

Stories Project. ACC 54.
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York.

Alex Rudinski was hired by Robert Rauschenberg in 1989 to work on the installation of the exhibition, *Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange: ROCI USSR* at the Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow (Feb. 2–March 5, 1989). He continued to work for Rauschenberg in New York until 1994. Rudinski now works as a Preparator at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Transcription of phone interview with Alex Rudinski conducted by David White, Senior Curator, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, on June 11, 2020. Reviewed and edited by the speakers November 23, 2020.

Alex Rudinski [AR]: All right. I'm Alex Rudinski. I was born in the Soviet Union, and came to the States when I was eighteen, and lived in a couple countries, Canada and Israel, and arrived in—

David White [DW]: Excuse me. A couple of countries before the United States, or—

AR: Yeah. We left when I was nine, went to Israel for four years, then Germany for a year, and then Canada for like three years. So, we did a little tour of the world. And then, came to New York for about six months, and then moved to Chicago, and that's where I finished high school and went to Northern Illinois University. Studied fine art there, and then after I graduated, I just couldn't wait to get back to New York, and I grabbed two suitcases and came here.

DW: The classic story.

AR: It was just the classic . . . Just I want to get . . . This is it. And then I was taking classes at Hunter College [City University of New York], and then a friend of mine texted me, or well at that time, it was called me, and said, "You should check out this ad in the back of the *Village Voice*, because it sounds like you." And then, I looked at it, and it said "Back to the USSR." That's what it said, "an artists is looking—"

DW: Great.

AR: It was in the back of the *Village Voice*, between looking for friends for the weekend and drugs, and you know, the *Village Voice* in the eighties.

DW: That standard classified ad section.

AR: Yeah. And I think it was Terry's [Van Brunt] idea to do that.

DW: Ah.

AR: Or, I don't know, maybe [Robert] Bob's [Rauschenberg]. I don't know. And it just said, like, "Looking for an artist who . . . To help in art handling, speaks Russian, to interpret an art show in Moscow." That's it. And send—mail a resume, a photograph, and a letter to a P.O. box

in Captiva [Florida]. And I had no idea what it was. I thought it was some corporate thing to be honest. And then my roommate, who was more art savvy than I was, and he's like, "Captiva, that's where Rauschenberg lives. I bet that's for him." And I had no idea. So, I just wrote a letter, sent some stuff to Captiva, and to the P.O. box, and then maybe two months later, I got a telegram that said, "We got your information. Thank you very much. We're looking at other resumes. We'll let you know." And that was it.

DW: Two months later. Wow. That's a long—

AR: I know. Because then it was like September [1988]. Then maybe November, I got this thing. And then, another two weeks passed, and then I got a call from Thomas to come in to 381 [Lafayette Street, Rauschenberg's New York City home and studio]. Yeah. Thomas Buehler, for the interview at 381. And so I went there, and that was maybe already November, and then—

DW: So, was that the first time that you realized it was Rauschenberg? Or—

AR: Even then, he didn't say the name. It was just the address, "Here's the address. We're going to have a meet . . ." I still had no idea what it was, you know? And then Thomas greeted me and then, of course he was like, "Well, this is Rauschenberg's house." And so, I was like, "Okay, this is where we are." And then he gave me a tour of the building. Then we sat down, we chit chatted, talked, and he said, "All right, I think this might work. Do you want to go to Moscow for three months?" And I was like, "Sure." And then he said, "All right, so I think you're going to do it, but let me just think about it, and I'll call you this week." And I was like, "All right, sounds like a New York adventure." And, of course, he called me the next week and said, "Okay, you're in. So just sit tight, and we'll call you."

DW: So basically, he was the one that was deciding that you were the person for the job?

AR: Yeah. I mean, I don't know if . . . and it kind of made sense because he was going to go, and he was in charge of the show, so he probably wanted to work with someone who he could work with.

DW: Of course.

AR: And I don't think I met you that time. Maybe I met Sachika [Hisachika Takahashi], but I don't recall him. I just don't remember. I think it was just Thomas and I.

DW: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

AR: And then I got a call like maybe two weeks from them. It was like, "All right, so why don't you come in? We need your passport so you could have a visa for Moscow," and that's it. He was like, "These are the dates. We're leaving on these dates, and we're going to Moscow." [The exhibition was held at Central House of Artists, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, *Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange: ROCI USSR*, Feb. 2–March 5, 1989.] And Thomas was also like, "By the way, I'm going to be already there," because he went with the art. "So you're just going to fly in. So why don't you come in in three weeks, and you're going to pick up your ticket, and

you're going to pick up some cash," and that's it. That's when I was like, "Wow." It was so loose, you know?

