it breathe." The onwardness is the pushing of this idea out into the world, encountering the world's great and powerful otherness, acknowledging its nurturing power, its enhancing strength, its transformational illumination. Idea and experience are one.

Embedded in the work, in all the work, is a surprising tirelessness as if each piece energizes the next. The artist's dream, the never-ending making, that makes all true art the celebration of living -- and sharing -- when it exists. You sense that you become one with the work, part of a somewhat secret society that rejects no applicant.

The earliest pieces in the show, works from 1984 like Raspberry Crime/ROCI Japan with its images of horizontality -- ladder rungs, slats, door structures, even cracks, its parts of Japan that are not noticed, and the long multi-colored acrylic force that seems to move across the surface one moment and to occupy the surface the next, and Taki-No-Ko/ROCI Japan, and others, in their various ways seem to define the complexity and excitement of cultural encounter. So do the last works in the show, dated 1990, like Malaysian Flower Cave/ROCI Malaysia with its juxtapositions of natural and mechanical images, natural and mechanical color transitions. Its dominant verticalities within the rectangle, as well as the complexity of the specific encounter, make a kind of celebration of all interchange.

The poet Holderlin despaired of his inability to make an impression on his contemporaries because he believed that it was the poets, the

artists of a culture, who were the ones that had to bring together the disparate experiences, images, things, that if seen with the proper kind of intensity and recognition would give that culture a sense of wholeness, of the kind of inner belonging that makes up humanity. The poetry that he wrote took longer than he thought to take effect, but for some who have read it the wholeness is felt and the distrust and hatred is dissipated. And for some who have listened to and looked at and read of the world's arts, that sense of being both one and many, of feeling and belonging, is what their lives are all about (as for a number of others it seems strange and naive to be affected that way).

Rauschenberg seems to be part of that group of artists like Holderlin and Shelley and Van Gogh and Kollwitz and Mahler and Bernstein and all that thought art mattered, that it could and can alter things, that it could, like Rilke said, make you change your life.

(And if not, what in the hell is it all about?)

Larry Day