

ROCI China and the Prospects of “Post-West” Contemporaneity

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This article reassesses the critical significance of Robert Rauschenberg’s collaborations with artisans and government institutions within the People’s Republic of China (PRC) as part of the Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Interchange (ROCI).¹ These collaborations culminated in the exhibition *ROCI China* at the China Art Gallery, Beijing, in 1985. Artworks by Rauschenberg showcased in *ROCI China* have been internationally upheld as seminal contributions towards the establishment of a cosmopolitan and technically diverse modern (*xiandai*) / contemporary (*dangdai*) art inside the PRC through the meeting of Euro-American as well as international modernisms and postmodernisms with localized Chinese cultural thought and practice.

The official website of the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation asserts that *ROCI China* “provided a rare view of Western contemporary art. In a country where traditional media and methods were the artistic norm, Rauschenberg’s unusual choice of materials and techniques was eye-opening.”² Identified implicitly as the “artistic norm” by that still residually Greenbergian assertion are the painterly and calligraphic ink-and-brush techniques associated for more than a millennium with China’s dynastic-imperial cultural traditions and the “kitsch” academicism of Maoist socialist realism.³

At the time it was staged, *ROCI China* was celebrated both as a significant advance in localized artistic thought and practice and in international relations by government officials, artists, and critics in the PRC. A related exhibition in the USA, *Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Interchange: ROCI USA*, staged in 1991 at the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, received decidedly mixed reviews. Some saw the exhibition as an unwelcome manifestation of Western cultural imperialism.

1 The meanings signified by the acronym ROCI vary, sometimes within the same text, between the “Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Interchange” and the “Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Initiative.” See, for example, “Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Initiative (ROCI),” *Robert Rauschenberg Foundation*, accessed July 28, 2020, <https://www.rauschenbergfoundation.org/art/art-in-context/roci>. A book summarizing the ROCI was published to accompany the exhibition *Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Interchange: ROCI USA* (1991); see Robert Rauschenberg, *ROCI: Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Interchange* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1991).

2 “Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Initiative (ROCI).”

3 See Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” *Partisan Review* 6, no. 5 (1939): 34–39; Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” *Art and Literature* 4 (1965): 193–201.

Global geopolitical circumstances have changed significantly during the last three decades. In the wake of post-Cold War globalization, progressive discourses of Western imperialism have turned to frame their criticism in the form of a now transculturally oriented decolonialism. While the USA remains, at least for the time being, the only truly global superpower, there has also been a marked shift of socioeconomic, military, and cultural power away from the West.

The PRC is a major instigator of this shift. The growing prominence of the PRC on the world stage and the competition between the PRC and the USA is accompanied by increasingly strident nationalist exceptionalisms on both sides. In the USA, this is exemplified by former President Donald Trump's protectionist doctrine "America first," and in the PRC by President Xi Jinping's "wolf-warrior diplomacy," which refers to the pursuit of an assertive patriotic socialism both at home and in an arguably neo-colonialist-imperialist manner on the world stage.⁴ The current standoff between the USA and the PRC can be understood as part of a wider condition of intensely interconnected and conspicuously factional "post-West" contemporaneity, to which Peter Osborne has appended the paradoxical notion "unity in difference."⁵ Recent scholarly debates have identified a shift from the perceived conditions of postmodernity to those of contemporaneity. Within these debates, the present period is seen as being marked by a conspicuous diversity of sociocultural perspectives beyond those associated with Euro-American as well as international modernisms and postmodernisms. A key factor in the emergence of contemporaneity has been post-Cold War globalization, which has resulted in a heightened state of global transcultural connectivity in addition to shifts in economic and cultural power away from a previously dominant West.⁶ This article reassesses the critical significances of *ROCI China* in light of these changing circumstances.

This article is also a response to absences in scholarly literature. Although a number of factual accounts of *ROCI China* have been published in contexts art-historical and otherwise,⁷ a searching analysis of the exhibition's

4 Zhu Zhiqun, "Interpreting China's 'Wolf-Warrior Diplomacy': What Explains the Sharper Tone to China's Overseas Conduct Recently?" *The Diplomat*, May 15, 2020, accessed February 16, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/05/interpreting-chinas-wolf-warrior-diplomacy/>.

5 Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013). See also Paul Gladston, *Contemporary Chinese Art, Aesthetic Modernity and Zhang Peili* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019).

6 See Terry Smith, "Introduction: The Contemporary Question," in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, ed. Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, and Nancy Condee (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 1–20.

7 See, for example, Ikegami Hiroko, "ROCI East: Rauschenberg's Encounters in China," in *East-West Interchanges in American Art: A Long and Tumultuous Relationship*, ed. Cynthia J. Mills, Lee

relationship to the particularity of China’s locally dominant artworlds is notably absent from the existing academic literature. In addition, there is no critically theorized analysis of the differing and shifting receptions of *ROCI China* within and outside the PRC.

This article first describes the actions and events related to the staging of *ROCI China*, after which it situates the exhibition in relation to an imbricating succession of modernizing artworlds particular to China during the twentieth century. In light of this particular succession, *ROCI China* can be interpreted as part of an extended relay of mutually constitutive transcultural interchanges between the artworlds of China, Euro-America, and other Westernized spaces. *ROCI China*’s significances are thus subject not only to the diffractive effects of multilateral appropriations-translations,⁸ but also to parallaxes—apparent shifts in the location and/or direction of an object when viewed from differing standpoints—pertaining to divergent Chinese and Western/ized⁹ discursive perspectives on the significance of art. The intersectional combination of these perspectives can be understood, in turn, to deconstruct the supposedly seminal standing of *ROCI China* while continuing to inform a historically dominant cultural exceptionalism within the PRC, which is now amplified by the intensely interconnected, yet conspicuously factional condition of, “post-West” contemporaneity. The article concludes by projecting *ROCI China* beyond the seeming paradox of its differing receptions as an index of a multi-dimensional non-synthetic criticality¹⁰ resistant to both Chinese and Western authoritarianism.

Glazer, and Amelia A. Goerlitz (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press, 2012), 176–189; Tidings Chan, “His Chinese Legacy: Robert Rauschenberg’s Impact and Influence in Post-1985 Chinese Contemporary Art and Art Policy” (Master’s thesis, Georgetown University, 2010).

8 The term “appropriations-translations” is used here to refer to the shifting of signifying texts, objects, and actions from one spatio-temporal context to another and the diffractions of meaning resulting from those shifts.

9 The term “Western/ized” is coined here to refer to Euro-American as well as other spaces that have developed in accordance with modernizing Western post-Enlightenment thinking and practice.

10 Euro-American modernism tends to view criticality rationally in terms of dialectical opposition and progressive synthetic resolutions of difference, as exemplified by Marxian-Hegelianism. Postmodernist and contemporary criticality has tended to lean away from such rationalist thinking toward more oblique forms of critical intervention that negate authority through productivity rather than synthesis of meaning.

The ROCI and *ROCI China*¹¹

Public exhibitions of American modernist and postmodernist art first became possible within the PRC following the acceptance of Deng Xiaoping's so-called policy of "Reform and Opening-up" (*gaige kaifang*) by the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in December 1978¹² and the end of a subsequent series of governmental campaigns (*yundong*) aimed at controlling the impact of Western liberalism on Chinese society. The earliest of these public exhibitions included an exhibition of twentieth century American abstract art from the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, staged at the China Art Gallery, Beijing (now the National Art Museum), and the Shanghai Museum in 1981, as well as an exhibition of works by the internationally renowned American artist and doyen of postmodernism, Robert Rauschenberg, titled *ROCI China* and staged at the China Art Gallery, Beijing, in 1985.

Both exhibitions had a significant impact on the development of contemporary art within the PRC during the mid- to late-1980s: the former on the emergence of a non-figurative abstraction previously unseen in mainland China,¹³ and the latter on the adoption of post-Duchampian collage-montage and defamiliarization techniques by artists associated with the '85 New Wave (*'85 xinlang chao*). The '85 New Wave was a nationwide movement widely credited with the establishment of modern/contemporary art throughout the PRC during the second half of the 1980s. Artists associated with this movement produced China's first conceptual, video, installation, and performance artworks.¹⁴

ROCI China was organized as part of the Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Interchange (ROCI), a series of cultural exchanges and accompanying exhibitions staged in ten countries across the world at the height of the Cold War, between 1984 and 1991. These exhibitions showcased works by Rauschenberg, some of which had been produced in collaboration with local

11 This section contains information on the exhibition history and chronology of ROCI and *ROCI China* drawn from the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation website. See "Exhibition History," *Robert Rauschenberg Foundation*, accessed July 30, 2020, <https://www.rauschenbergfoundation.org/artist/exhibition-history>; "Chronology," *Robert Rauschenberg Foundation*, accessed July 30, 2020, <https://www.rauschenbergfoundation.org/artist/chronology>.

