

Rauschenberg's Tour de Force

By MARY LYNN KOTZ

FOR ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG all the world's a canvas — and a palette. Up to his elbows in paper pulp in China, in mud-manure straw clay in India, in red-brown tribal face-paint in a Venezuelan village on the Amazon or a mixture of sands from Israel, Mr. Rauschenberg takes materials and images, techniques and information from cultures around the globe and uses them in his art.

"In the early years, I found everything I needed on the streets of New York," Mr. Rauschenberg said in November at the Tokyo opening of his exhibition, called R.O.C.I./Japan, for which an Osaka showing is planned this summer. "People threw all sorts of things away, right around the corner. Now, my studio's gotten a lot bigger." His "studio" is the 22 countries of R.O.C.I., the Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange, now at midpoint on a global tour de force. R.O.C.I. (pronounced "Rocky") is an ambitious nonprofit project conceived by Mr. Rauschenberg in the early 1980's to forge communication with other nations through the language of art.

"He is trying to introduce the world to itself," said Dr. Donald Saff, artistic director of R.O.C.I. With an advance staff, Mr. Rauschenberg goes into a country to work with local artists and artisans. After producing the art, he returns to a major museum in that country to exhibit the work done there and in other R.O.C.I. nations, in what amounts to a mammoth artistic chain letter displayed at a huge public exhibition. In Japan, he worked in the town of Shigaraki with a group of chemists at the factory of Otsuka Chemical — a firm that perfected a method for producing permanent screen-printed images on clay — to create daring new ceramic paintings.

R.O.C.I.'s logo is the Oriental symbol of the turtle that carries the world on its back. ("Rocky" is also the name of Mr. Rauschenberg's 27-year-old pet turtle.) Since R.O.C.I.'s birth in Mexico City in 1985 with 230 pieces, it has attracted millions of viewers in Mexico, China, Tibet, Chile, and Japan. (In China, 70,000 showed up during the first week alone.) After its Osaka show this summer, R.O.C.I. will travel next to Sri Lanka, other Far Eastern countries, and then around the world.

Each R.O.C.I. exhibition is accompanied by

Mary Lynn Kotz is the author of "Rauschenberg Himself," to be published by Harry N. Abrams.

He conceived the global tour to forge communication with other nations.

a catalogue written by leading poets, writers and journalists of that country, such as the writers Octavio Paz in Mexico and José Donoso in Chile. In each country, Mr. Rauschenberg leaves as a gift to the people of that nation a work of his art made there. He also sends a piece to the National Gallery of Art in Washington for a major exhibition planned for 1990.

Integral to each R.O.C.I. exhibition are hundreds of his black-and-white photographs, parts of which also become silk-screened images in his paintings. They are accompanied by continuously running color videotapes on 10 to 15 video monitors ("video verité" as Dr. Saff describes it) — scenes and sounds of the countries as seen through Mr. Rauschenberg's eyes.

Mr. Rauschenberg has committed a vast portion of his own resources to the venture. "My pockets are empty," he told the Tokyo audience, not entirely in jest. "But to be government-sponsored would defeat the idea of the project. It has to be from people to people. We want to communicate our human kinship. I trust art to do that. Certainly politics isn't doing a very good job."

In the Tokyo exhibition, one of the most vivid images was a giant Japanese fish kite of hot pink cloth floating in a sea of poured blue and white acrylic paint. Bright collages are made of rich silks from Japan. From other cultures there are vibrant sweeps of turquoise, purple, orange and yellow swirling over and around silk-screened photographs of faces and things, humble or grand, from Mexico to Sri Lanka.

In Mr. Rauschenberg's body of work there is a distinct line of demarcation between art produced before and after he began his serious journeys about the globe. In the images, first-hand observation now broadens the the irony and the social commentary that have always permeated Mr. Rauschenberg's work.