DW: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

AR: And then he gave me the phone number of this travel agent on Wall Street, and she was, I guess, dealing with all the travel. And I remember that was the first time I dealt with a travel agent. She was like, "All right, do you want an aisle seat or a window seat?" And I'm like, "I don't know." She's like, "I would recommend an aisle seat. It's a long flight." I'm like, "Okay." And from then on, I always get aisle seats.

But anyway, I came, and then they said, "You know what? Why don't you just come in a couple of days and just come in and work so you get a little comfortable with the scene and the people here?" So, I came—

DW: Wait a minute. You mean, come into—

AR: 381. But I don't remember having contact. It was what's his name? Charlie [Yoder]. But okay, there was a shipment coming from the airport. So, he said like, "I'm going there as a courier so why don't you come with me and see what we do?" It was an evening, one of those late European flights.

DW: Yeah.

AR: I met him at 381, we took a car to JFK [John F. Kennedy airport], and we received the paintings. So, he told me some stories and all. And then the other thing that we did, when I came in . . . Oh yeah. Because after Moscow, the show was going to Asia. I believe it went to Bali, and he was going to go there by ship. [After the *ROCI USSR* exhibition there was the *Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange: ROCI BERLIN*, at the Neue Berliner Galerie, Altes Museum, Berlin from March 10–April 1, 1990.] So, they wanted to put . . . Right? Is that right or wrong?

DW: Well, it went to Kuala Lumpur. [Balai Seni Lukis Negara (National Art Gallery), Kuala Lumpur, *Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange: ROCI MALAYSIA*, May 21–June 21, 1990.]

AR: Kuala Lumpur, right. Okay. So, it went by boat. It was going to be shipped by boat. And they wanted to put the crystals that absorb moisture in every crate, the little bags.

DW: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

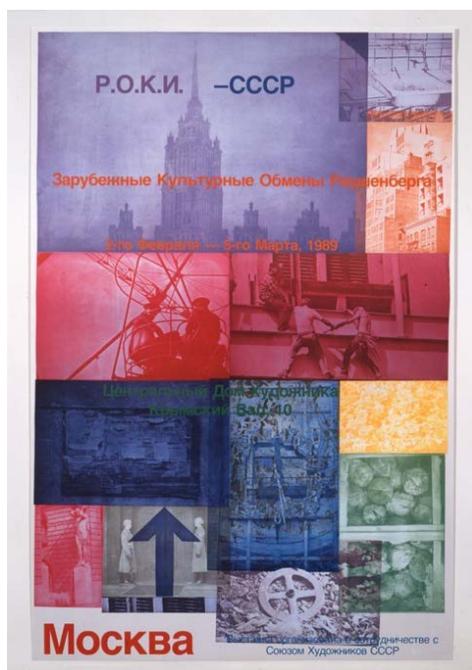
AR: I don't remember who sent me. I don't know if it was Charlie or maybe Thomas, or . . . They sent me to some place on Twenty-third Street. I think I did the research to find women's stockings so we can put the crystals in there when we were packing the work after the show closed in Moscow, like in every crate.

DW: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

AR: You know those things you get when you get a box of shoes or something from China, or somewhere? They have these little bags in it, like little mini things to absorb the moisture. So, I remember I did that, and then I was just told, “Okay, here’s your ticket. Here’s your passport. Here’s whatever, \$500, your spending money. We’ll see you in Moscow.” That was it. So, I met Thomas twice. I met Charlie Yoder twice, and that’s it. I’m going. I had no idea what was . . . I had no exhibition list. I had nothing. I didn’t know anyone.

DW: So, Thomas must have given you a little explanation of the ROCI [Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange] tour in general.

AR: Yeah, right. He gave me on the first go around . . . And I was picking it up. Like ROCI was doing the world tour. We did all these other shows. It’s a massive show. Here’s the poster, and everything. So, I kind of knew, but I didn’t know it was that scale. It was like a rock show, let’s face it. I didn’t know he brought everything with us, all the material, you know?



Robert Rauschenberg
Poster for ROCI USSR, 1989
Offset lithograph
38 3/8 x 25 1/2 inches (97.5 x 64.8 cm)
From an un-numbered edition produced by Universal
Limited Art Editions, West Islip, New York
RRF 89.E001

DW: Yeah.