12 Reform and Opening-up has formed the basis of the PRC's prodigious modernization during the last four decades.

13 Paul Gladston, *Yu Youhan* (Hong Kong: 3030 Press, 2015).

14 Fei Dawei 费大为, *'85 Xinchao: Zhongguo diyici dangdai yishu yundong '85新潮: 中国第一次当代艺术运动* [*'85 New Wave: The Birth of Chinese Contemporary Art*] (Beijing: Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, 2007). See also Paul Gladston, *"Avant-Garde" Art Groups in China, 1979–1989* (Bristol: Intellect, 2013).

artists and artisans.¹⁵ The ROCI was conceived by Rauschenberg as a “peace mission” to enable the establishment of mutually beneficial cultural links between the liberal-democratic West and other “developing” or “totalitarian” spaces.¹⁶ In October 1984, Rauschenberg visited the Caribbean island of Tobago where he wrote the “Tobago Statement,” which set out the aims and scope of the ROCI. In that statement, Rauschenberg comments,

I feel strong in my beliefs, based on my varied and widely traveled collaborations, that a one-to-one contact through art contains potent peaceful powers, and is the most non-elitist way to share exotic and common information, seducing us into creative mutual understandings for the benefit of all. ... Art is educating, provocative, and enlightening even when first not understood. The very creative confusion stimulates curiosity and growth, leading to trust and tolerance. To share our intimate eccentricities proudly will bring us all closer.¹⁷

The idea that art could positively intervene in the starkly oppositional politics of the Cold War by bringing societies and cultures together through a shared artistic language was reiterated by Rauschenberg in an interview conducted in 1990 regarding the international progress of ROCI:

One of the reasons that I am so thankful that I’m an artist is that the language of being an artist works anywhere. There is no country that is so rich or so poor that they don’t have an artistic culture. Artists always understand each other... I even feel restricted with the world as small as it is already. I’m trying to take advantage of as much as possible.¹⁸

As such, Rauschenberg’s vision can be understood to carry traces of earlier international and cosmopolitan romantic, socialist, and countercultural

15 “Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Initiative (ROCI),” Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, accessed July 28, 2020, <https://www.rauschenbergfoundation.org/art/art-in-context/roci>.

16 Ikegami Hiroko, “Part I. ‘Art Has No Borders’: Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange,” *Post: Notes on Art in a Global Context*, Museum of Modern Art, December 6, 2017, accessed July 20, 2020, <https://post.moma.org/part-1-art-has-no-borders-rauschenberg-overseas-culture-interchange/>.

17 Robert Rauschenberg, quoted in “Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Interchange (ROCI): Rauschenberg and a Tibetan Official at the Opening Ceremony for ROCI Tibet, 1985,” *Robert Rauschenberg Foundation*, accessed July 28, 2020, <https://www.rauschenbergfoundation.org/art/art-in-context/roci>.

18 Robert Rauschenberg, “A Conversation about Art and ROCI,” 1990, quoted in Minneapolis Institute of Art, “Park/ROCI Mexico, 1985,” *Minneapolis Institute of Art*, accessed July 20, 2020, <http://collections.artsmia.org/art/116538/park-roci-mexico-robert-rauschenberg>.

movements that strove for a progressive world without borders.¹⁹ Rauschenberg launched the ROCI at the United Nations, New York, on 13 December 1984. Unable to secure sufficient funding from an inwardly focused American artworld, Rauschenberg underwrote the costs of ROCI himself.

Rauschenberg first visited the PRC from 10 June to 14 July 1982 in order to work on a collaborative project set up by the Los Angeles-based print studio Gemini G.E.L. He initially traveled throughout China for three weeks, visiting cities and archaeological sites and meeting with students and artists in Beijing, before spending two weeks working in Anhui province on a series of collages titled *7 Characters*, which used handmade paper supplied by the Xuan paper mill in Jingxian—reputedly the world’s oldest.²⁰ Rauschenberg’s collaboration with the Xuan paper mill was indirect. After arriving in Jingxian, the artist found himself barred from the mill because of fears that he would appropriate the secrets of traditional Chinese paper-making (a reflection of historical trade protectionism within China).²¹ Rauschenberg responded by establishing a workshop of his own nearby. Paper was produced in accordance with instructions relayed to artisans working at the mill and then delivered to the workshop for further working.²²

7 Characters comprises 491 unique collages in seven suites mounted on thirty-ply Xuan paper. Images from posters found by Rauschenberg in Shanghai were attached to a layer of silk, which were then overlaid with thin transparent paper. Individual collages are intended to signify one of seven terms—“change,” “howl,” “individual,” “light,” “red heart,” “trunk,” and “truth”—as depicted by Mandarin Chinese characters added in pulp relief. On his return to the USA later that year, Rauschenberg applied gold leaf to the edges of the

19 Within Euro-American post-Enlightenment discourses there is a persistent strain of thought that looks beyond arbitrary divisions between nation states and toward global cosmopolitanism as a basis for community. This strain runs through diverse “movements,” including nineteenth century romanticism, international socialism, and the late twentieth century counterculture, as well as the more recent development of so-called “woke” culture. Emily Sun, “Shelley’s Voice: Poetry, Internationalism, and Solidarity,” *European Romantic Review* 30, no. 3 (2019): 239–247, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509585.2019.1612564>; Carsten Holbraad, “Socialist Internationalism,” in *Internationalism and Nationalism in European Political Thought*, ed. Carsten Holbraad (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2003), 67–89, <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781403982315>; Rio Goldhammer, “New Globalism: A Counterculture That Could Redraw the World Map,” *The Conversation*, January 6, 2017, accessed February 19, 2021, <http://theconversation.com/new-globalism-a-counterculture-that-could-redraw-the-world-map-69390>.

20 See Larry Rohter, “China: A Brush with the Master,” *Newsweek*, August 2, 1982; Robert Rauschenberg, “Interview with Tono, Yoshiaki,” in *ROCI JAPAN* (Tokyo: Setagaya Museum of Art, 1986), 11–12; “Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Initiative (ROCI).”

21 *Xuanzhi*, or Xuan paper, was first manufactured in China during the Tang Dynasty (618–907) in Jing County in the Xuan Prefecture (Xuanzhou), from whence its name derives. Xuan paper has traditionally been used along with silk as a support for ink-and-brush painting and calligraphy in China.

22 Ikegami, “ROCI East,” 179–180.

paper and attached a cloth medallion to each collage (see figs. 1 and 2). The exhibition, *Rauschenberg in China*, staged at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, between 2 December 1982 and 1 February 1983, featured works from the *7 Characters* series. Works from the series were also included in *ROCI China* and other ROCI exhibitions.



Fig. 1. Robert Rauschenberg, *Individual* (from *7 Characters*), 1982. Silk, ribbon, paper, paper-pulp relief, ink, and gold leaf on handmade Xuan paper, with mirror, framed in a Plexiglas box. 43 x 31 x 2 1/2 inches (109.2 x 78.7 x 6.4 cm). ©Robert Rauschenberg Foundation.²³

Fig. 2. Robert Rauschenberg, *Individual* (from *7 Characters*), 1982. Silk, ribbon, paper, paper-pulp relief, ink, and gold leaf on handmade Xuan paper, with mirror, framed in a Plexiglas box. 43 x 31 x 2 1/2 inches (109.2 x 78.7 x 6.4 cm). ©Robert Rauschenberg Foundation.²⁴



23 From an edition of seventy unique variations, published by Gemini G.E.L., Los Angeles. RRF Registration #82.E017.

24 RRF Registration #82.E019.

During his visit to the PRC in 1982, Rauschenberg proposed an exhibition of his work to the Chinese Ministry of Culture. Work toward the exhibition began but was stymied by the onset of the so-called “Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign” (*Qingchu jingshen wuran yundong*) (October–December 1983), which was initiated by conservative elements of the CCP with the aim of suppressing growing calls for the establishment of Western-style liberalism as part of Reform and Opening-up. Planning resumed in 1984 after the implementation of a new CCP initiative aimed at developing stronger ties with the West. The artist’s stated commitment to internationalism and the peace movement, both of which resonated with the officially non-aligned status of the PRC during the Cold War, aided Rauschenberg’s work within the PRC, including the staging of *ROCI China*.²⁵ Rauschenberg’s avoidance of any direct criticism of the CCP also made him a relatively safe prospect as a visiting artist.

