

Robert Rauschenberg Foundation
Hunter College MA in Art History

“Lottery Cloth”: On Rauschenberg’s *Casino / ROCI MEXICO* (1985)

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fig. 1

Robert Rauschenberg, *Casino / ROCI MEXICO*, 1985. Silkscreen ink, acrylic, and fabric on canvas, 25 feet 2 ¾ inches × 10 feet 9 inches (769 × 327.7 cm). Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

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For almost two weeks in August 1984, Robert Rauschenberg traveled throughout Mexico in preparation for his first, self-initiated global project Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange (ROCI), along with the project’s artistic director Donald Saff.¹ While in Mexico, Saff kept a brief travel record of their activities, including a list of sites visited in Mexico City and Oaxaca, flight details, and useful museum contacts. He also jotted down items that Rauschenberg collected in Mexico: cardboard boxes, paper bags, feed sacks, tin cans, and what was referred to as “lottery cloth,” indicating the various fabrics he planned to incorporate into his Mexico-focused artworks as part of the ROCI initiative.² This “lottery” of fabric was especially important to a monumental-scale textile work titled, not coincidentally, *Casino / ROCI MEXICO* (1985), which inaugurated the first ROCI show at the Museo Rufino Tamayo Arte Contemporáneo Internacional in Mexico City (figs. 1 and 2). Establishing the process for the controversial exhibition series that Rauschenberg replicated in eleven countries from 1984 to 1991, his trip to Mexico served as ROCI’s test run to “promote world peace and understanding through art,” with the bannerlike *Casino* as its centerpiece.³

Conceived in the late 1970s, ROCI represents Rauschenberg’s effort to foster exchange across countries he deemed “sensitive areas,” due to their complex or opposing relationships with Western capitalist nations at the end of the Cold War. Along with visits to China (1985), Cuba (1988), the USSR (1989), as well as Chile (1985) under Augusto Pinochet’s military dictatorship, Rauschenberg’s stays consisted of taking photographs and scavenging local materials in order to produce new artworks for solo exhibitions that he staged amid diplomatic challenges in each place. Given the United States’s fraught history of Cold War propaganda campaigns, many people expressed frustration with Rauschenberg over ROCI, as they perceived him as a powerful American artist feeling entitled to travel to these countries under the pretense of art and democracy. From the start, ROCI received criticism. Art critic Roberta Smith called the project “at once altruistic and self-aggrandizing”; others called it neo-imperialist; and Leo Castelli, Rauschenberg’s art dealer, famously attempted to delay artist payments that could contribute to ROCI’s funding.⁴

The ROCI project managed, with difficulty, to continue on with Rauschenberg’s own funds, and through a long trajectory it created an unusual and extensive archive. While *ROCI MEXICO* (1985), in its function as a springboard for ROCI, stands outside the contentious history of the total project, it serves to highlight globalizing cultural forces in Mexico during the mid-1980s,

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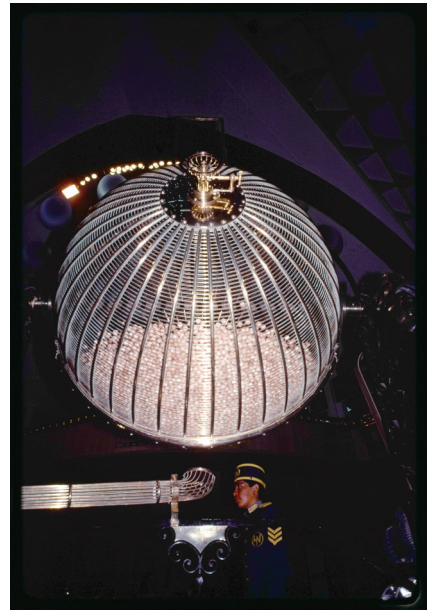


fig. 2
Installation view,
Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange: ROCI MEXICO, Museo Rufino Tamayo Arte Contemporáneo Internacional, Mexico City, 1985. Works pictured: *The Lurid Attack of the Monsters from the Postal News Aug. 1875 (Kabal American Zephyr)* (1981) and *Casino / ROCI MEXICO* (1985). Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York

