

Mutual Exchange: *Hibiscus Fever* (1988) and ROCI in Cuba

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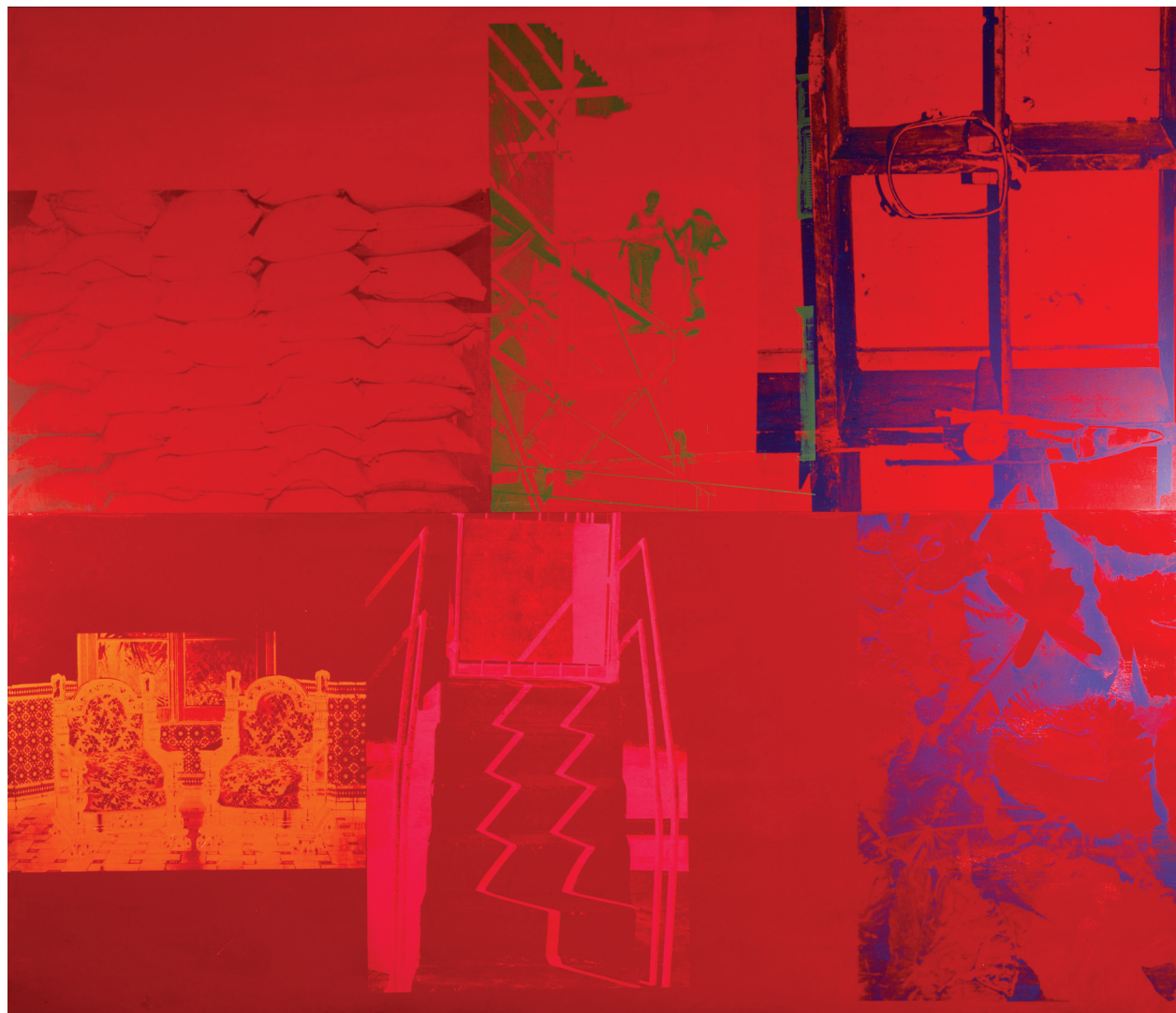


fig. 1

Robert Rauschenberg, *Hibiscus Fever (Fiebre de Hibiscus) / ROCI CUBA*, 1988. Enamel and acrylic on galvanized steel, 72 3/4 x 84 3/4 inches (184.8 x 215.3 cm). Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Havana

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On February 10, 1988, three concurrent exhibitions of work by Robert Rauschenberg opened at major art venues in Havana, Cuba—the Museo Nacional, the Castillo de la Fuerza, and the Haydée Santamaría gallery at the Casa de las Américas. The artist's worldwide tour to promote communication and peace through art, the Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange (ROCI), had arrived at its seventh stop, in Cuba.¹ A photograph taken at the ROCI opening captures the artist alongside the celebrated Cuban painter Raúl Martínez and the Minister of Culture Armando Hart Dávalos. Rauschenberg's painting *Hibiscus Fever* (*Fiebre de Hibiscus*) / *ROCI CUBA* (1988) looms over them like a theatrical backdrop while a camera flash reflects off the vermillion enamel surface (figs. 1 and 2). The two artists pose before a yellow silkscreened image of two chairs angled toward each other, as though they had just been seated in them, smiling for the cameras that document this friendly exchange. That same evening, this painting was presented as a gift to the people of Cuba, and as a result the work is now in the collection of the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Havana.² Reflecting on his experience in Cuba, Rauschenberg later described it as the "perfect place" for ROCI.³