Rauschenberg subsequently visited Japan on two occasions in 1982, between 15 July–31 August and 22 September–8 October, to initiate the production of two series of works in collaboration with the Otsuka Ohmi Ceramics Company, Shigaraki: *Japanese Clayworks* (1982/1985) and *Japanese Recreational Clayworks* (1982–1983/1985/1989) (see figs. 3 and 4). Individual works from these series were exhibited at *ROCI China*. Back in the USA during the autumn of 1982, Rauschenberg produced a 75 cm high x 30.5 m long mural of photographs he took while travelling in the PRC. The composite image, *Chinese Summerhall* (1982), as well as a number of accompanying studies (see figs. 5 and 6) were included in an International Festival of Photography staged at Arles, France, between 3 July–6 August 1983, as well as in *ROCI China*.



Fig. 3. Robert Rauschenberg, *Dirt Shrine: South* (Japanese Clayworks), 1982. Transfer on high-fired ceramic. 120 x 179 1/2 x 75 inches (304.8 x 455.9 x 190.5 cm). ©Robert Rauschenberg Foundation.²⁶

25 Chan, “His Chinese Legacy,” 93.

26 RRF Registration #82.080.

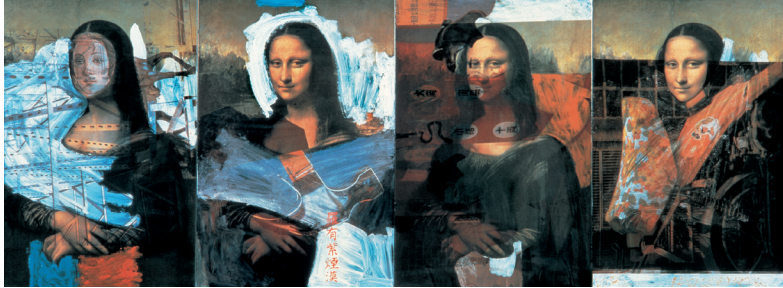


Fig. 4. Robert Rauschenberg, *Pneumonia Lisa (Japanese Recreational Claywork)*, 1982. Transfer on high-fired Japanese art ceramic. 32 1/4 x 86 5/8 x 2 1/4 inches (81.9 x 220 x 5.8 cm). ©Robert Rauschenberg Foundation.²⁷



Fig. 5. Robert Rauschenberg, *Studies for Chinese Summerhall #V*, 1984. Chromogenic print. 30 x 99 3/4 inches (76.2 x 253.4 cm). University of South Florida, Tampa. ©Robert Rauschenberg Foundation.²⁸



Fig. 6. Robert Rauschenberg, *Chinese Summerhall*, 1982, Chromogenic print and fabric collage backing to be used if it is installed in a free-hanging situation. 30 x 1200 inches (76.2 x 3048 cm). ©Robert Rauschenberg Foundation.²⁹

27 RRF Registration #82.087.

28 From an edition of twenty-five, published by Graphicstudio. RRF Registration #84.E016.

29 Edition of five. RRF Registration #82.070.

ROCI China was the first major solo exhibition of work by a living American artist held publicly within the PRC. It was hugely ambitious in scale, occupying four exhibition halls at Beijing's National Art Museum and covering 2,250 square meters. It received significant public interest, attracting over 300,000 visitors during its three-week run between 18 November–8 December 1985. The exhibition also attracted significant coverage in art magazines and general press within the PRC, including in the then newly established CCP-owned English language newspaper, *China Daily*.³⁰

Exhibited at *ROCI China* alongside mixed-media works by Rauschenberg (see figs. 7, 8, and 9) were films about the artist, the *ROCI*, and American culture. Taking place in conjunction with the exhibition were performances by the Trisha Brown Dance Company, *Glacial Decoy* (1979) and *Set and Reset* (1983), staged at the Minzhu Wenhua Gong Theatre, Beijing, on 17 and 19 November. In preparation for *ROCI China*, the walls of the designated exhibition spaces at the National Art Museum were painted white and temporary divisions added, in accordance with the stripped-down “white cube” format of museum and gallery display that was well-established within Western/ized artworld contexts at the time.³¹

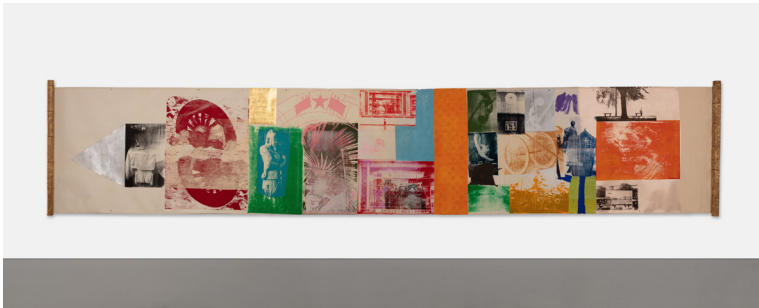


Fig. 7. Robert Rauschenberg, *Untitled / ROCI CHINA, 1985*. Silkscreen ink, acrylic, fabric, gold and silver leaf, and graphite on fabric-laminated paper with rattan. 68 1/8 x 366 1/8 x 4 3/8 inches (173 x 930 x 11.2 cm). ©Robert Rauschenberg Foundation.³²

30 S. P. Jin, “Rauschenberg’s Riddles,” *China Daily*, November 28, 1985; Su Chun Wuei, “Rauschenberg and His ‘International Exhibition Tour,’” *Tibet Daily*, November 30, 1985, 4; and articles by Kong Chang’an 孔长安, Li Jiātun 李家屯, Yu Feng 郁风, Yuan Xiaojin 远小近, Zhao Jianhai 赵建海, Zhu Ye 朱叶, and Zheng Shengtian 郑胜天 in *Zhongguo meishubao* 中國美術報 [Fine Arts in China] 22 (December 21, 1985).

31 Ikegami Hiroko, “Part 2. ‘Art Has No Borders’: Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange,” *Post: Notes on Art in a Global Context*, Museum of Modern Art, December 13, 2017, accessed July 20, 2020, <https://post.moma.org/part-2-art-has-no-borders-rauschenberg-overseas-culture-interchange/>.

32 RRF Registration #85.078.



Fig. 8. Robert Rauschenberg, 28 Famous Murders with Poems (Kabala American Zephyr), 1981. Solvent transfer, acrylic, and Plexiglas on wood construction. 93 x 94 x 94 inches (236.2 x 238.8 x 238.8 cm). Robert Rauschenberg Foundation.³³



Fig. 9. Robert Rauschenberg, Prehistoric Rose Spore (Kabala American Zephyr), 1981. Mixed media construction. 34 1/2 x 76 1/2 x 15 1/4 inches (87.6 x 194.3 x 38.7 cm). ©Robert Rauschenberg Foundation.³⁴

33 RRF Registration #81.046.

34 RRF Registration #81.054.

Rauschenberg was awarded a Certificate of Merit by the Ministry of Culture, Beijing, for *ROCI China*'s furtherance of cultural exchange. This official acclaim was matched by a largely positive reception of the exhibition by artists and critics within the PRC, including key figures subsequently associated with the '85 New Wave, many of whom attended the exhibition, with some traveling from outside Beijing explicitly for this purpose. Artists and critics who attended *ROCI China*—among them the artists Xu Bing, Zhang Peili, and Wang Guangyi, as well as the critics Gao Minglu and Li Xianting—welcomed the exhibition not only as an insight into a cosmopolitan post-Duchampian artworld previously kept from public view by CCP censorship, but also as a model on which to develop art outside of the established strictures of Maoist socialist realism and the staid predictability of China's literati-Confucian artistic traditions.³⁵

Writing the following year, Gao Minglu acknowledged *ROCI China* as a significant factor in the development of the '85 New Wave:

The Robert Rauschenberg exhibition held in the China Art Gallery in Beijing was the most exciting foreign exhibition to be held in the country for many years. As Chinese artists were looking for new ideas, while suffering from the narrow limits of permitted thought, the exhibition came as an important breakthrough. And even though the works were “old tricks” from the 1960s, in China's special environment, they seemed very new.³⁶

ROCI China's standing as a seminal contribution to the development of Chinese contemporary art has persisted within specialist artworld circles, as the celebratory exhibition “Rauschenberg in China” staged at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing, in 2016 attests.³⁷ However, according to local press reports, the public reception of *ROCI China* at the time of its staging was not so positive, with some visitors (both Chinese and expatriate) voicing their criticism of “everyday objects presented as art.”³⁸

35 Zhu Ye, “Beijing Theorists' Reactions to the Art of Robert Rauschenberg,” in *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, ed. Wu Hung and Peggy Wang (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 42–45.