fig. 3
Installation view,
Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange: ROCI MEXICO, Museo Rufino Tamayo Arte Contemporáneo Internacional, Mexico City, 1985. Work pictured: *Casino / ROCI MEXICO* (1985). Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York

as well as the logistical hurdles that ROCI would face going forward. Rauschenberg's reasoning for initiating ROCI in Mexico was largely based on logistical foresight. In a *Mexico City News* article from 1985, Rauschenberg called *ROCI MEXICO* "the beginning, the inaugural venture." As he explained, "When asked 'Why are you opening in Mexico?' I've told people there are two very practical reasons: One is that this is the first time all this work has been pulled together: and—everyone laughs at me when I say this—but, if we make any big mistake, all we have to do is run across the border."⁵

In tandem with this major ROCI commencement, *Casino* was created to hang from the high ceilings of the Museo Rufino Tamayo, as visitors circled around it and through the rest of the exhibition (fig. 3). Resembling a tapestry, the twenty-five by eleven-foot artwork consists of over two dozen silkscreened photographs taken by Rauschenberg in Mexico, interspersed with his signature bursts of acrylic paint. As a focal point in the show (as well as in subsequent ROCI exhibitions in Chile, Venezuela, and Washington, D.C.), *Casino* visually and figuratively staged the entire ROCI endeavor. While its gridlike assemblage of photographs and fabric allows us to explore his compositional logic and expressive use of Mexican imagery, it also reveals the contradictory ways in which his artistic approach intersected with the then-rapidly-changing Mexican art scene. Further, its versatile form—as an artwork that can be simply rolled up—made it an ideal migratory work and metaphor for cultural interchange that Rauschenberg was focused on cultivating.



figs. 4-5

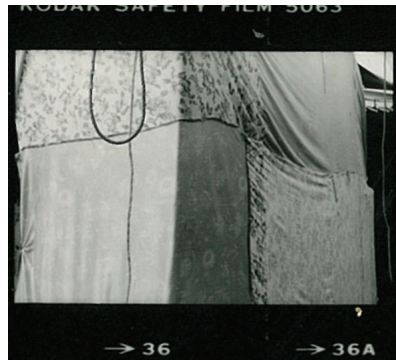
Color slides, Mexico, August 1984. Photo: Robert Rauschenberg, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York



fig. 6

Robert Rauschenberg, *Mexican Canary / ROCI MEXICO*, 1985. Silkscreen ink, acrylic, fabric, and graphite on canvas with metal frame, 7 feet 6 3/8 inches x 13 feet 5 3/8 inches x 6 1/8 inches (230.1 x 410 x 15.6 cm). Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

Within *ROCI MEXICO*, references to the "lottery" extended beyond Rauschenberg's quest for fabric and use of the title *Casino* for the exhibition's central artwork. Alongside the sites that he and Saff visited and photographed in Mexico, such as the major downtown areas of Mexico City and archeological sites of Oaxaca, they attended a lottery drawing at the Lotería Nacional Mexicana in Mexico City. His photographs document the official stage where the drawing took place and the large cranking lottery-ball machine (figs. 4 and 5). Alluding to this experience in the *ROCI MEXICO* show, Rauschenberg pasted lottery tickets into a related work, *Mexican Canary* (1985; fig. 6), alongside silkscreens of other Mexican national symbols. In the case of *Casino*, however, the work's peculiar title puts the lottery theme into a different context: while



figs. 7–10

Black-and-white contact sheets, Mexico, August 1984 (details). Photo: Robert Rauschenberg. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York

it also evokes gambling (Rauschenberg did not gamble in Mexico; casinos were illegal at the time), it can further be read as a kind of joke referring to the financial precariousness of ROCI at its start and the “gamble” Rauschenberg was taking by going ahead with it.