For the last 10 years, Mr. Rauschenberg has been working in countries where an American artist is a rare creature. Using native materials or learning ancient techniques from local artisans, he has produced, for example, immense pieces imprinted with flamboyant colors and a multiplicity of religious symbols from Mexico; paper sculptures from China that are translucent, luminous



Robert Rauschenberg working recently on a piece in Naples.

and at the same time rigid; gleaming copper-plate wall pieces emblazoned with images of a hovel, a crucifix or a bird from Chile, and delicate drawings made in a hotel room in Sri Lanka. The body of work changes and grows as it moves to major shows in different countries.

"To communicate is the goal," says Mr. Rauschenberg. "And yet the energy that emerges from this most basic collaboration is rewarding in itself." Collaboration is Mr. Rauschenberg's modus operandi. From his joint efforts in the late 1940's with his former wife, Susan Weil, to multimedia performance art with Merce Cunningham and John Cage in the 1960's, to suites of prints and sculptures in studios at Universal Limited Art Editions on Long Island, Gemeni G.E.L. in Los Angeles and GraficStudio in Tampa, Fla., he has always worked closely with others. In his own working compound in Captiva, Fla., he is surrounded by young artist-assistants.

Even his art "collaborates." He mixes media, objects and images, causing them to relate to each other in a new way. In a new piece called "Awn," for example, an awning he bought from a Mexican street merchant is the field for a silk-screened image of an ancient stone dog. From economic necessity as much as esthetic curiosity ("I couldn't afford canvas"), Mr. Rauschenberg began — and continues — to work with such commonplace objects as weathered boards, a chair, a shirt, a piece of brick wall.

Collaboration is what Mr. Rauschenberg expects of his viewers as well. Many of his pieces have moving parts; others are activated by the viewer simply walking by, causing a silky scrim or a row of light-as-air Mexican wheat bags to waft gently. Some pieces have mirrors, so the viewer is actually a part of the work. As Mr. Rauschenberg told his Japanese audience: "I want to make you work hard. I don't want to give you any 'an-

swers."

The international participation — the deep connections Mr. Rauschenberg has made with Chileans and Tibetans, Moroccans and Venezuelans, is taking his life and art in an expanded, profound direction. Related images, materials and concepts from his R.O.C.I. experiences also appear in "Quarter-Mile or Two Furlong Piece," his 750-foot-long painting in the new special exhibitions gallery of the 20th-century wing at New York's Metropolitan Museum. His global images, translated into other new series, have made their way to Europe this spring with major openings last month in Dusseldorf, West Germany, and Naples, and another show currently in Stockholm. His photographs are a basis for much of his imagery, and for his work in this hybrid field Mr. Rauschenberg received last week the International Center of Photography Award in Art for a visual artist who has made an important use of photography in mixed media.

Mr. Rauschenberg's aim, he says, is to show viewers around the world new ways of seeing and appreciating the cultures often overlooked by Western art.

In India, at the Gandhi Ashram in Ahmedabad, the artist's collaborators were a throng of papermakers of the untouchable caste, descendants of the people with whom Mahatma Gandhi founded the Ashram. Bamboo and fabric were integrated into the paper itself with thin strings, and then laminated.

"For the first time, I wasn't embarrassed by the look of beauty — of elegance," said the artist. "Because when you see someone who has only one rag as their property, but it happens to be beautiful, pink and silk — you see that beauty doesn't have to be separated."

Mr. Rauschenberg became intrigued by the clay of Indian houses. "It's made out of manure — either camel or cow — and mud and straw, and it's a beautiful look — very primitive," he said. "But I had to change the recipe." Soon, another set of Indian collaborators began working with Mr. Rauschenberg to make editions of clay sculptures from his mud inventions.

In Anhui, China, at what is said to be the world's oldest paper mill, Mr. Rauschenberg learned to make delicate, see-through, sculpted paper. He inserted cutouts from everyday graphics — a leg and shoe here, a sliced apple there, an upside-down bicycle — into their ancient, honored paper. Below the bottom of the paper — which was white, edged with gold and embossed with Chinese calligraphy — he hung a brightly colored circle of embroidered silk.