Coinciding with the latter years of the Cold War, ROCI was initiated in 1984 to "[share] experiences with societies less familiar with non-political ideas or communicating 'worldly' through art,"⁴ and it would travel to what Rauschenberg referred to as "sensitive areas"—nations whose dominant ideologies were at odds with those of the United States and who maintained tight control over artistic expression. While Rauschenberg promoted ROCI as a project to connect and collaborate with artists in these countries, his distanced engagements did not reflect this idealized image issued by his public relations campaign. For example, even as Rauschenberg's staff provided briefing papers about each country he visited, these were often limited in their scope as Rauschenberg preferred to remain uninformed about the countries he visited in an effort to make artwork without preconceived notions of his destinations. And while the works produced for ROCI were characterized in a press release as "collaborations with artists and artisans,"⁵ it was Rauschenberg who authored them using materials, wares, and photographs collected during his travels, and constructed them back in his Captiva, Florida, studio.

These are some of the reasons why ROCI invited substantial criticism, both at the time of the project and in retrospect. As a result, much of the scholarship to date on ROCI has focused on Rauschenberg's political unawareness, his status as a powerful American celebrity artist, and his project's imperialistic nature. While it is crucial to discuss these problematic dimensions of

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fig. 2

From left: Robert Rauschenberg, artist Raúl Martínez, and Minister of Culture Armando Hart Dávalos in front of Rauschenberg's *Hibiscus Fever* (*Fiebre de Hibiscus*) / *ROCI CUBA* (1988) at the Museo de Bellas Artes, February 10, 1988. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York

ROCI, their narratives run the risk of casting host nations as passive recipients and reinforce a cultural hierarchy by focusing on Rauschenberg's dominance rather than the responses and conditions of host nations. It proves useful, then, to consider the agency of the countries involved in receiving ROCI by examining its reception. According to historian Hiroko Ikegami, "the global rise of American art" can be seen as "a reciprocal, cross-cultural, and yet necessarily conflicted process rather than . . . a result of unilateral cultural imperialism."⁶ In the case of *ROCI CUBA* (1988), an examination of how Rauschenberg's work was received reveals an intersection of interests, not least of all because Cuba was the only country to host the artist at more than one venue.⁷ While the authorities in many ROCI countries were uneasy about Rauschenberg's presence, I submit that *ROCI CUBA* was of mutual but not uncomplicated interest to both Rauschenberg and Cuban officials. Just as Cuba served as the "perfect place" for Rauschenberg's ROCI mission, Cuban authorities instrumentalized the global attention trained on ROCI to broadcast a positive and apolitical image of their cultural sector during a tumultuous moment marked by increasingly politicized art activity and protest. In fact, some of these very protests and artworks show up in the documentary photographs and video footage taken by Rauschenberg's team, as I will discuss later in this essay. Rauschenberg's *Hibiscus Fever* was gifted by the American artist to the people of Cuba, and it plays a key role in the exchange as the physical object that remained behind.

Centrally installed on a wall at the Museo Nacional, *Hibiscus Fever* contains six images created from Rauschenberg's collection of photographs taken while traveling across Cuba in August 1987. In bright, monotone hues silkscreened atop a red enameled steel panel, the photographs reveal piled sugar sacks, construction workers atop scaffolding, a windowlike grid, a pair of facing chairs, a zigzag shadow falling on steps, and water lilies. In total, Rauschenberg exhibited twenty silkscreen paintings that were based on his collection of photographs taken during his travels across the country.



fig. 3
Robert Rauschenberg,
Cuban Acre / ROCI CUBA,
1988. Enamel and acrylic
on galvanized steel, 84 3/4 ×
216 3/4 inches (215.3 ×
550.5 cm). National Gallery
of Art, Washington, D.C.

Without any context, *Hibiscus Fever's* connection to Cuba is not readily apparent. Rather, the images might have been taken anywhere. In contrast, over half of the works from *ROCI CUBA* (1988) contain imagery with more direct indicators of location or national symbolism. *Cuban Acre* (1988; fig. 3), for example, which was sent directly to the National Gallery of Art and never exhibited in Cuba, features 1950s cars, historic architecture, components of the nation's flag, and a picture of Cuban national hero José Martí.⁸ *Wish (Deseo)* and *Premonition (Ante de Creer)* (both 1988; figs. 4 and 5), which would join the ROCI tour for exhibitions in the USSR, Berlin, and Malaysia, include an image of the national monument to Martí and Cuban revolutionary leader Abel Santamaría, and the visage of Che Guevara respectively. Therefore, the paintings made with specific Cuban imagery could be identified when installed among works from other countries along the tour. Similarly, at the National Gallery in Washington, D.C., American visitors would have been able to see their perceptions of Cuba reflected in Rauschenberg's work. But curiously, none of these identifiable motifs occur in the painting that the artist selected as a gift to Cuba. Rather, the images he chose for *Hibiscus Fever* tend toward ambiguity and

fig. 4
Robert Rauschenberg, *Wish (Deseo) / ROCI CUBA*, 1988. Enamel and acrylic on galvanized steel, 36 3/4 × 48 3/4 inches (93.3 × 123.8 cm). Private collection

fig. 5
Robert Rauschenberg,
Premonition (Ante de Creer) / ROCI CUBA, 1988. Enamel and acrylic on galvanized steel, 36 3/4 × 84 3/4 inches (91.5 × 213.7 cm). Robert Rauschenberg Foundation



universality. As I will demonstrate, it was precisely Rauschenberg's political ambiguity embodied by his gift to the Cuban people that granted him a warm welcome from Cuban cultural officials and made him the perfect fit for Havana's major exhibition spaces in 1988.