In a published conversation with Rauschenberg, Saff recalls that during *ROCI MEXICO*, the project’s financial uncertainty had reached a high point. As Saff explains, “Mexico was hugely successful. However, ROCI was at a point where, because of its attractiveness and invitations from many nations combined, the absence of financial support could have made the Mexican premier its finale. Its own success could have been a seed for its demise.”⁶ Rauschenberg open-endedly addressed these concerns in the ROCI works, which also translated to their visual format. As a piece made of fabric—a material he frequently used while abroad—*Casino*, in particular, demonstrated his strategic thinking for ROCI and his plan for adapting his artistic practice in this new, Mexican context.

Rauschenberg’s photographs from Mexico illustrate his attraction to hanging fabric as a form. He took images, for example, of the layers of fabric on view in Oaxacan markets, displays of traditional woven rugs, laundry on clotheslines, and various fabric-based structures made to shelter market vendors from the sun (figs. 7–10). This recalls the long precedent of fabric used in Rauschenberg’s work in general, from the bits of fabric collaged into his early Combines (1954–64) to works that more readily incorporate hanging fabric, such as his *Pyramid Series* (1974), *Hoarfrost* (1974–76), or *Jammer series* (1975–76). Allusions to hanging laundry are also prevalent: according to an essay by Yve-Alain Bois, the use of fabric in the *Jammer series* served as a tribute to the “lush silk” Rauschenberg admired on a 1975 trip to India and the “colorful spectacle” of laundry lines in foreign cities.⁷ Though Rauschenberg incorporated only a few photographs of fabric in Mexico into *Casino* as silkscreens, his evident interest in capturing the fabric helps us to trace the visual thinking that likely led to the artwork’s creation.

Requiring a team of people to run it through the sewing machine, *Casino* included everything from silkscreened canvas to silk, pillowcases, and flaps of gauze affixed by traditional stitching, quilting, and appliqué. Rauschenberg's studio assistant Sheryl Long, who was largely responsible for assembling the work in his studio in Captiva, Florida, has reflected on the grueling process of sewing it together. She recounts, "Sometimes the fabrics would be silk, sometimes they would be canvas, so they were all these different weights. Well, the more layers you got, normally you would pin things. You couldn't pin it, so I learned you could use clothespins and butterfly clips. There were just all these things that you had to do as the piece got bigger."⁸ As a result the work had to be, as Long explains, "built in pieces," section by section as they went along.⁹ This, in part, led to the work's quiltlike grid composition, which required a great deal of improvisation to handle the constantly changing and piecemeal structure of the work.

The patchwork of fabric in *Casino* also reflects what Rauschenberg saw in Mexico, calling attention to the country's very present textile culture, particularly on display in Oaxaca. This is seen in the vibrancy of the colored fabric, as well as in Rauschenberg's use of reddish pinks

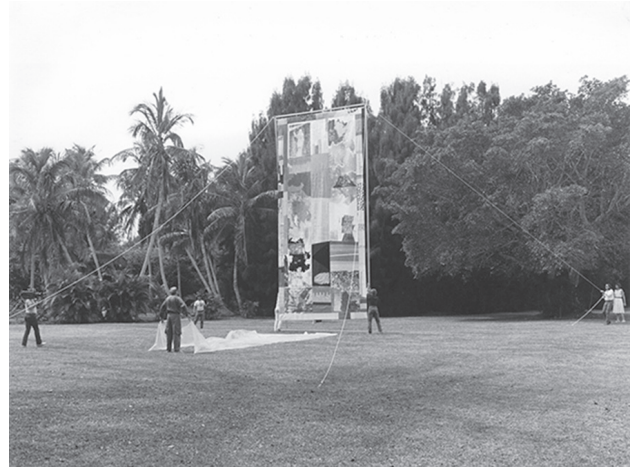
associated with Mexico (as in "Mexican pink") and the cochineal-colored dyes of Oaxacan textile traditions. On one side of *Casino*, Rauschenberg includes a central strip of red, pink, and yellow patterning and a single monochrome rectangle of saturated pink that provides a focal point for the viewer. During his visit, he may have also witnessed an emerging tension in the Oaxacan textile industry, between traditional handmade fabrics and their industrial reproductions. A special issue of *Artes de Mexico* magazine on Oaxacan textiles explains that in the latter half of the twentieth century, "Traditional designs have been largely replaced by more recent innovations imposed by market forces . . . however, a few dedicated weavers have chosen to return to the natural dyeing methods of their ancestors."¹⁰