AR: Paint, two by fours, nails. I mean, at that point, he knew from Cuba what he was getting into. [The exhibition was installed in Havana, Cuba before it traveled to Moscow: Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Castillo de la Real Fuerza, and Casa de las Américas, Galería Haydée Santamaría, Havana, *Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange: ROCI CUBA*, Feb. 10–April 3, 1988.] So, we were completely . . . There were crates of just material. Then I just arrived in Moscow, and boom. And that time, the Russians really took care . . . The Soviets really took care of us, because they gave us great hotel rooms, and they gave me . . . When I got there, I had a driver, and I had cash. They gave us expense money. Which was . . . I don’t remember. It was a lot of money for Russians anyway.

DW: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

AR: So, I had cash, I had a driver, I had a suite in the Hotel Rossiya I don't know if you remember where you stayed.

DW: Yeah. I guess that was the same place.

AR: Yeah. We all stayed in the same . . . I had two rooms in there, and it was great.

DW: And so, when did you first meet Bob?

AR: Well, Bob, we were there for about three . . . Well, maybe four weeks installing. I don't know if it was three or four weeks installing, and Bob came with everybody from Florida, three days, four days, before the opening. Maybe seven days before the opening, for publicity, walk through.



Robert Rauschenberg's assistants Alex Rudinski, Terry Van Brunt, Thomas Buehler, and others at *Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange: ROCI USSR* exhibition at the Central House of Artists, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, ca. February 1989. Works shown include *Consul (Spread)* (1980), *Snowberry Fudge (Spread)* (1980), and *Phoenix (Scale)* (1978). Photo: Unattributed. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York.

DW: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

AR: So, the first time I met him was on the floor of the museum as we were working, and I remember that I'd never met him before. And we were introduced, and he leaned towards me, and he said, "Are you going to take care of me? Are you going to protect me?" And he was very serious and genuine, you know? And I was totally like, "Whoa. I guess I really have a job." Because I was really impressed with that, because he wasn't like, "Hey, here we're going to party. We're going to . . ." He was really vulnerable, and it showed his vulnerability, you know?

DW: Right.

AR: From then on, I knew we could definitely get along. He wasn't full of himself. He wasn't like Mr. Art Star.

DW: And yet, of course, he had his ideas of when he wanted to work. So, if the museum people were being stubborn about closing before he wanted to stop working, I'm sure that's why he wanted you who knew the language to try to—

AR: Definitely, we had a lot of meetings with the museum director. Because basically also, we wanted to do, and Bob wanted to do, whatever we wanted to do.

DW: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

AR: If we wanted certain hours, and to paint the walls, we painted the walls with our paint, and put the walls up where we wanted. And I know working in museum now, the museum is like, "No, no. We are the ones who are going to tell you what is going to happen here," you know?

DW: Right.

AR: So, it was completely inverted. I don't remember any curators for the museum. The director would just show up, and then we'd just . . . So, we had the complete carte blanche, and we would stay, work on weekends late, but I remember by the time he came, he already laid out the shell pretty much, and a lot the work was already up. So Bob, I think he made some minor changes, but pretty much it was what it was, except the cardboard pieces, people kept stepping on them.

DW: Oh dear.

AR: Because they really couldn't figure this out. So, he was there for about two weeks I think, and he was there a week before the opening, and maybe a week after. And so that's how I met him.

DW: Wow. What a nice story.

AR: Yeah.

DW: Did you then go on to any other ROCI installations that—

AR: No. Because, I think Thomas had his team. You know Tom.

DW: Yes.

AR: And basically Tom, and Charlie, I don't know if Charlie was in Moscow or not. I don't remember. I think he was just done with the whole thing by then. So he didn't really need me, you know?

DW: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

AR: Part of my job became, in Moscow, more like a social secretary too, you know? Because making dinner plans for everyone, because you couldn't just go to a place to eat. There was

nowhere to go. You had to make reservations, and not only do you have to make . . . You have to call in person, give him like \$100 ahead of time to make sure we had somewhere to go.



Viola Stephan, Alex Rudinski, Ilona Tullmin and Thomas Buehler, David White, Terry Van Brunt, and Darryl Pottorf at a dinner during the *Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange: ROCI USSR* exhibition, ca. February 1989. Photo: Unattributed. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York.

DW: Well, I remember you being in charge of all the caviar.

AR: Caviar, right. And then also, the money, because remember, if you go to the bank, they would give you like two dollars, or two rubles for a dollar, but if you go to anybody on the street, they'll give you twenty-five rubles for a dollar, which was like a huge markup.

DW: Yeah.

AR: And there were all these people trying to constantly change the money, but you always looked for the best deal. You wanted to work with people that you trusted. But yeah, and so caviar . . . People would be giving you caviar cans for five dollars, and that was like whoa—a lot of money—just crazy, you know? That was insane.