36 Gao Minglu, “The 1985 New Wave Art Movement,” in *China's New Art, Post-1989: With a Retrospective from 1979–1989*, ed. Valerie C. Doran, trans. Don J. Cohn (Hong Kong: Hanart TZ Gallery, 1993), civ–cvii; cvi. This is a reprint of an article first published as: Gao Minglu 高名潞, “Bawu meishu yundong” '85美術運動, *Meishujia tongxun* 美術家通訊 [Artists' Newsletter], 5 (1986): 15–23.

37 See “Rauschenberg in China,” *Ullens Center for Contemporary Art*, 2016, accessed December 3, 2020, <https://ucca.org.cn/en/exhibition/robert-rauschenberg-2/>.

38 Chan, “His Chinese Legacy,” 71.

ROCI China took place in the emerging context of post-Cold War globalization. Between the end of the Anti-Spiritual Pollution campaign and the Tiananmen killings of 4 June 1989, the PRC became significantly more open to the socio-culturally progressive possibilities of Western-style liberalism in the context of Reform and Opening-up—an openness re-embraced with varying degrees of commitment between the lifting of the post-Tiananmen crackdown in 1992 and the installation of the strongly nationalistic Xi Jinping as president of the PRC in 2013.

ROCI China’s positive specialist reception within the PRC contrasts with that of *Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange: ROCI USA*, which some critics within the USA saw as a “renaissance” in Rauschenberg’s work and others viewed as culturally arrogant and imperialistic.³⁹ The latter view reflected the increasing prominence of postcolonialist, postmodernist discourses within Western/ized artworlds that were skeptical of Euro-American modernism’s inherent universalism.⁴⁰ It also presaged revelations about the co-option of modernism for the USA’s international projection of soft power during the Cold War.⁴¹

Similar criticisms were privately leveled at Rauschenberg during his time in the PRC, including by members of the Stars (*Xingxing*) art group, who perceived *ROCI China* as being more about the furtherance of Rauschenberg’s international career than any meaningful engagement with the Chinese artworld.⁴² Rauschenberg issued a statement separately in which he wrote that the purpose of *ROCI* was to “introduce the peoples of a country to themselves and to each other [by showing them] things so familiar that they’ve lost their meaning,”⁴³ which did little to detract from such criticisms.

In spite of its mixed receptions within the USA and the PRC, the *ROCI* now appears highly prescient of the globalized artworld that has developed since the end of the Cold War. Indeed, aspects of Rauschenberg’s vision have now been effectively enshrined both through the espousal of post-Duchampian

39 Ikegami, “‘Art Has No Borders.’” This article states: “The *New York Times* critic Roberta Smith described the concept as ‘at once altruistic and self-aggrandizing,’ while another reviewer even called Rauschenberg an ‘art imperialist’ who lived as a ‘big-time visiting American aided by ambassadors and surrounded by his entourage.’” The latter comments can be found in Paul Richard, “Silk Sheets and Neon Bicycles: At the National Gallery, the Extravagant ‘Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange,’” *Washington Post*, May 12, 1991, G1.

40 See Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 57–93, 245–282, 303–337.

41 See Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: The New Press, 2001).

42 Chan, “His Chinese Legacy,” 68.

43 Chan, “His Chinese Legacy,” 68.

techniques by contemporary artists worldwide and by the globalized artworld's institutionalized desire to promote sociocultural diversity and connectivity beyond the restrictive limitations of national sovereignty.

Recently, the outlook of the post-Cold War globalized artworld has been overshadowed by the re-emergence of a much starker *Realpolitik*. The shifting of power away from the West as an outcome of globalization has resulted in a return to assertive exceptionalisms worldwide, epitomized by an increasingly frosty economic and political stand-off between China and the USA. This stand-off, which has been described by some commentators as “Cold War 2.0,”⁴⁴ has further hardened with the de-globalizing⁴⁵ impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and China's perceived failures in halting the global spread of the virus. Rauschenberg's vision of a world brought together peacefully through shared cultural understanding now appears to be receding.

China's modernizing artworlds

Prior to the founding of republican China in 1912, Chinese dynastic-imperial high-art was dominated by thinking and practice associated for over a millennium with the principles and ideals of Confucianism. Confucianism became firmly established during the Tang dynasty (618–907) as the dominant outlook among dynastic-imperial China's administrative class—known in Mandarin Chinese as the *Shi*, and in Euro-American contexts as the literati. Confucianism sought to maintain a stable hierarchical social order based on respect for tradition as well as ritualized reciprocities between individuals, human society, nature, and heaven. From the Tang dynasty onwards, Confucianism was informed by the non-rationalist outlooks of Daoism and Buddhism. The resulting discursive agglomeration is sometimes referred to as syncretic Confucianism.

Aligned with Confucian principles and ideals were artistic practices among the *Shi*, including the composition of poetry, calligraphy, and ink and brush painting. Successful execution of such artworks was considered indexical of the capacity of the *Shi* to bring the otherwise disordered human mind spontaneously into harmonious accord with nature and, by association, to administer the Chinese dynastic-imperial state wisely.

As part of their artistic practices, the *Shi* favored *shan-shui* (mountains and water) landscape painting produced through the medium of ink and brush on paper or silk. This genre of painting is characterized by topographic

44 Christopher Joye, “Welcome to Cold War 2.0,” *Australian Financial Review*, May 29, 2020, accessed May 29, 2020, <https://www.af.com/wealth/investing/welcome-to-cold-war-2-0-20200527-p54x0c>.

45 The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a significant rolling back of the physical connectivity brought about by post-Cold War globalization and, as a consequence, a decline in the world's economy.

relations of foreground, mid-ground, and background—sometimes referred to as the “three prominences”—organized through combinations of aerial perspective, multiple viewpoints, and relative pictorial scale rather than strict geometrical perspective. Literati-Confucian painting also combines passages of painterly depiction drawing on the observable qualities of actual landscapes with untouched areas of paper or silk—signifying cloud, mist, or intervening atmosphere.⁴⁶ The overall effect of this style is to set up a shuttling between the abstractness of picture-making and realistic illusory depiction, as well as a sense of multiple shifting spatial and temporal viewpoints.⁴⁷

The formal tropes of literati-Confucian painting are underwritten by a constellation of concepts related to Daoist/Buddhist non-rationalism. Among these are *qiyun shengdong* (vital-energy resonance), which conceives of a relay of felt reciprocities between artists, their subjects in nature, artworks, and viewers, and *xu-shi* (emptiness-substance), emphasizing formal reciprocities between seeming emptiness and repletion.⁴⁸ Both derive from Daoism’s non-rationalist, dualistic vision of an ultimately harmonizing cosmological reciprocity between the otherwise fundamentally opposed states of *yin* and *yang* (that which is turned negatively away from the light, and that which positively faces the light, respectively).⁴⁹

46 Paul Gladston and Lynne Howarth-Gladston, “Beyond Dialogue: Interpreting Recent Performances by Xiao Lu,” *Di’van: A Journal of Accounts* 5 (2019): 120–129; 124. For a discussion of the ways in which painterly representations of clouds can be understood to exceed perspectival geometry, see Hubert Damisch, *A Theory of Cloud: Toward a History of Painting* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002). The work of the contemporary artist Michael Cherney includes topographic comparisons of scenes depicted in historical *shan-shui* paintings with present-day photographic representations of their actual locations. Although there are discrepancies between the two, not least because of changes to the landscape in China as a result of modernization, it is nevertheless possible to discern existential relationships between the former and the latter. See albums related to Cherney’s work: Michael Cherney, *The Sun Is Not So Central* (self-pub., 2013), accessed January 6, 2020, <http://www.qiumai.net/ecatalogs/the%20sun%20is%20not%20so%20central.pdf>; Arnold Chang, Michael Cherney, and Jay Xu, *From Two Arises Three: The Collaborative Works of Arnold Chang and Michael Cherney 2009–2014* (New York: Early Spring Press, 2014); Michael Cherney, *Map of Mountains and Seas* (Self-pub., 2017), accessed January 6, 2020, <http://www.qiumai.net/ecatalogs/map%20of%20mountains%20and%20seas.pdf>.