Fig. 11
Merce Cunningham Dance Company's *Travelogue* (1977) with costumes and set, titled *Tantric Geography*, designed by Robert Rauschenberg. Photo: Charles Atlas

Whether or not Rauschenberg was fully aware of these shifts in dyeing methods, the celebratory feel of *Casino*, which juxtaposes, for example, materials like silk with ordinary cotton, suggests his captivation with and intent on using any and all of the fabric he encountered.

In the cavernous Museo Rufino Tamayo, where Rauschenberg paired a retrospective selection of his work with the newly created *ROCI MEXICO* series, *Casino* helped to provide cohesion to the exhibition that required, according to the artist, "a kind of theater in the organization, rather than a logic."¹¹ The works were organized thematically with the Mexico-focused artworks at the forefront and *Casino* prominently suspended between the upper and lower levels of the museum's atrium. In this format, *Casino* recalls Rauschenberg's work in stage design, including his sets and costumes made for collaborations with dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham and composer John Cage. In 1977, for example, he created the textile set that



he called *Tantric Geography* as the centerpiece for the Merce Cunningham Dance Company's performance *Travelogue* (fig. 11). Consisting of flowing, translucent fabric and bands of bright yellow and cyan silk that hung above the stage in a manner similar to *Casino*, the piece required the dancers to move around and through it on stage, guiding Cunningham's experimental choreography.

This use of fabric also emphasizes other, broader connections that have been drawn between Rauschenberg's performance work and his overall ROCI strategy. He is frequently quoted, for instance, referring to his experience traveling in 1964 with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company's World Tour as "a good out-of-town rehearsal for ROCI."¹² While he became accustomed on the tour to sourcing local fabrics and materials in cities across Europe and Asia, he confronted similar obstacles, from financial worries to mixed reviews and the difficulties of staging art events abroad. By the time of *ROCI MEXICO*, his logistical insights became crucial and may have highlighted the necessity for a work like *Casino*, which would provide an easy-to-replicate backdrop for the project's first sequence of exhibitions to travel in Latin America.

To create the scenery for *Set and Reset* (1983), a performance made in collaboration with Trisha Brown, two years before *ROCI MEXICO*, Rauschenberg assembled large aluminum forms on the grass outside his Captiva studio (fig. 12). He would use this same process in the making of *Casino*, temporarily erecting the work with an aluminum frame to assess it in its full upright form (fig. 13). Like *Casino*, his design for *Set and Reset* would also incorporate images, in part by projecting stock footage onto the three-part geometric structure that was hung above the stage. He created sheer fabric costumes for the dancers, silkscreened with his photographs of urban details in New York—similar to those he would capture in Mexico and other cities for ROCI. Though two distinct projects, *Casino* and *Set and Reset* demonstrate fundamental elements that were at play in his work in the early 1980s: not only his use of traveling three-dimensional forms but also the reintegration of photographs into his fabric pieces. According to curator Emily Liebert, "As Brown's company performed, they physically animated Rauschenberg's imagery, whisking and jerking it around the stage—they danced his prints."¹³

fig. 12

Robert Rauschenberg with the structure for his set design for Trisha Brown Dance Company's *Set and Reset* (1983), Captiva, Florida, 1983. Photo: Attributed to Emil Fray. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York

fig. 13

Robert Rauschenberg unveiling *Casino / ROCI MEXICO* (1985), Captiva, Florida, 1985. Photo: Terry Van Brunt. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York