DW: Yeah.

AR: So that became a big part. Like an afternoon, I would start making restaurant plans for Bob and everyone. With different places, and then I spoke with Terry, and I don't know who else. But they were saying, "When this is all done, we could maybe use you in New York. We'll see what happens, and just come and see us." I mean, everybody left after the show opened.

DW: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

AR: To go back to whatever . . . Thomas went to Goa, and Tup [Schmidt] went back, and that was the plan for all of us to go and return in three months, and take the show down. The problem is that they've never seen a show like Bob's that has all these sculptures and paintings that were not traditional, and there were a lot of mechanized, and people kept touching them. So, I was

asked I think by Bob . . . He asked me, “Do you mind staying for the show and just coming every day, and if something goes off haywire, you can fix it? And just keep an eye. Keep the guards there and everybody on top that you’re here.” So, I said, “Sure, I’ll stay.”

So I remember he gave me like \$2,000 bucks in cash. He’s like, “Here, this is for you, for spending money,” and so that’s what I did. I would come in every day, and just do a walkthrough and . . . I mean, it wasn’t much. Really it was fine, but hopefully that made a difference.

DW: I’m sure it did. So, you were there for the duration of the—

AR: Yes.

DW: Of the exhibition. Great.

AR: Yeah. And that actually gave me personally, an opportunity which was great for me, to go to Odessa [Ukraine]—the city which I was born—for like a weekend. And see my family there. I took the train there, but then I was not taking the train again. So, I flew back. It was one of those trains that would stop for hours, with no announcements, and it was just not fun. And then also I went to Drogobich [Ukraine] which was where my dad’s family is from. So, I went there for a week, and so it was great. I could travel a little bit and see the family, and then we took the show down.

Now, the ironic part of it all, David, was just . . . The reason I brought up the stockings—kind of make it a full circle—was that when Tommy came back, all those stockings, female stockings were stolen or gone. So, I don’t know if you remember the babooshkas, the ladies who were the cleaning crew?

DW: Oh yeah. Sure.

AR: So, they sewed. They made us little canvas bags for all of the things in the show. They spent a couple days doing that. I don’t know if they felt bad, or they felt they could use those stockings, it’s great.

So anyways, so then I came back to New York, and hung out a bit, and Terry was like . . . And Sachika was like, “Yeah, we have some projects for you. We can do some stuff, and paint the galleries.” So I did. Michael [Moneagle] also was not around. I think he was in Chile at the time. And I didn’t meet him for a while, so there was a lot of stuff to do. I did a little gallery painting, and some art installs, and—

DW: So, you did that as soon as you came back from Moscow.

AR: Yeah, it was a couple of months into it, I started, because there were some things to tie up. And then one of my first great projects—I don’t know if you remember—I painted the fire escape. That took me a while, because Sachika was very demanding as you can imagine.

DW: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

AR: He was, “Oh you have to sand everything. Then you have to put like three coats of paint.” Anyways, I got along with Sachika. And then, so Terry’s like, “If you want to make it a semi part time, full time job, three four days a week,” so I was like, “Sure. I’m not doing anything else.” And I remember Terry offered me like nine or ten dollars an hour, and I was like, “No, I need twelve.” Because the galleries were paying twelve dollars at the time, so I was like all right, I need something. Anyways, that’s how I started working. I was there like four days a week for a bunch of—

DW: And how long did you work at—

AR: You know, I don’t remember. Maybe ‘94, you know? [Rudinski worked for the studio through 1994.] Something like that. And then, I just wanted to do other things.

DW: Sure.

AR: I wanted to do a little travel, and I then I started some museum work. I worked at the Bronx Museum, and I’d just do other things.

DW: Sure.

AR: And so then, [that] kind of led to my current job at the Modern [Museum of Modern Art, New York], which I’ve been [at] since like ‘96, but ‘99 full time.

DW: And do you have any other recollections of specific things that Bob said? I loved your one comment of him saying, “Are you going to take care of me?”

AR: Yeah. My memory of Bob, which was great I think, because he would come in once a month, once every two months, and I remember he would always come in with very positive, very happy . . . I think he was happy to be in New York, happy to meet some new people, and we would stay late at night.

DW: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

AR: Bob, telling his stories. And Sachika well, we’ll go do dinner at 11 p.m., you know?