47 Jerome Silbergeld, “On the Origins of Literati Painting,” in *A Companion to Chinese Art*, ed. Martin Joseph Powers and Katherine R. Tsiang (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 474–498.

48 Craig Yee, “Zheng Chongbin: The Classical Origins of Contemporary Abstraction,” *Ran Dian*, July 20, 2017, accessed July 20, 2020, http://www.randian-online.com/np_blog/the-classical-origins-of-contemporary-abstraction/; Jason C. Kuo, “Emptiness-Substance: Xushi,” in *A Companion to Chinese Art*, ed. Martin Joseph Powers and Katherine R. Tsiang (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 329–348.

49 Laozi, *Dao de jing*, as translated in Wang Keping, *The Classic of the Dao: A New Investigation* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2008), 76. For an extended discussion of the historical uses and development of the terms *yin* and *yang*, see Zhang Dainian, *Key Concepts in Chinese Philosophy*, trans. Edmund Ryden (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 83–94.

Syncretic Daoist/Buddhist inflected Confucian thinking also supports a capacity for resistance to overweening imperial authority among the *Shi*, signaled not through direct opposition but rather oblique departures from public life and established convention embodied by the *yimin*—scholars who withdraw into nature—and outlaw-like behavior associated with the term *jianghu* (literally, “rivers and lakes”).⁵⁰ Unlike the crucially distant modes of criticality envisaged by Euro-American post-Enlightenment aesthetic modernity, those of literati-Confucianism are intimately bound up with the practices of political governance.⁵¹

The twentieth century saw three significant modernizing shifts with regard to artistic discourses and practices within China involving the interweaving of literati-Confucian, realist, and modernist/postmodernist tendencies. The first of these, spanning the period from 1912 to 1949, involved the development of an early republican artworld characterized by the coexistence of a dominant officially sanctioned progressivist realism advocated by the Republic of China’s first minister of culture, Cai Yuanpei; a residual literati-Confucianism; and an emerging avant-garde modernism. The second, from 1949 to 1979, was an overwriting of early republican realism by Soviet-influenced socialist realism—prefaced by Mao Zedong in his “Yan’an Talks on Art and Literature” (1942)—alongside the persistence of literati-Confucian artistic practices adapted to Maoist ideology and an avant-garde-like diversification of visual media during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Finally, the third period, from 1979 onwards, saw the emergence of a modern/contemporary art that combined Western/ized modernism and postmodernism with localized cultural thinking and practice, and existed alongside persistent realist and literati-Confucian artistic practices adapted to official post-revolutionary ideology.⁵²

Although well beyond the scope of the present article, it is possible to trace an extended genealogy of comparably modernizing intersections between the cultural spheres of China and the Western/ized world stretching back to the seventeenth century.⁵³ This genealogy includes the impact of Chinese sociocultural discourses and practices on the construction of Euro-American post/modernity and of the latter on Chinese society and culture, not least through the expansion of Euro-American colonialism-imperialism.

50 Helena Yuen Wai, “A Journey across Rivers and Lakes: A Look at the Untranslatable Jianghu in Chinese Culture and Literature,” *452:F. Electronic Journal of Theory of Literature and Comparative Literature* 7 (2012): 58–71, https://www.452f.com/pdf/numero07/07_452f-mono-helena-yuen-wai-orgnl.pdf.

51 Jürgen Habermas, “Modernity versus Postmodernity,” *New German Critique* 22 (1981): 3–14.

52 For a more detailed account of all these periods of artistic discourse/practice in China, see Gladston, *Contemporary Chinese Art, Aesthetic Modernity and Zhang Peili*.

53 See Gladston, *Contemporary Chinese Art, Aesthetic Modernity and Zhang Peili*, 43–59.

The adoption of realism as a dominant mode of artistic expression in early republican and revolutionary China appears retrogressive and even kitsch from the standpoint of a contemporaneous Euro-American modernism fixated principally on abstraction, collage-montage, and defamiliarization as technical markers of artistic progress. The embracing of modernism within China during the country’s early republican period can be viewed in a similar light.⁵⁴ Included among those who embraced modernism within early republican China were members of the Shanghai-based Storm Society (*Juelanshe*), most of whom had been trained in Paris and/or Tokyo. Founded by the artists Ni Yide and Pang Xunqin in 1931, the Storm Society was China’s first identifiably modernist avant-garde art group. Although the Storm Society explicitly sought to align itself with the major European avant-garde art movements of the early twentieth century in its manifesto, including Cubism and Dadaism, in actuality the work produced by its members is relatively unchallenging from a contemporaneous Euro-American perspective, comprising as it does styles redolent of Western nineteenth-century post-impressionism and early twentieth century decorative modernism. In early republican China, where high-cultural tastes continued to reside with literati-Confucian artistic thinking and practice, the official adoption of realism and the emergence of modernist tendencies were, nevertheless, hugely challenging to established convention.

Mao Zedong’s death in 1976 ushered in a period of political turmoil in the PRC, including open public dissent against the authoritarian policies of the CCP. Deng’s resultant socioeconomic and political reforms aimed at quelling this turmoil also cleared the ground for alterations in official thinking with regard to the making and showing of art within the PRC. The CCP continued to uphold a directive issued shortly after the founding of New China in 1949 that held that art should realistically reflect the view of the masses and support the strategic aims of the party. In 1982, however, it was declared that strict subordination of literature and art to politics was an “incorrect formulation.” Parallel to Deng’s economic and social reforms were calls to redefine the role of Chinese culture, which drew from ideas of cultural enlightenment first developed in China during the 1920s and 1930s as well as from an emerging localized modernism. This looking back involved the national onset of a state of so-called “aesthetic fever” (*meixue re*) resonant with historical neo-Confucian connections between elevated poetic feeling and morality.

The successive emergence of so-called “modern” (*xiandai*) and “contemporary” (*dangdai*) art in the PRC after the dominance of revolutionary

54 See Ralph Croizier, “Post-Impressionists in Pre-War Shanghai: The Juelanshe (Storm Society) and the Fate of Modernism in Republican China,” in *Modern Art in Africa, Asia and Latin America: An Introduction to Global Modernisms*, ed. Elaine O’Brien, Evelyn Nicodemus, Melissa Chiu, Benjamin Genocchio, Mary K. Coffey, and Roberto Tejada (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 254–271.

socialist realism has been widely attributed to the first unofficial exhibition by a group known as the Stars at the end of September 1979. Works included in this exhibition not only diverged from the established stylistic conventions of Maoist socialist realism but also, in some cases, presented a thinly veiled allegorical criticism of Mao and the Cultural Revolution. In a conversation published in the journal *Meishu*, shortly after the closing of the September 1979 exhibition, leading members of the Stars describe their work as a response to the events of the Cultural Revolution.⁵⁵ In the same conversation, they also acknowledge the impact on their work of early twentieth century European and Chinese modernists, including Pablo Picasso, Käthe Kollwitz, and members of the Chinese Modern Woodcut Movement.⁵⁶ It is important to note that progressive art within the PRC during the 1980s was widely referred to as “modern” (*xiandai*) or “avant-garde” (*qianwei*) with partial reference to Chinese modernism of the early twentieth century. The adjective “contemporary” (*dangdai*) only came into widespread use within the PRC after 1989 as part of an increasing synchronization with the international artworld in the context of post-Cold War globalization.

It is into this particular practical-discursive context that Rauschenberg launched his collaborative activities within the PRC leading to the staging of *ROCI China*. *ROCI China* was the first major public exhibition within the PRC to involve direct existential links with twentieth century, Euro-American postmodernism. Unlike the Stars’ first exhibition, which was restricted to Beijing residents, *ROCI China* was seen first-hand by artists from across the PRC, many of whom were associated with the ’85 New Wave. Many of the artists who attended this exhibition subsequently adapted the post-Duchampian techniques used by Rauschenberg in their own work.⁵⁷ The now internationally acclaimed artist Xu Bing, for example, attended *ROCI China* and acknowledged that his installations are indebted to Rauschenberg’s combinatory techniques.⁵⁸ There are therefore grounds for regarding *ROCI China*’s impact on the development of modern/contemporary art within the PRC as more significant, in both practical and intellectual terms, than that of the Stars’ exhibition.