In Israel, he found art weighted with angst. "I told them they need art that can lift their spirits," Mr. Rauschenberg said. He tried to show his Israeli artist friends "new ways of looking" by incorporating common discards into his work there. In the process he became friends with Mayor Teddy Kollek of Jerusalem "who was so proud of his clean streets he was astonished I'd found anything at all."

In Venezuela, the artist met with members

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of 10 separate Indian tribes, photographing scenes that appear in many of his new works. Among the Panare Indians there, he crushed berries from the onoto plant into a pigment with which he colored many of the paintings. The result of his work with the Otsuka chemists in Japan — silk-screening images and transferring them to clay — was a collection of bright, enormous free-standing and wall-hung ceramic paintings. Many had mystical and playful titles such as "Pneumonia Lisa" or "Able was I ere I saw Elba," in which a Jacques-Louis David "Napoleon" is aswirl in Rauschenberg pictures.

The impact of Chile's trauma, along with the colors and materials of the Far East, has shaped what is perhaps Mr. Rauschenberg's most dramatic departure from his past art. One especially compelling Chilean piece is a standing, three-dimensional construction that was in the R.O.C.I. exhibition in Japan — a man-sized aluminum sculpture shaped like a cross with an embroidered white sash priest's vestment laminated onto both sides. Part of the vestment is patched with peasant cotton. Its title is "Altar Peace Chile."

Mr. Rauschenberg says that "Altar Peace Chile" and the hundreds of other works made for R.O.C.I. are intended as a contribution to peace. This passion to make a personal impact on the state of the world has engaged the artist in mid-life. His entire new body of work for R.O.C.I. was designed to affect "the way people see each other. I try to use my art to communicate that you, yourself, must take responsibility for life on earth." □

selections are mostly blown-glass vessels, enhanced by engraving and painting, that seem as light as the air used to inflate them and more liquid in their shaping than earlier glass works.

The surprises begin at the entrance to the exhibition, where one of the show's smallest works — a portrait bust of Augustus, the first Roman Emperor — establishes a majestic mood. The deftly modeled work, a shade less than two inches tall, is an example of lost-wax casting from the first century A.D. that time's patina has transformed from a lapis-lazuli blue into a work with a bronze-green finish.

Glass blowing, the technique that revolutionized the craft when it was introduced in or near Syria before the end of the first century B.C., is a relatively simple process. Artisans, using iron pipes and lung power, inflated gobs of molten glass, and discovered that this process quickened produc-

press. It was lent from a collector who has not been identified. Cage-cups, which are cut or blown vessels, have always puzzled scholars, who said they seemed impossible to use as drinking vessels — their rims are too thick — and were not likely to have functioned as bowls — several have open-cut bases, which means they wobble when set down. The anonymous collector's cage-cup is the only one that retains its original bronze rim and rods, metalwork that proves it was suspended from a ceiling and functioned as an oil lamp.

Among other curiosities are three helmet-shaped dropper flasks, made in the third century A.D., probably to be used as perfume dispensers. All look like eggs decorated with Picasso-like faces, perched on neck-shaped bases. Mold-blown flasks in the shape of human heads range from banal to grotesque, and one — an iridescent jug depicting a Roman youth — looks like an early 20th-century Christmas tree ornament. A fourth-century green beaker, thickly en-

crusted with images of sea creatures, anticipates Emile Gallé's Art Nouveau blown-glass feats. Throughout the exhibition are jewel-toned bottles, pitchers, plates and bowls, astonishing in their simplicity. A sapphire blue cinerary urn has a remarkable, thick, ribbon-like handle, and an emerald-green bowl is awash with pin-prick bubbles.

Under Augustus, who ruled from 27 B.C. to A.D. 14, Rome was at peace, the good life flourished, and glass was even produced as souvenirs to be hawked at the circus and gladiator contests. Several mold-blown examples in the show illustrate chariot races and helmeted warriors.

After closing at Corning Oct. 18, the exhibition will travel to the participating museums in London and Cologne and later will be seen at the Capitoline Museums in Rome, which lent several major works. The show is supported, in part, by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and

the New York State Council on the Arts. A sumptuous 340-page catalogue, with entries by curators from all the museums involved, was produced in collaboration with Olivetti. It costs \$32.25, including postage.