Like a collection of visual memories, *Hibiscus Fever* organizes Rauschenberg's fading glimpses of Cuba. The colors—gray, green, blue, yellow, and pink—compete in value with the red grounds so that the images occasionally appear as negatives. As art historian Robert Mattison has observed regarding the use of negative silkscreens in the series produced for *ROCI CHILE* (1985), the effect gives the impression that the images are “fading away before our eyes.”⁹ Likewise, the images that spread across *Hibiscus Fever* barely assert themselves against their red field. This tension between image and background recalls the artist's handwritten caption in his 1963 photo essay “Random Order”: “A dirty or foggy window makes what is outside appear to be projected onto the window plane” (fig. 6). The adjacent image of a grimy window overlooking the facade of a building shares a compositional affinity with *Hibiscus Fever* in its gridlike nature. While the painting's highly chromatic scheme is characteristic of this *ROCI* series, the gestural brushstrokes, found objects, and the fabrics that Rauschenberg incorporated into works for other *ROCI* countries are absent. Rather, its visual simplicity and prominent color resembles Rauschenberg's monochrome paintings that the *ROCI CUBA* press release offers as “philosophical antecedents” to the series.¹⁰ Indeed, just as his *White Painting* (1951) was meant to receive shadows in a room like a projector screen,¹¹ *Hibiscus Fever* presents Rauschenberg's photographs of Cuba as afterimages that linger on a viewer's eyelids.

The word “hibiscus” in the artwork's title points to its prominent crimson color. Color did not come easily to Rauschenberg, he struggled with it since his days as a student of artist Josef Albers at Black Mountain College in North Carolina, and specifically, with the color red. As he told art historian Barbara Rose in 1986, “The ‘white paintings’ came directly out of [Albers's] schooling. He taught me such respect for all colors that it took years before I could use more

than two colors at once.”¹² And of the red monochromes, he explained, “I picked the most difficult color for me to work in.”¹³ Shortly following his monochromatic works, he arrived at a method for incorporating color into his work more freely, which he called “pedestrian color.” According to author Calvin Tomkins, “[Rauschenberg] had noticed that, although people were constantly surrounded by color, they did not usually notice specific colors in the environment . . . [he] set out to make paintings that would have this nondescript quality.”¹⁴ While the color of *Hibiscus Fever* is hardly unnoticeable, Rauschenberg may have felt it was

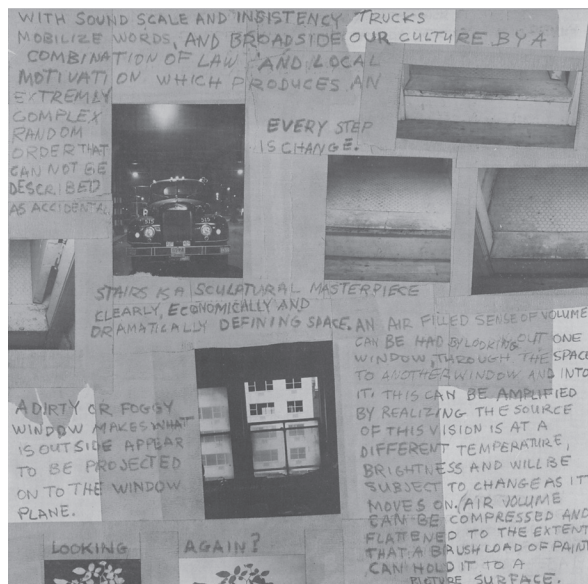


fig. 6
Robert Rauschenberg,
“Random Order,” 1963
(detail)



reflective of his Cuban surroundings. As he later told ROCI artistic director Donald Saff, “Part of the responsibility of the artworks done for that country is that they have to somehow mirror the environment.”¹⁵ Though Rauschenberg photographed in mostly black and white, a handful of color slides from his trip reveal an attentiveness toward the chromatic fixtures and the candy-colored pre-1959 cars that fill the streets of Havana.¹⁶

The word “fever” in the work’s title recalls the exoticizing term “jungle fever.” Originally used by colonists in tropical regions to describe malaria, which induces vivid dreams and hallucinatory effects, the phrase came to mean a state of altered consciousness achieved through encounters with a foreign ‘other.’ Although Rauschenberg did not photograph any hibiscus flowers when he was on his trip, he certainly encountered them: in the video footage taken for the Cuba travelogue, his videographer Terry Van Brunt captured a cerise-colored hibiscus bouncing in the breeze while he followed Rauschenberg’s photographic pursuits (fig. 7).