Artworks produced by the ’85 New Wave are characterized by a combination of ideas, styles, and techniques appropriated-translated from Euro-American modernism and postmodernism as well as local Chinese cultural thought and practice. Huang Yongping’s assemblages, *Big Roulette* and *Small Portable Roulette* (both 1987), for example, bring practices of cleromancy derived

55 Li, “About the Stars Exhibition,” 11–13.

56 Li, “About the Stars Exhibition.”

57 Ikegami, “ROCI East,” 178.

58 Ikegami, “ROCI East,” 182.

from the Chinese Classic *I Ching* (Book of Changes) together with collage-montage and chance techniques appropriated-translated from the Euro-American avant-gardes. An intentional relationship between those artworks and the American avant-garde composer John Cage’s signature use of chance techniques critically reverses the direction of the latter’s formation.⁵⁹ In the early 1950s, Cage began to adapt chance-directed practices taken from *I Ching* as part of his compositional methods.

As the critic Hou Hanru indicates, this reversal not only “suggests a process of constant change in the universe, the duality and interconnectedness of necessity and chance, of the rational and irrational, culture and anti-culture” commensurate with Daoist thought, “but also a strategy to launch ‘attacks’ on the legitimacy of the West-centric monopoly in intellectual and everyday life.”⁶⁰ Huang himself reportedly drew comparisons between Rauschenberg’s “free method” and the thinking of the Daoist scholar and critic of Confucian rationalism, Zhuangzi.⁶¹ The formal resonances between Rauschenberg’s *28 Famous Murders with Poems (Kabal American Zephyr)* (1981), shown in *ROCI China*, and Huang’s *Big Roulette* and *Small Portable Roulette* are undeniable.

Reassessing the critical significances of *ROCI China*

The transcultural appropriations-translations enacted by the ’85 New Wave in developing a modern/contemporary art within the PRC should not be considered straightforward transplantations from one cultural context to another. From the standpoint of poststructuralist theory and practice, such appropriations-translations, like the collage-montage/defamiliarization techniques of Euro-American modernism and postmodernism, can be shown to involve inescapable deconstructive diffractions of both material practices and significances.⁶² Consequently, what may be seen as derivative from the standpoint of the “originating” culture is of productive localized meaning from the standpoint of the “receiver.” Consider, for example, adaptations of Western artistic realism in the changing socio-political circumstances of early republican and revolutionary China. As Nikos Papastergiadis succinctly

59 For a discussion of the relationship of Daoist, Buddhist, and Confucian thinking and practice with installation art within and outside the PRC, see Chui Lee, “A Contemporary Interpretation of Daoism and Installation Art Practice” (DFA Thesis, RMIT University, 2014).

60 Hou Hanru, *On The Mid-Ground: Hou Hanru, Selected Texts*, ed. Hsiao-Hwei Yu (Hong Kong: Timezone 8 Ltd., 2002), 62.

61 Bowen Li, “Robert Rauschenberg—In Memory of an ‘Old Friend of Chinese People,’” *COBO Social*, June 24, 2016, accessed November 28, 2020, <https://www.cobosocial.com/dossiers/robert-rauschenberg-in-memory-of-an-old-friend-of-chinese-people/>.

62 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 53–56.

puts it, “the meaning of an original always shifts by the very process of being translated.”⁶³

Rauschenberg was clearly conscious, at least in general terms, of the diffractive effects of appropriation-translation before his first visit to the PRC. In 1980, Rauschenberg and Gemini G.E.L., Los Angeles, settled a lawsuit filed against them by Morton Beebe, whose photograph of a diver had been incorporated without permission into two works by Rauschenberg. Rauschenberg and Gemini did not, however, admit any wrongdoing, arguing that Rauschenberg’s techniques were transformative of the image.⁶⁴ After 1980, Rauschenberg nevertheless desisted from such unwarranted appropriations-translations, instead using photographs that he had himself taken for his artworks, no doubt on the advice of his lawyers.

Although the appropriation-translation of techniques associated with Euro-American modernism did not become widespread in the PRC until the mid to late 1980s, significant examples can be found in republican China during the early twentieth century. In addition to the Storm Society’s stylized referencing of cubist tropes, evidence of the contemporaneous use of collage-montage can be found in the “composite” photographs of Lang Jingshan (Long Chin-san) (1892–1995)—described as “China’s first photographer” and “the father of Asian photographic art”⁶⁵—which combine photographic montage and retouching techniques with the multi-perspectival and multi-temporal compositional principles of literati-Confucian painting.

Lang’s composite photographs can be understood as part of a wider modernizing East-Asian aesthetic sensibility that characteristically looks toward disjunctive reworkings of the past rather than a radical break,⁶⁶ as exemplified by the Japanese Confucian/Zen Buddhist scholar and twentieth century garden designer Mirei Shigemori’s (1896–1975) idea of a “timeless modernity.” Such a view is comprehended by Daoism’s non-rationalist vision

63 Nikos Papastergiadis, “Cultural Translation and Its Limits,” in *Fatal Natalities & Cultural Translation*, ed. Sarat Maharaj and Nikos Papastergiadis (Sydney: Artspace Visual Arts Centre, 1999), 35.

64 Susan Davidson and Joan Young, “Chronology,” *Robert Rauschenberg Foundation*, accessed July 28, 2020, <https://www.rauschenbergfoundation.org/artist/chronology>. See also Greg Allen, “Beebe v. Rauschenberg, The First Big Appropriation Lawsuit,” *Greg.Org*, June 27, 2012, accessed May 20, 2020, <https://greg.org/archive/2012/06/27/beebe-v-rauschenberg-the-first-big-appropriation-lawsuit.html>.

65 Liu Tan, *Long Chin-San* (Shanghai: M Art Centre, 2019), 5. See also Long Chin-San, *Selected Works of Chin-San Long* (Taipei: Photographic Research Institute of College of Chinese Culture, 1971).

66 Christian A. Tschumi, “Between Tradition and Modernity: The Karesansui Gardens of Mirei Shigemori,” *Landscape Journal* 25, no. 1 (2006): 108–125, <https://doi.org/10.3368/lj.25.1.108>; Stephen Mansfield, “Mirei Shigemori: At Home with Stone,” *The Japan Times*, November 29, 2014, accessed February 19, 2021, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2014/11/29/travel/mirei-shigemori-home-stone/>.

of dynamic cosmological reciprocity and, therefore, readily assimilated within the aesthetic regime of syncretic Confucianism.

With respect to this historical *longue durée*, modernizing artistic developments within China can be seen to have been induced by continuing culturally syncretic and therefore diffractive intersections between localized tradition, established cultural thinking/practice, and incoming discursive/practical innovations. Techniques characteristic of Euro-American modernism and postmodernism are thus open to two differing cultural-interpretative standpoints: one from which they are seen as a locus of deconstruction, and another of obliquely shifting reciprocities toward an ultimately harmonizing unification of differences commensurate with Daoist non-rationality.⁶⁷ Gao Minglu hints at such a transcultural reading in his contemporaneous appraisal of *ROCI China*'s impact on the '85 New Wave:

While some artists want to discover new ways of traditional depiction, and enrich the artistic language, others want to renew the entire artistic vocabulary. For example, the former would discuss the best way to paint a vase, while the latter would replace the vase with a urinal. For the latter, the question is not a matter of choosing between a vase or a urinal, but the act of exchange itself. Chinese artists know that string, cardboard and paper boxes have been used too many times in the past, but they also know that oil paints have been used thousands of times before. Whether they are used too often or not depends on the need to narrate something, an inherent trait in a particular cultural setting.⁶⁸

Rauschenberg's collaboration with Chinese artisans and government institutions in relation to the staging of *ROCI China* was not, therefore, an entirely seminal moment in which Euro-American modernism/postmodernism intervened with an unknowing and regressive Chinese artworld. Rather, these collaborations reactivated the traces of latent discourses and practices related to the development of an earlier artistic modernism in China as well as syncretic Confucian aesthetics. In light of this, *ROCI China* is left open to interpretation as a deferred action resonant with the traumatic curtailment of both by Maoist socialist realism.