Glass is one of the least expensive areas for collectors of antiquities, according to Richard M. Kersey, an antiquities specialist at Sotheby's. The prices for ancient Roman glass today, as when they were first made, cover a wide range, he said. An attractive perfume bottle might sell for as low as \$200, and the most expensive might be a cage-cup, one of which, formerly owned by Andrew Constable-Maxwell, is among those on view at Corning. This bowl-shaped work was sold in 1979 at Sotheby's in London for \$1,080,000. At an upcoming sale at Sotheby's on May 29, 15 works of Roman glass, made for everyday use, are estimated to bring from about \$300 each to as much as \$1,800 each. □

Rauschenberg

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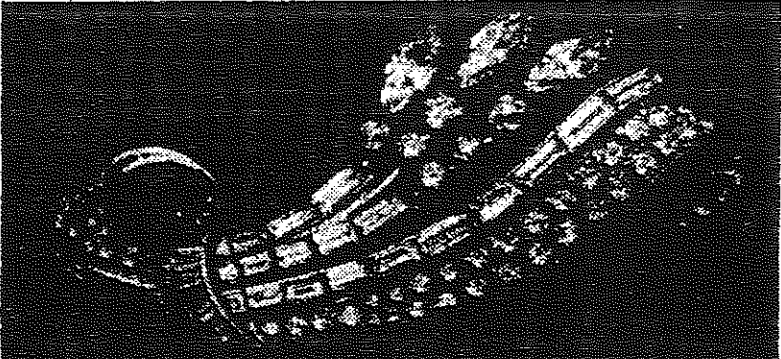
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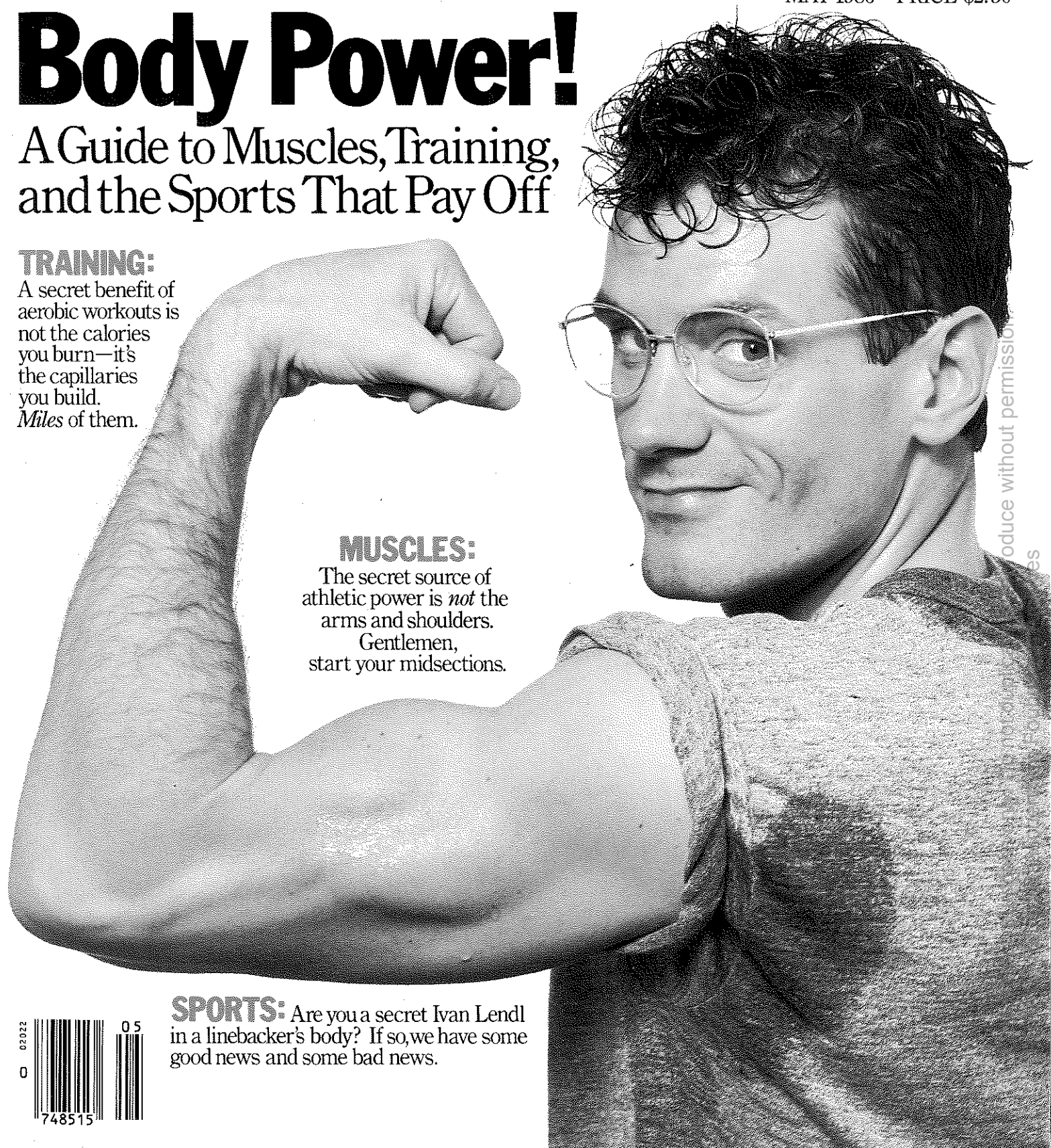
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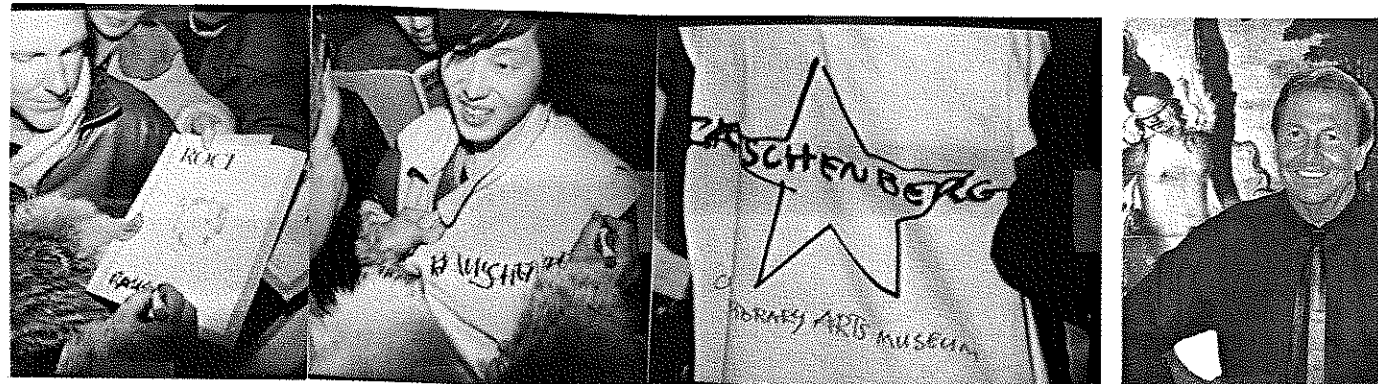
ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG