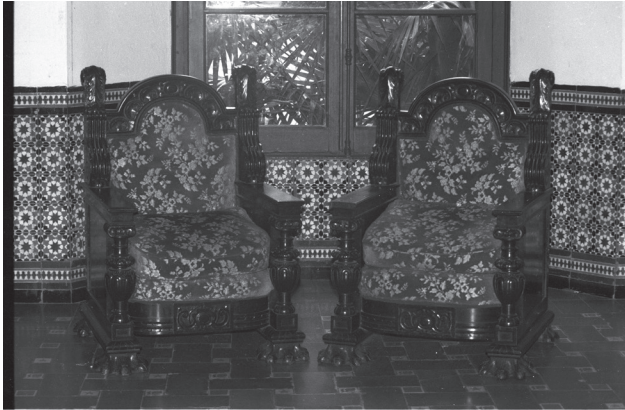
Throughout his silkscreen works, images operate as both formal components and legible signs, towing the line between representation and abstraction. In *Hibiscus Fever*, the work’s visual content lends balance to the overall composition. Both lower corners include floral motifs: one plucked from the natural world and the other from a decorative interior. The photographs in the upper corners of empty cubbies and stacked sugar bags operate as grids. This stockpile of sacks, perhaps the work’s most explicit reference to Cuba, recalls its volatile sugar economy. The center column contains images with strong linear qualities that also speak to elevation. Here, construction workers on scaffolding join Rauschenberg’s considerable collection of images of laborers aloft, examples of which can be found among his photographs taken in Japan (fig. 8), New York, and Baltimore. Though the presence of workers in urban spaces makes them an obvious subject for Rauschenberg’s roving eye, their appearance in the work adds an element of humanity to the built environment. Stairs were of both formal and

fig. 7

Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange, Cuba travelogue video, 1987–88 (still). Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York

fig. 8

Robert Rauschenberg, *Japan*, 1983. Gelatin silver print, 19 × 13 inches (48.3 × 33 cm)



metaphorical interest to Rauschenberg, who had previously expressed his appreciation for them in his earlier “Random Order” photo essay: “Stairs is a sculptural masterpiece,” he wrote, “clearly, economically and dramatically defining space. . . . Every step is change” (fig. 6).

Since Rauschenberg strove for ambiguity and welcomed multiple readings of his work, there is no overt message to Cuba that can be extracted from this painting. But as art historian Rosalind Krauss has argued, associations persist in Rauschenberg’s work, even as he denied them. At an angle backed by patterned tile, the prominent image of bright-yellow chairs that face each other and the viewer was snapped one morning in the lobby where he was staying in Havana at the Hotel Nacional de Cuba (fig. 9). Empty chairs are a recurrent motif throughout Rauschenberg’s work and the subject of one of his earliest photographs *Quiet House* from Black Mountain College in 1949 (fig. 10). In that work, the organization of natural light, shadow, and the geometric structure of the chairs serve the compositional dimensions of the image. In *Hibiscus Fever*, Rauschenberg’s use of the camera flash and the canted orientation of the chairs implies a dialogue posed before an audience. Positioned under the sugar sacks that slump to the bottom of their frame, the chairs might be read as a commentary on U.S.–Cuban relations, weighted by economic sanctions inhibiting communication between the countries. Associations like these, Krauss wrote, are “the stuff of the ‘subconscious.’ It is like the kernel of the dream . . . fabricated from the ‘daily residue’ of one’s recent waking life.”¹⁷ In this case, the daily residue might be a grouping of newspaper clippings collected by Rauschenberg for his Cuba files that includes reports on the declining sugar economy, dwindling resources, and deadlocked negotiations. One headline from a local Fort Myers, Florida, paper reads, “Tense relations with Cuba will continue, expert says.”¹⁸ Looking back at *Hibiscus Fever*, the facing chairs give visual reference to Rauschenberg’s pile of clippings, like a stock photo.

fig. 9

Scan of black-and-white negative, Cuba, August 1987. Photo: Robert Rauschenberg

fig. 10

Robert Rauschenberg, *Quiet House—Black Mountain*, 1949. Gelatin silver print, 14 3/4 × 14 3/4 inches (37.5 × 37.5 cm)



fig. 11
Reference sheet for scans of black-and-white negatives, Cuba, August 1987 (detail). Photos: Robert Rauschenberg



fig. 12
Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange, Cuba travelogue video, 1987–88 (still). Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York

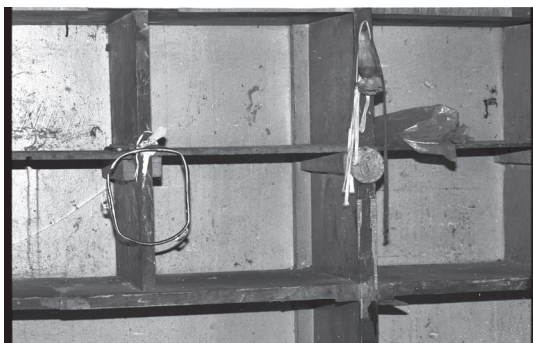


fig. 13
Scan of black-and-white negative, Cuba, August 1987. Photo: Robert Rauschenberg

The rotated grid of shelves in the upper right-hand portion refers less to the outside world than the composition of the artwork itself. Rauschenberg’s contact sheets and travelogue footage reveal a situational context for this cryptic photograph. On his first day in Havana, Rauschenberg happened upon an abandoned office and shoe-polishing station. There, he circled around the empty chairs before training his lens on the religious iconography tacked to the empty shelves behind them (fig. 11). The resulting photograph, in which the religious items are completely obscured, became one of the most frequently used silk-screens in the *ROCI CUBA* artworks and was also repurposed years later in the *Urban Bourbon* series (1988–96).