DW: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

AR: And I remember there was the time he came up for Jasper John’s opening at Castelli, and then, he went to the opening, and he came back and he was really, really upset and hurt, and it was, “What happened?” And he was like, “Well, I came . . . I went to Jasper’s, and he was talking to someone. I said hi, and he said hi, and he just kept talking to the person.” And he was just like, “I couldn’t believe . . . It’s me. I’m Bob, and he just treated me like just another person.” He was really hurt by that.

DW: That was a complex relationship.

AR: Yeah. I think he wanted to reconnect with Jasper it seemed like at that time, and nothing was happening.

Look, all these people just say hi to them. It was just a great, great experience to be in that environment. I remember one time, it was Christmas, Bob was always making the Christmas drawings. Not always, but you know?

DW: Yeah.

AR: If you're lucky. And one year . . . I don't know if it was '92 I think. He did maybe 100 of them, little eight by tens. And I was very lucky, because he . . . It was either you or someone asked me to go and deliver them to his friends, or people that he wanted to give it to. So, I went to John Cage's house. I remember, I went to John . . . I was like, "All right, I'm going to give one to John Cage on the West Side," and then he had a like number. His loft was all plants. There must have been hundreds of plants there. I gave him one.

AR: And then I went to David Byrne's house. He lived in a townhouse in the West Village at that time.

DW: Right.

AR: And then I went to Roy Lichtenstein's place in the West Village, Washington Street, to take his drawing there. So, I just showed up, and he came down the staircase, I remember. And I gave it to him in person. He was like, "Thank you very much." So that was just a fun thing to do. It was great.

DW: This is wonderful, particularly the whole ROCI Moscow thing, what that was like, and how it came about. So, thank you very, very much. It was a treat for me to hear all this and bring some memories back for me, and hear things I didn't know about as well. So—

AR: What are your recollections from Moscow like?

DW: I can't even remember when I went or whom I went with, but certainly I remember being there, and then of course the Trisha Brown Company being there, and—

AR: That's right, I completely forgot about that.

DW: And then, part of the set included the automobile batteries for the headlights, and I think they all got stolen as well.

AR: Right.

DW: Certainly, an interesting event.

AR: Now also, as an aside, [Donald] Don Saff who organized Bob's show in Moscow—

DW: Right.

AR: He worked with [James] Jim Rosenquist, and then Jim Rosenquist wanted to have a show in Moscow, so Don . . . I don't know if you remember, but Don organized Jim Rosenquist's show the same place, same time two years later, and Bob called Jim, and he said, "You've got to take Alex with you if you want this show to happen." [Central House of Artists, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, *Rosenquist: Moscow 1961–1991*, Feb. 5–March 5, 1991.]

DW: Oh, how nice.

AR: So, I went to see Jim, and we talked, and he said, "Do you want to come with me?" So Bob, you or whatever, they said, "Yeah, you can take Alex for a couple of months." So, I went with them, and it was basically the same thing again. He brought all the food. It was even more debauchery maybe, and I went with them and with his crew, and he had a show there. It was very similar to—

DW: Oh, that's interesting. I knew he'd had a show there, but I didn't realize you had gone, or I'd forgotten. Oh, that's great.

AR: So that kind of kept it going.

DW: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Well, they were very good friends of one another obviously.

AR: Oh, for sure. I mean, it was weird. We installed [Rosenquist's] *F-III* at MoMA a few years ago. And he [Rosenquist] came to see it, and I saw him, and he was in a wheelchair. He was very not doing well. I was shocked, you know? Because he seemed always so full of energy, and boisterous. Mimi [Thompson] was pushing him, and I was like, "Wow." And then he passed away a few months later, so it's . . . I still can't believe that he's gone.

DW: Well, I'm sorry to end on this note.

AR: No, no, no. I brought it up. But just an aside too David, it was really great to work with you. I learned a lot from you about art installation, which I use at work every . . . Not every day, but I do think, "What would David do," or "How would David handle this?"

DW: Good.

AR: And a lot of times, we're working on a show, and the curators can't make up their mind. I was like, "Oh, I wish just David were here." Everything would be resolved in an hour, you know?

DW: What a compliment. Thank you.

AR: It's true.

DW: In any case, many thanks, and I'll keep in touch.

AR: Thank you, David. Please do.

DW: Bye Alex.

AR: Bye.

Addition from Alex Rudinski via email, November 19, 2020:

One thing to add is that [working for Bob] was a very positive experience. I felt like I wouldn't want to work for any other artist. It was like being in the center of the universe. Bob was very generous in spirit and in kindness. I also liked going to Captiva and having more intimate time with Bob and his associates who lived in Florida.

I would also like to add that it was a pleasure to work with David White. I learned a lot from him about art installation which I use every working day at MoMA.