Within the Museo Rufino Tamayo exhibition, *Casino* confronted viewers with a range of Rauschenberg's photographs of Mexico intuitively composed on the sewn cloth. Their organization is similar to that of his silkscreens from the '60s, which contain, as art historian Rosalind Krauss writes, "A loose grid of enframed photographic spaces that seems to present one with nothing so much as a visual archive: the storage and retrieval matrix of the organized miscellany of images. . . ." ¹⁴ We find photographs of votive skulls and historic Zapotec artifacts, peeling paint on Mexico City billboards and wall murals, details of a frieze from the Basílica de Nuestra Señora de la Soledad (Basilica of Our Lady of Solitude) in Oaxaca, shop windows, city fountains, a freestanding Coca-Cola advertisement, truck signage, as well as a sculpture of an eagle with a serpent in its mouth—a symbol also found in the Mexican coat of arms. Cataloguing a range of scenes from Mexican cultural life, *Casino* reads at once a tapestry, an archive, and a travelogue of Mexico solidifying the visual formula Rauschenberg would draw upon throughout the *ROCI* project.

While *ROCI MEXICO* was generally well received by the public, others found the presentation odd, or even aggravating. In an interview for a 1985 *Washington Times* article, Mexican artist and journalist Felipe Ehrenberg explains, "There was some sort of understandable resentment that a privately funded museum, such as the Tamayo Museum, would show and surround with such drums and trumpets a series of propositions already handled by artists in Mexico years back that hadn't been able to reach public forums."¹⁵ The exhibition opened in a climate of dwindling arts funding, propelled by the 1982 debt crisis in Mexico, at a museum that was newly established and distinctly private. Funded by Televisa, the nation's leading media company, Museo Rufino Tamayo had also faced criticism for its internationally dominant programming and the hiring of an American outsider as the museum's director.¹⁶ Rauschenberg had little to do with these politics, but this more negative reception of the show illustrates the ways in which *ROCI*'s intentions could become murky and often, though inadvertently, reinforced a Western-centric perspective.

As Ehrenberg's 1985 comment in the press suggests, Rauschenberg's handling of Mexican symbolism, seen in both *Casino* and *Mexican Canary*, was not so much disagreeable as it felt retrogressive for that moment in Mexican contemporary art. In a signature Pop format, many of Rauschenberg's *ROCI MEXICO* works recycle and deconstruct the national imagery he encountered. In *Casino*, for example, his photograph of a Mexican golden eagle is obscured by smears of blue paint and absorbed into the overall composition. However, Mexican artists during the 1980s were already engaged with their own, more nuanced attempts at deconstruction, including, for instance, an interrogation of the proliferation of images from the Mexican School (for example, Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, and the legacy of Mexican Muralism). This is seen, in particular, in the Neo-Mexicanism movement of the 1980s, in paintings by Mónica Castillo, Julio Galán, or Nahum B. Zenil, among others, which rigorously reinterpret the visual tropes associated with Mexican popular culture.¹⁷ Though this history is less directly relevant to Rauschenberg's motivations for *ROCI*, the presence of this movement at the time helps to further illuminate the critical context in which *ROCI MEXICO* made its debut.



Rauschenberg's ultimate vision for *ROCI MEXICO*, with *Casino* at the forefront, involved the idea that the Mexican imagery within his Mexico-inspired artworks would be seen by other countries, as he adapted the exhibition for each ROCI iteration. "The show would metamorphose as it moved around the world," Saff recounts.¹⁸ For instance, the most prominent installation of *Casino* was in Santiago, Chile, where it was suspended from the ceiling of the grand hall of the Museo Nacional Bellas Artes, visible to viewers upon walking in (fig. 14). During *ROCI MEXICO*, however, the expectation for the project to travel was still largely uncertain, and Rauschenberg's inclusion of *Casino*, as a towering textile work, served as one of his many efforts to force ROCI's success.