Rauschenberg printed many of his photographs from *ROCI* as stand-alone gelatin silver prints in addition to making them into silkscreens. In Cuba, he installed these prints in large grids of identically sized units at the Casa de las Américas (fig. 12). All the images silkscreened in *Hibiscus Fever* were also selected and printed as individual photographs with the exception of the empty shelves (fig. 13). The fact that Rauschenberg was so fond of the image for silkscreens but not as a stand-alone photograph suggests that he considered it a formal device that served to activate a composition. From painting to painting, he rotated the image vertically or horizontally, maintaining parallel lines with the edges of the frame. According to Krauss, Rauschenberg’s recurrent grid composition recalls something akin to archival organization: “the storage and retrieval matrix of the organized miscellany of images, which presents the memory as a kind of filing cabinet of the mind.”¹⁹ In *Hibiscus Fever*, the image is oriented vertically, which allows for the empty shelves to also read as a window. While its primary function seems to echo the grids within the painting, the image might have a secondary role as an indirect commentary on the resilience of the Cuban people in the face of declining resources.

Despite these associations, the painting’s indistinct photographs and cryptic lexicon are reflective of an artistic and political gesture: one devoid of overt messaging and passively receptive to shared meanings. Though the images in *Hibiscus Fever* were taken in Cuba, Rauschenberg’s treatment plays up their formal qualities, removes their clarity,

and universalizes them. As Ikegami has argued, Rauschenberg's "neutrality" and "ambivalence is crucially important" for his acceptance on an international scale. "Such complexity," she writes, "actually worked in Rauschenberg's favor abroad, because it allowed his overseas audiences to embrace his art."²⁰ The work that Rauschenberg chose to serve as the project's legacy in Cuba, *Hibiscus Fever*, provides a useful starting point from which to consider how *ROCI CUBA* served the interests not only of Rauschenberg but also Cuban officials.



fig. 14

Robert Rauschenberg,
 Untitled (Mirror), 1952.
 Solvent transfer with oil,
 watercolor, crayon, pencil,
 and paper on paper, 10 ½ ×
 8 ½ inches (26.7 × 21.6 cm).
 Museum of Modern Art,
 New York

Of all the countries Rauschenberg traveled to for ROCI, why was Rauschenberg so enthusiastic about exhibiting in Cuba? For one, the communist state's strained relationship with and isolation from the United States, which had significantly worsened under the Reagan administration, made Cuba a natural choice for the ROCI mission. According to a front-page article in the *New York Times* titled "Downward Spiral for U.S.-Cuba Ties," relations between the countries were at their "lowest point in at least a decade."²¹ Furthermore, Cuba was a familiar place for Rauschenberg and a site of early artistic production. In 1952, several months after separating from his wife Susan Weil, he first traveled to Cuba while on spring break from Black Mountain College with partner Cy Twombly.²² There, he experimented for the first time with photographic transfers, an artistic breakthrough that would eventually lead him to the process of silk-screening.²³ A collage produced during this time, *Untitled (Mirror)* (1952), contains ghostly images and text extracted from print media using solvent (fig. 14). Only 225 miles from Captiva, it is not insignificant that Cuba was geographically the closest ROCI country to Rauschenberg's home. Rauschenberg's proximity to Miami meant he lived close to a major Cuban community. Since reports on Cuba were frequently broadcast

through local newspaper and media outlets, Rauschenberg had likely a better understanding of Cuban current events than those of other—more distant—ROCI countries.

Beyond Rauschenberg's personal connection with and proximity to Cuba by living in South Florida, his tenuously authorized visit provided him with an opportunity to bolster his image as an enfant terrible in American minds and to demonstrate his opposition to Reagan's policies.²⁴ As Rauschenberg eagerly asserted, his visit to Cuba was "an international scandal."²⁵ Indeed, since the Reagan administration reinstated a travel ban between the United States and Cuba in 1982, his presence alone could be perceived as a transgressive act against the U.S. government. Significantly, his visit to Cuba also provided him with some immunity against criticisms of American imperialism that he had been defending since his controversial trip to Chile in 1985. There, given the grave conditions under Augusto Pinochet, Rauschenberg's insistence on "apolitical communication" in lieu of taking a definitive stance appeared to many as support for the dictatorship.²⁶ On the other hand, Cuba served as the ideal backdrop for the image of a rogue agent of world peace that Rauschenberg sought to construct through his ROCI project.

ROCI CUBA also enabled Rauschenberg to express his personal criticisms against U.S. policy toward Cuba and his disapproval of the Reagan administration. During a press conference in

Havana, he remarked and then quickly recanted: "I think that what they're doing is really stupid . . . I can't understand how we could do these awful things like sell weapons to terrorists in Iran, and we can't smile at Castro."²⁷ In 1990, he told Saff, "That's such a senseless controversy that's going on and can only be excused by secrets and maneuvers that are useless and hostile."²⁸

Despite this critical commentary, Rauschenberg insisted that one could not read clear political messages into his artwork inspired by Cuba. Instead, he characterized them as "non-coherent" and "honest."²⁹ While Rauschenberg considered himself to be socially engaged, he also expressed strong opinions about how that should be manifested in a work of art. When asked during a press conference in Havana to comment on the current state of Latin American art, he said, "I found an exaggerated focus on the artists involved in propaganda, rather than some universal response to life itself. I think that's too easy."³⁰ And in response to another question posed during a student conference, as to whether artists in Cuba should "follow tradition" or "make reforms," it's possible that Rauschenberg was thinking back on his troubles in Chile when he stated:

I've always said that I want my work to look more like what's out the window, than what's in the studio. But you can take that, and in many South American countries, it gets exaggerated because that could be interpreted as doing political art. But all art is political. It doesn't have to be an illustration of some pain that you can imagine. It doesn't have to be critically depressing. It could be about hope.³¹

With these statements given before an audience of Cuban art students and artists, Rauschenberg cautioned against making art with an overt social agenda.