It is also important in this regard to return one's gaze toward the development and understanding of collage-montage/defamiliarization in the context of Euro-American art. Characteristically, collage-montage and defamiliarization involve re-presentations of texts, images, objects, and/or actions within unusual settings wherein they take on new and unexpected

67 See, for example, Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 1–27; Laozi, *Dao De Jing*.

68 Gao, “The 1985 New Wave Art Movement,” cvi.

significances.⁶⁹ Since the early twentieth century, collage-montage and defamiliarization have become staples of artistic production within Euro-American and other Westernized artworld contexts. Marcel Duchamp's development of the readymade is widely considered pivotal in this regard.⁷⁰ Duchamp's use of readymades pointed the way to an expanded field of visual representation/expression beyond established classically mimetic forms of painterly and sculptural representation in which objects could, in effect, represent themselves in the context of art.⁷¹ This was matched by the development of mechanical forms of reproduction including still photography, moving film, and mass-printing, which can be understood to share in the diffractive effects of collage-montage and defamiliarization.⁷²

The shift from classical mimesis toward collage-montage/defamiliarization has been subject to changing interpretations. Uses of collage-montage/defamiliarization by the modernist avant-gardes of the early twentieth century came to be interpreted initially in two significant ways. Marxian discourses saw such uses as superstructural artistic furtherances of wider socio-political struggles⁷³—viz. Sergei Eisenstein's conception of "cinematic montage"—while Dadaists saw them as ways of breaking with restrictive convention, as signified by the ideas of anti-art and the anti-aesthetic.⁷⁴ Related surrealistic conceptions of art extended both views to a dialectical blurring of boundaries between conscious and unconscious experience⁷⁵ wherein dreamwork-like non-rationality is envisaged as a site of expanded un-/consciousness and the revolutionary uncaging of erotic desires otherwise constrained by a socially disciplining bourgeois-capitalist morality.⁷⁶ In each case, the ostensible strangeness of collage-montage and

69 Paul Gladston, "Going Over the Edge: COVID-19, the Global Artistic Industrial Complex and NIRIN," *Di'van: A Journal of Accounts* 8 (2020): 8–27; 15; Eddie Wolfram, *History of Collage: An Anthology of Collage, Assemblage, and Event Structures* (London: Studio Vista, 1975), 7–14.

70 Gao, "The 1985 New Wave Art Movement," cvi.

71 Cécile Debray Affron and John Vick, *The Essential Duchamp* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 7–59; Gregory L. Ulmer, "The Object of Post-Criticism," in *Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (London: Pluto Press, 1985), 83–110.

72 Gladston, "Going Over the Edge," 16; Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Fontana, 1973), 211–244.

73 See, for example, Raymond Williams, *Culture and Materialism* (London: Verso, 2020).

74 Gladston, "Going Over the Edge," 16; Hans Richter, *DADA: Art and Anti-Art* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2016).

75 Gladston, "Going Over the Edge," 16. See, for example, Max Ernst, *Une Semaine de Bonté: A Surrealistic Novel in Collage* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 1976).

76 Gladston, "Going Over the Edge," 16; Alyce Mahon, *Surrealism and the Politics of Eros, 1938–*

defamiliarization is considered as a means towards the revealing and critical transcendence of “realities” masked by the false consciousness of capitalist and traditionalist ideologies.

With the transition from modernist to postmodernist sensibilities in Euro-American contexts from the 1950s onwards, another interpretation of collage-montage and defamiliarization emerged. This was prefaced by Peter Bürger’s assessment of the avant-garde’s dialectical blurring of the boundary between art and life as one that by the mid-twentieth century had been effectively recuperated by capitalism and mainstream culture.⁷⁷ Countering the endism of that assessment were readings of defamiliarization and collage-montage as means towards serially incomplete multiplications of significance. Gregory H. Ulmer, for example, identifies collage-montage as a form of “post-critical” deconstructive practice negative of authority not through dialectical opposition but, instead, illimitable semiotic productivity,⁷⁸ a position echoed by, among others, Craig Owen’s identification of allegory as a signature characteristic of a deconstructivist postmodernist art,⁷⁹ and Hal Foster’s later vision of a post-avant-garde with the capacity to continually shape-shift and diversify beyond the snares of mainstream dialectical recuperation.⁸⁰

In light of these poststructuralist, postmodernist interventions, it becomes possible to rethink Duchamp’s proposing of the readymade beyond Marxian/Surrealist dialectics as an immanent locus of non-rationalist deconstruction *avant-la-lettre*, including what might be seen as a performative demonstration of the fundamentally Eucharistic basis of artistic economies of production, display, and reception within predominantly Judeo-Christian Euro-American artworld contexts, wherein art is upheld performatively as such in the context of a consecrated artworld with its various specialist initiates and credulous audiences. The resulting deconstructive undecidability of the readymade revealed art, for those receptive to Duchamp’s intervention, relies for its significances not on a capacity to represent an ideal being (as classical mimesis would have it) but rather on a mystical sleight of hand dissembling

1968 (London: Thames & Hudson, 2005), 15–21.

77 Gladston, “Going Over the Edge,” 16; Peter Bürger and Michael Shaw, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

78 See Ulmer, “The Object of Post-Criticism,” 83–94.

79 Gladston, “Going Over the Edge,” 16; Craig Owens, “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism,” *The MIT Press* 12 (1980): 67–86, <https://doi.org/10.2307/778575>; Craig Owens, “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism Part 2,” *The MIT Press* 13 (1980): 59–80, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3397702>.

80 Gladston, “Going Over the Edge,” 16; Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 206–226.

the social-semiotic constructions of art and the aesthetic as arbitrary and shifting categories of *technê* and feeling.

In recent decades, the unsettling implications of the Duchampian readymade have been overwritten by rather more straightforward uses of collage-montage/defamiliarization as means of conveying, rather than deconstructing, meanings. Although contemporary art is undeniably an inheritor of the technical diversity of modernist and postmodernist art, there has been a marked shift away from the complexities of poststructuralist postmodernism toward a revival of more directly oppositional ways of thinking in relation to the development of socially engaged artistic practices.⁸¹ This shift is understandable in the face of the parlous state of the world in the twenty-first century. Its dialectical outlook also remains eminently self-deconstructing.

As numerous commentators have pointed out, poststructuralist postmodernism's theorization of collage-montage/defamiliarization has distinct structural resonances with the non-rationalism of syncretic Confucianism.⁸² These resonances are brought to the fore by Ulmer's identification of a relationship between Derridean deconstruction and avant-garde artistic practice. In addition to identifying similarities between the avant-garde's use of collage-montage/defamiliarization and the disjunctive effects of deconstructivist analysis, Ulmer also connects both with John Cage's translation of chance divinatory techniques drawn from the Chinese Daoist-Confucian classic text, *I Ching*, as part of his musical compositional practice.⁸³

A further practical connection along these lines can be made in relation to Cage's teaching at the highly influential Black Mountain College. Black Mountain College was founded in Black Mountain, North Carolina in 1933 as an institution supportive of progressive approaches to liberal arts education in which teaching of artistic practice was to be central. By 1956, despite its relatively short period of operation, Black Mountain College had become a significant site for localized development of avant-garde modernist and proto-postmodernist art in the USA. Josef Albers, Merce Cunningham, Robert Motherwell, Robert Rauschenberg, Kenneth Noland, and John Cage, for example, were all affiliates or students of the college.

Cage's description of *avant-la-lettre* minimalist paintings produced by Rauschenberg at Black Mountain College in the summer of 1951 as "landing

81 Robert Klanten, Pedro Alonzo, Alain Bieber, Matthias Hubner, and Gregor Jansen, *Art & Agenda: Political Art and Activism* (Berlin: Gestalten, 2011), 5–8.

82 See, for example, Rey Chow, "Rereading Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies: A Response to the 'Postmodern' Condition," in *Postmodernism: A Reader*, ed. Thomas Docherty (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), 471–489; Han Byung-Chul, *Shanzhai: Deconstruction in Chinese* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017).

83 See Ulmer, "The Object of Post-Criticism," 107.

strips” for ambient light and shadow has been interpreted as an index of the composer’s emerging interest in the non-desiring outlook of Buddhism.⁸⁴ Cage is known to have attended a series of lectures on Zen Buddhism (a variation on Chinese Chan Buddhism) by D. T. Suzuki.⁸⁵ Cage would go on to produce an equivalent musical work, *4’33”* (1952), in which he draws attention to the non-directed ambient soundscape of the performance space by requiring its musician not to play. It might be added that Cage’s use of apparent silence in *4’33”* has a certain resonance with the literati-Confucian conception of *xu-shi* (absence-presence).