by Paul Bob

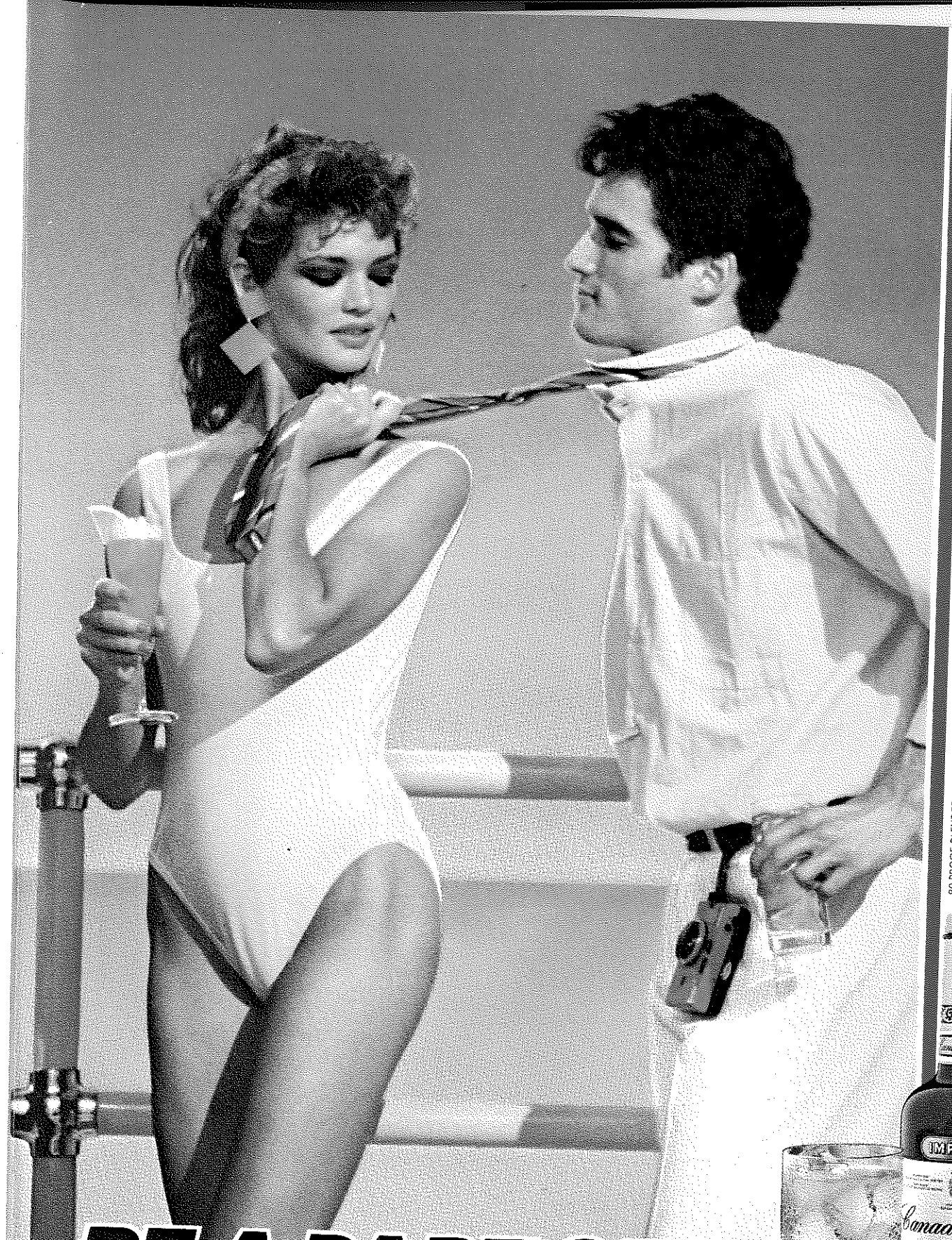


Robert Rauschenberg is reconstructing his way around the world. Since 1955, when he helped put contemporary art on the map, Rauschenberg has been working toward a universal artistic language; now, thirty years later, his art works are reaching a global audience. One of his current major projects is his own Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange, which made possible the first Western contemporary-art exhibition in Beijing's National Art Gallery and the Exhibition Hall in Lhasa, Tibet. In cities where the sight of foreign art is rare, his paintings and

constructions have attracted as many as four thousand people a day. Another project is a survey of his work from 1971 to the present, which is traveling throughout Texas, orchestrated by the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston. The reality of a Tibetan shepherd viewing an artist's work at the same time as students in China, or perhaps an oil baron in Texas, is exceptional, as shown in the photomontage above, made especially for Esquire. Rauschenberg remains one who asserts that art can break down cultural barriers and unite the people of the world.



Photomontage created for Esquire by Robert Rauschenberg



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