During his trip, Rauschenberg enjoyed the honors of being a government guest despite conflictual relations between the United States and Cuba. He was formally invited to Cuba by writer, councilmember, and president of Casa de las Américas, Roberto Fernández Retamar, and Fidel Castro had hosted Rauschenberg one evening for dinner, even extending an invitation for Rauschenberg to visit his summer home. On the night of his opening, Rauschenberg was joined by national figures, including Cuban ballerina Alicia Alonso, who symbolically received *Hibiscus Fever* as a gift to the people of Cuba,³² while Armando Hart read a prepared speech. A single line from Hart's speech appeared the following morning on the front page of *Granma*, the official paper of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Cuba: "A real artist, not one of those who invents enemy propaganda, but one of those with genuine talent, a son of Lincoln's homeland, gives us his art and human solidarity."³³ With this statement made on behalf of the Communist government, Hart expressed an alliance with Rauschenberg, while at the same time invoking another kind of art that he, and by extension the Cuban authorities, characterized as "enemy propaganda."

Indeed, ROCI opened on the eve of the collapse of the USSR during a tense moment of economic and political uncertainty in Cuba. Major political reforms in the USSR, known as *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (reconstruction) posed a destabilizing threat to Cuban officials, and in 1986 Castro implemented a "rectification" campaign in an effort to reinstate and uphold Guevarist revolutionary ideals.³⁴ For the arts sector, this signaled a dramatic reversal toward



fig. 15

Arte Calle performance at the exhibition *Nueve alquimistas y un ciego* (*Nine Alchemists and A Blind Man*), October 1987



fig. 16

Juan-Sí González, *Me han jodido el ánimo* (*They've Screwed Up My Spirit*), 1988. Street performance

the cultural climate of the 1970s when art had been instrumentalized by the government to support the revolutionary cause following Castro's 1971 proclamation that art was to be a weapon of the revolution ("el arte es un arma de la Revolución").³⁵ For over a decade, the arts had been enjoying increasing autonomy from the government and its prescriptive ideals since the Ministry of Culture was founded in 1976 with Hart at its helm.³⁶ Consequently, contemporary art flourished in the 1980s, a decade described by Cuban art historian and curator Gerardo Mosquera as Cuban art's "golden age." "a period of very intense, transformative artistic energy, and also of conceptual discussion, social criticism, and openness to international trends."³⁷ During this time, the Havana Biennial was launched to global acclaim in 1984, and Cuban artists garnered public attention with political gestures aimed at illuminating the harsh realities of life in post-revolutionary Cuba.

By the time Rauschenberg's exhibition opened in 1988, the boundaries of artistic freedoms in Cuba were being pushed to their limits by a new generation of artists. Performance collectives, such as ABTV, Art-De, Arte Calle, Grupo Provisional, and Grupo Puré, emerged as part of this New Cuban Art, organizing controversial interventions and staging events that drew intense governmental scrutiny. In October 1987, an exhibition by Arte Calle was censored after a dance party broke out at the opening atop a portrait of Che Guevara on the floor (fig. 15). The following year, Art-De member Juan-Sí González staged *Me han jodido el ánimo* (*They've Screwed Up My Spirit*), a street performance for which he tied himself into a plastic bag and slowly suffocated until a concerned viewer intervened (fig. 16). Writing on this critical moment in Cuban art, art historian Rachel Weiss observes, "The relationships between the artists, state control, and the Havana public were in continual negotiation and flux."³⁸



fig. 17
Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange, Cuba travelogue video, 1987–88 (still), picturing a public mural by Arte Calle. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York



fig. 18
Aldito Menéndez, *REVIVA LA REVOLU*, 1988. Street installation

fig. 19
Aldito Menéndez, *El Indio*, 1988. Performance at Rauschenberg Student Conference for *ROCI CUBA*



Rauschenberg's arrival in Cuba intersected with the height of this artistic activity. Although there is no evidence that he was aware of this younger generation of Cuban artists, documentary photographs and video footage prove that he did cross their paths more than once in 1988. Notably, Van Brunt captured an Arte Calle mural on the Cuba travelogue footage (fig. 17), and an uncaptioned image of a work by Arte Calle member Aldito Menéndez appears among the documentary photographs taken during the 1988 trip (fig. 18). In this piece, hand-painted white text on a black canvas spells out "REVIVA LA REVOLU" (Revive the mess), which is a spin on the slogan "Reviva la Revolución" (Revive the revolution) to imply the revolution's failure or end.³⁹ The work was installed on the street for passersby, and a collection pot in front of the sign connected the revolutionary program to financial destitution.