The pedagogy at Black Mountain College drew on educational principles set out by the pragmatist philosopher John Dewey. Dewey argued that educational institutions should act as places of social reform through direct interaction with wider society and that students should play a democratic-andragogic role in the shaping of their own curriculum.⁸⁶ Dewey’s thinking grew in part out of an engagement with Asia’s intellectual and artistic traditions, introduced to him personally by D. T. Suzuki and his then publisher Paul Carus in the 1890s.⁸⁷ Dewey visited China between 1919 and 1921, during a period in which major reforms to the education system were taking place as part of early republican modernization. He also developed an aesthetic theory redolent of syncretic Confucian aesthetics that stress the reciprocal relationship of art to wider society and interpretation of artworks from the perspective of the local cultural circumstances of their production.⁸⁸

By the time of *ROCI China*’s opening in 1985, a poststructuralist, postmodernist interpretation of the implications of artistic collage-montage and defamiliarization had begun to circulate widely in Euro-American and other Westernized artworld contexts. Intersecting with this were identifications of resonances between poststructuralist thinking/practice, the dislocating aesthetic effects of collage-montage, and non-rationalist

84 See Guggenheim Museum, “Singular Forms (Sometimes Repeated): Art from 1951 to the Present,” 2004, accessed October 10, 2017, http://pastexhibitions.guggenheim.org/singular_forms/highlights_1a.html. See also John Cage’s chapter on Rauschenberg in John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1961), 98–107.

85 D. T. Suzuki is well-known as a popularizer of East-Asian culture. Examples of Suzuki’s work include: Suzuki Daisetz Teitaro, *Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist* (London: Routledge, 2002); Suzuki Daisetz Teitaro, *Manual of Zen Buddhism* (New York: Grove Press, 1994); Suzuki Daisetz Teitaro, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (New York: Grove Press, 1994); Suzuki Daisetz Teitaro, *Essays in Zen Buddhism* (New York: Grove Press, 1994).

86 John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2004); John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Touchstone, 1997).

87 Frances Morris and Tiffany Bell, ed., *Agnes Martin* (London: Tate Publishing, 2015), 230.

88 Dewey’s major work on aesthetics is John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Penguin, 1980).

thinking/practice traditional to East-Asian culture.⁸⁹ It therefore becomes necessary to recognize that Rauschenberg's import of collage-montage/defamiliarization into the PRC resonated with an already transculturally constructed Euro-American modernism and postmodernism. Yet again, the idea that *ROCI China* was simply a modernizing intervention with established localized tradition involving the overwriting of Chinese cultural identities is made problematic.

The effects not only of cultural appropriation-translation but also parallax are conditional upon the factional state of post-West contemporaneity. Parallax, as I use it here, refers to alterations in the apparent positioning of objects in relation to differing perceptual standpoints. Parallax accounts for sometimes starkly differing understandings of contemporary art and its attendant artworlds. In the context of contemporaneity, there have been emphatic criticisms of poststructuralism as being both culturally deracinating and, as such, a manifestation of globalizing Euro-American colonialism-imperialism through the back door.⁹⁰ Included in this rejection are dominant discourses that uphold an exceptionalist view of Chinese society as having a unique civilization-specific identity divergent from that of Euro-America. Indicative of this discourse are not only Hou Hanru's aforementioned evaluation of the work of Huang Yongping but also more assertive arguments put forward by Gao Minglu. Gao has argued in the context of debates related to contemporaneity that the use of collage-montage/defamiliarization by Chinese contemporary artists is aligned predominantly with the non-rationalism of syncretic Confucianism rather than that of Euro-American postmodernism.⁹¹

Since the early 1990s, the PRC's growing stature on the world stage has been accompanied by an ever-more strident Chinese nationalism.⁹² This nationalism has been further buttressed by CCP appeals to syncretic Confucianism's vision of a harmonious society as a means of offsetting the socially and culturally

89 Richard Francis, Nanjo Fumio, Ian Buruma, James Roberts, and David Chipperfield, *A Cabinet of Signs: Contemporary Art from Post-Modern Japan* (Liverpool: Tate Publishing, 1991), 15–17.

90 Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, and David Joselit, *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 598–599.

91 Gao Minglu, "Particular Time, Specific Place, My Truth: Total Modernity in Chinese Contemporary Art," in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, ed. Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, and Nancy Condee (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 133–164. For the wider context of Gao's thinking, see Han Byung-Chul, *Shanzhai: Deconstruction in Chinese*.

92 Jean-Pierre Cabestan, "The Many Facets of Chinese Nationalism," *China Perspectives* 59 (2005): 26–40, <https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.2793>.

unsettling impact of Reform and Opening-up.⁹³ As a consequence, following cultural debates within the PRC during the 1990s, there has been an emphatic ideological upholding of localized cultural discourses over those of the West, which has only been further amplified during Xi Jinping’s presidency.⁹⁴

Circumstances surrounding the staging of *ROCI China* can therefore be conceived as involving not simply tensions between a desire to bring the artworlds of Euro-America and China productively together, but also a parallaxic field of differing-intersecting sociocultural interpretative lines of sight on the significances of a perceivably colonizing Euro-American modernism/postmodernism. In the context of contemporaneity, the transcultural collaborations put on display by *ROCI China* are brought to prominence as being of multiple and shifting significances beyond any singular cultural viewpoint. As such, these transcultural collaborations cannot be considered the focus for a definitively common understanding of the language of art.

Conclusion

It is possible to interpret the significances of *ROCI China* as subject to multiplications by both the diffractive effects of transcultural appropriations-translations and the parallax that pertains to differing Euro-American and Chinese artworld standpoints. Such circumstances can be understood from the point of view of poststructuralist discourses still residual to Western/ized artworld contexts as pervasively deconstructive of authoritative meaning, including, as Derridean deconstruction indicates, of poststructuralism itself.⁹⁵ However, as has been argued here, this is by no means the only conceivable interpretation of *ROCI China*.

The conspicuous factionalism of “post-West” contemporaneity in the specific case of the PRC opens up a problematic double-bind that compels us on ethical-political grounds—in abjuration of Western coloniality—to shuttle inconclusively between intersecting yet ultimately irreconcilable non-rationalist outlooks. These outlooks point, on the one hand, toward the deconstructive suspension of supposedly categorical differences, and, on the other, toward the upholding of a potentially harmonizing reciprocity between artistic discourses and practices dominant in China and Euro-America. What remains is a seemingly irresolvable impasse that counterposes the arguably colonizing immanence of poststructuralist postmodernism with a resistant

93 Jin Kai, “The Chinese Communist Party’s Confucian Revival: Xi Jinping’s Emphasis on Confucius Has a Modern-Day Political Purpose,” *The Diplomat*, September 30, 2014, accessed February 19, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/09/the-chinese-communist-partys-confucian-revival/>.

94 Gladston, *Contemporary Chinese Art, Aesthetic Modernity and Zhang Peili*, 15.

95 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Translator’s Preface,” in *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), ix–lxxxviii; xvii.

Chinese foundationalism rooted in a purportedly civilization-specific syncretic Confucianism. Under present circumstances, Rauschenberg's residually romantic hope of progressive cultural interchanges between Euro-America and China through a mutually comprehensible art seems to be deferred indefinitely in the face of resonant but irreconcilable discursive and practical differences.

Rauschenberg's intentions in establishing the ROCI could be criticized as politically naïve, and *ROCI China* perceived as engaging only superficially with the syncretic complexity of "Chinese culture." Rauschenberg's collaboration with Chinese artisans is nevertheless indicative of a productive transcultural diversification of the non-rationalist critical significances of collage-montage/defamiliarization beyond those identified solely by poststructuralist postmodernism—one brought about by a parallaxic shuttling between the destabilizing immanence of deconstruction, and literati-Confucianism's upholding of a harmonious reciprocity between humanity and nature. In the face of the conspicuously factional prospects of post-West contemporaneity and the accompanying onset of the Anthropocene, this diversification—as a legacy of *ROCI China*—is, perhaps, an apposite point of entry into a multi-dimensional, non-synthetic artistic criticality. While the CCP's neo-Confucian supported nationalism and expansion of its interests at home and on the world-stage are open to the same counter-authoritarian criticisms as Western nationalism and colonialism-imperialism, the oblique strategies of resistance to authority characteristic of syncretic literati-Confucian culture should not be summarily dismissed by association.