Casino is a photographic record, an energetic display of fabric, and a tool for staging: in the atrium of the Museo Rufino Tamayo, where the piece was first hung, opening performances took place, including a reading by Mexican poet Octavio Paz and music by saxophonist Dickie Landry. With ROCI's unstable beginnings inscribed into its origins, the piece is also a response to the mix of desperation, utopian idealism, and arrogance that characterized Rauschenberg's position at the start of the project, in sum a six-year feat. At ROCI's culmination in 1991, he recalls, "It was hopeless at that point in Mexico . . . and I can't stand good advice. Everybody said, 'See, we told you it wouldn't work.'"¹⁹ The stories of subsequent ROCI exhibitions overshadow this early phase of the project, but its opening in Mexico was a crucial turning point; it established the format—and funding—that would determine the ROCI world tour to come.

fig. 14
Installation view,
*Rauschenberg Overseas
Culture Interchange: ROCI
CHILE*, Museo Nacional de
Bellas Artes, Santiago, 1985.
Pictured at left: *Casino* /
ROCI MEXICO (1985)
Robert Rauschenberg
Foundation Archives,
New York

ENDNOTES

- 1 "First" indicates that *ROCI / MEXICO* was the first ROCI exhibition. However, there were other proto-ROCI trips before Mexico, including to China and Japan (1982) and to Japan, Thailand, and Sri Lanka (1983).
- 2 Donald Saff, RRFA 10: Donald Saff records on Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange [1984], Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives.
- 3 National Gallery of Art, "National Gallery of Art Announces Rauschenberg Exhibition to Open in 1988," Press Release, May 30, 1985, https://www.nga.gov/content/dam/ngaweb/research/gallery-archives/PressReleases/1989-1980/1985/14A11_44593_19850530.pdf.
- 4 Roberta Smith, "Robert Rauschenberg, At Home and Abroad," *New York Times*, August 6, 1991; Hiroko Ikegami, "Art Has No Borders' Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange," in Leah Dickerman and Achim Borchard-Hume, eds., *Robert Rauschenberg*, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2016), p. 344.
- 5 Paul Lenti, "'The Dreamt World of Rauschenberg' Begins Its Tour in Mexico," *Mexico City News*, April 20, 1985.
- 6 Rauschenberg in "A Conversation about Art and ROCI: Rauschenberg and Donald Saff," in *ROCI: Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange*, ed. Mary Yakush (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1991), p. 166.
- 7 Yve-Alain Bois, "'Mostly the Restraint and Strength': A New Grammar with the Jammers," in Dickerman and Borchardt-Hume, eds., *Robert Rauschenberg*, p. 306.
- 8 Sheryl Long, Interview by Cameron Vanderscoff, July 22, 2015, Rauschenberg Oral History Project, pp. 62–63, http://www.rauschenbergfoundation.org/sites/default/files/Long_Sheryl_FINAL.pdf.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 63.
- 10 Chloë Sayer, "Ancestral Weft: Lives Spun on Teotitlán Looms," *Artes de México* 35, Textiles de Oaxaca, Segunda Edición (2000), p. 94.
- 11 Rauschenberg in "A Conversation about Art and ROCI," p. 166.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 162.
- 13 Emily Liebert, "'Looking Also Had to Happen in Time': The Printed Trace," in Dickerman and Borchardt-Hume, eds., *Robert Rauschenberg*, p. 365.
- 14 Rosalind Krauss, "Perpetual Inventory," *October* 88 (Spring 1999), p. 107.
- 15 Jane Addams Allen, "Rauschenberg's Worldwide Art Exchange," *Washington Times*, May 31, 1985.
- 16 James Oles, "An Uneasy Alliance: The Early Years of the Museo Tamayo," in *Art Museums of Latin America: Structuring Representation*, ed. Michele Greet and Gina McDaniel Tarver (New York: Routledge, 2018), p. 153.
- 17 James Oles, *Art and Architecture in Mexico* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2013), pp. 374–86.
- 18 Rauschenberg in "A Conversation about Art and ROCI," p. 166.
- 19 *Ibid.*