Menéndez's work intersected with Rauschenberg a second time at the student conference on the evening following the grand opening of *ROCI CUBA*. As Rauschenberg answered audience questions through a translator, Menéndez sat in the front row dressed as an American Indian performing captive attention and bowing periodically, a gesture that made reference to the passive acceptance of colonial impositions (fig. 19). Grupo Provisional also saw Rauschenberg's conference as an opportunity to respond to the outsized presence of the American artist. Carrying a sign with a painted image of an American Indian and the text "VERY GOOD RAUSCHENBERG," Grupo Provisional members Carlos Rodríguez Cárdenas, Francisco Lastra, and Glexis Novoa interrupted the talk by proceeding through the crowd to ask



Rauschenberg for his autograph (fig. 20). As Weiss points out, the objective was to “[skewer] the self-colonizing impulse behind the museum’s decision to turn itself over to Rauschenberg’s self-aggrandizement” and to denounce the “‘universality’ of the language of art” that the artist so espoused.⁴⁰ These performances were not intended to criticize Rauschenberg but rather to ridicule the Cuban government for its uncritical adulation of the American celebrity artist and to its open doors for him across Havana’s cultural spaces.⁴¹

The invitation from Cuban officials like Roberto Retamar and Hart to fill Havana’s exhibition spaces articulated a strong position of support for Rauschenberg and his ROCI mission at the expense of a Cuban avant-garde. As the artist Novoa from Grupo Provisional told Weiss in 2002, officials often purposefully disregarded their work: “They said we were mediocre, they didn’t include us in any important exhibitions, we didn’t travel abroad, and when foreign curators came to Cuba they never took them to see us. That segregated you. That’s what the Cuban government knew how to use, that implacable silence which separates you and dissolves you as an artist.”⁴² In response, Grupo Provisional and Menéndez took advantage of *ROCI CUBA* to make their presence known through public performance pieces. This exchange demonstrates that Rauschenberg’s presence in Cuba served as the catalyst for an implicit negotiation between the government and the young generation of Cuban artists over the occupation of cultural space.

Shortly after Rauschenberg left Cuba, the tacit strategies imposed by the Cuban state turned into explicit actions when it began outright censoring exhibitions by the younger generation of Cuban artists. According to Mosquera, these rising tensions—further exacerbated by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union—gave way to a major shift in the Cuban cultural landscape. “At the end of the ‘80s the sharp critical edge of the visual arts exceeded the limits the regime was willing to tolerate,” he describes of this moment. “Liberal officials were fired and censorship increased.”⁴³ Several months following *ROCI CUBA*, Novoa’s solo

fig. 20

Grupo Provisional, *Very Good Rauschenberg*, 1988. Performance at Rauschenberg Student Conference for *ROCI CUBA*

exhibition at Galería 23 y 12 in Havana was closed after opening for only one day.⁴⁴ At the same time, a retrospective of work by Raúl Martínez, painter of revolutionary heroes, was mounted in the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, where he and Rauschenberg posed for photographs in front of *Hibiscus Fever* only months earlier. In 1989, a cycle of shows organized by young artists at the avant-garde art space Castillo de la Fuerza, where Rauschenberg had exhibited, was initially censored and then altogether prohibited from opening when an artwork criticized an official painter.⁴⁵ In other cases, artists faced imprisonment and exile. As a result of this increasing repression and the growing social and economic crisis, the early 1990s saw the mass emigration of significant Cuban artists and cultural workers.

Throughout *ROCI CUBA*, Rauschenberg and Cuban authorities enjoyed mutual support. They shared common positions on the sanctions imposed by the United States, and, for very different reasons, on overtly political work. During a period of rising tensions between the Cuban government and a young generation of Cuban artists, the authorities instrumentalized Rauschenberg's project to signal the global importance of their cultural sector. By hosting *ROCI CUBA*, the Cuban government demonstrated its acceptance of a certain kind of political and artistic gesture: one motivated by peace, dispassionately ambivalent, and folded into the traditions of high art. Rauschenberg, unaware of his role in the growing tensions between the state and artists, preferred Cuba for his ROCI project for peace and communication for the reasons addressed above. In sum, his presence there served to bolster his image as a radical artist in the eyes of the American public, it enabled him to express his disapproval of the Reagan administration, and he was warmly embraced by Cuban officials.

As Retamar observes in his catalogue essay for *ROCI CUBA*: "One day, gas stations will be romantic ruins. Mr. Rauschenberg, so rooted in our time, nevertheless lives in that future day." With an eye toward the future, his home country, and the flashbulbs of news reporters, Rauschenberg presented *Hibiscus Fever* to the people of Cuba, where it was welcomed by official hands. The painting's ambiguous message can be seen as a counterpart to the image that the Cuban government endeavored to project to the world, one that conspicuously excluded the voices of a young generation of artists who they perceived as a threat to revolutionary ideals. Even though the heated moment has passed, *Hibiscus Fever* works like an afterimage of those interchanges in the collection of the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Cuba.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Rauschenberg initiated the Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange (ROCI) in Mexico in 1985, and it subsequently traveled to nine additional countries over the course of six years: Chile (1985), Venezuela (1985), China (1985), Tibet (1985), Japan (1986), Cuba (1988), USSR (1989), Berlin (1990), and Malaysia (1990).
- 2 As part of Rauschenberg's ROCI program, each country received one of his artworks produced for them, a selection that was planned in advance. He would then present the work to an artist or arts supporter during the public opening of the exhibition. The gesture, however, was symbolic. Since Rauschenberg was concerned about the artwork's conservation, he ensured its safe reception into the collection of a national institution for the arts.

- 3 Donald Saff, "A Conversation about Art and ROCI, with Robert Rauschenberg," in *Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1991), p. 171.
- 4 Rauschenberg's ROCI Letter of Intention, also known as "Tobago Statement," written in Tobago, October 22, 1984. Chun-Wuei Su Chien papers. A56, RRFA-05: Box 4, Folder 1. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York.
- 5 ROCI Press Kit, undated. RRFA-10. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York, p. 3.
- 6 Hiroko Ikegami, "Introduction: Discovering 'The Great Migrator,'" in *The Great Migrator: Robert Rauschenberg and the Global Rise of American Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2010), p. 11.
- 7 Helen L. Kohen, "An Odyssey to Encourage World Peace," *Miami Herald*, February 21, 1988.
- 8 ROCI's concluding exhibition was held at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., in 1991.
- 9 Robert S. Mattison, "ROCI in Chile," in *Robert Rauschenberg: Breaking Boundaries* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 251.
- 10 Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange, statement by Donald Saff for *ROCI CUBA*, 1988. Donald Saff records on Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange (ROCI). A84, RRFA-10: Box 19. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York.
- 11 Rosalind Krauss, "Perpetual Inventory," *October* 88 (Spring 1999), p. 97.
- 12 Barbara Rose, *Rauschenberg* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987), p. 23.
- 13 Rose, *Rauschenberg*, pp. 52–53.
- 14 Calvin Tomkins, *Off the Wall: A Portrait of Robert Rauschenberg* (New York: Picador, 1980), pp. 114, 115.
- 15 Saff, "A Conversation about Art and ROCI," p. 176.
- 16 See color contact sheets for *ROCI CUBA*, ACC7, Box 7, 87-A through F. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York.
- 17 Krauss, "Perpetual Inventory," p. 115.
- 18 Denes Husty, "Tense Relations with Cuba Will Continue, Expert Says," *News-Press*, January 19, 1988.
- 19 Krauss, "Perpetual Inventory," p. 107.
- 20 Ikegami, "Introduction," p. 13.
- 21 Joseph B. Treaster, "Downward Spiral for U.S.-Cuba Ties," *New York Times*, May 2, 1987.
- 22 "Chronology," Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, www.rauschenbergfoundation.org (accessed April 15, 2021).
- 23 Krauss, "Perpetual Inventory," p. 97.
- 24 During his press conference in Havana, Rauschenberg admitted that although the ROCI team applied for visas from the U.S. State Department, not all visas had been processed. See Robert Rauschenberg, transcription of audio from ROCI Press Conference at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Havana, February 6, 1988. RRFA-01. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York, p. 5.
- 25 Robert Rauschenberg, transcription of audio from ROCI Press Conference, p. 4.
- 26 Rauschenberg refers to ROCI as apolitical on multiple occasions. See Rose, *Rauschenberg*, p. 107, and his interview with Donald Saff in *Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1991), p. 160. For more on the Chilean reception of ROCI, see Vitoria Hadba, "Yankee Go Home," Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, https://www.rauschenbergfoundation.org/sites/default/files/Hadba_YankeeGoHome.pdf (accessed March 20, 2021), and Mattison, "ROCI in Chile."
- 27 Robert Rauschenberg, transcription of audio from ROCI Press Conference, 5.
- 28 Saff, "A Conversation about Art and ROCI," p. 172.
- 29 Robert Rauschenberg, K. Robinson transcription of M. L. Kotz audio tape and notes from ROCI Student Conference at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Havana, February 11, 1988. RRFA-01. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York, p. 2.

- 30 Robert Rauschenberg, transcription of audio from ROCI Press Conference, p. 2
- 31 Robert Rauschenberg, audio tape and notes from ROCI Student Conference, p. 3.
- 32 Saff, "A Conversation about Art and ROCI," p. 166.
- 33 Toni Piñera, "Inaugura Hart La Exposición de Rauschenberg," *Granma*, February 11, 1988. My translation.
- 34 Rachel Weiss, "Performing Revolution: Arte Calle, Grupo Provisional, and the Response to the Cuban National Crisis, 1986–1989," in *Collectivism after Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination after 1945*, ed. Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), p. 122.
- 35 Fidel Castro, "Declaration of the First National Congress of Education and Culture," in "Casa de las Américas" nos. 65–66 (March–June 1971), pp. 4–19, quoted from <https://rialta.org/declaracion-del-primer-congreso-nacional-de-educacion-y-cultura/> (accessed March 20, 2021).
- 36 Weiss, "Performing Revolution," pp. 145–46.
- 37 Gerardo Mosquera, "Cuba in Tania Bruguera's Work: The Body Is the Social Body," in *Tania Bruguera: On the Political Imaginary*, exh. cat. (Milan: Charta, 2009), p. 30.
- 38 Weiss, "Performing Revolution," p. 129.
- 39 *Ibid.*, pp. 137, 159.
- 40 *Ibid.*, pp. 127–28.
- 41 See *Ibid.*, p. 128.
- 42 *Ibid.*, p. 156.
- 43 Gerardo Mosquera, "New Cuban Art Y2K," in *Art Cuba: The New Generation* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2001), p. 13.
- 44 Holly Block and Glenda Leon, "Selected Chronology and Exhibition History," in *Art Cuba: The New Generation* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2001), p. 162.
- 45 Gerardo Mosquera, "The New Cuban Art," in *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition: Politicized Art under Late Socialism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p. 239.