Rauschenberg, ROCI, and Cuba's Young Lions

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DISSERTATION
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in Art History

May, 2016

The University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico
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ABSTRACT

During the 1980s Robert Rauschenberg conceived of an art exhibition for which he would travel to different countries and collaboratively create work about the nations he visited. He called the project Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange, or ROCI. He proposed the project as an endeavor to promote peace and understanding by communicating “worldly” through art. This research is a case-study of the impact of ROCI at its seventh stop, Havana, Cuba. Following an introduction and a discussion on the mechanics of ROCI, the dissertation moves on to a critical analysis of the ROCI art. The purpose of such an analysis here is to expose the subjective nature of the work and explore how viewers engage with it differently.

The final chapter is an examination of the performance art of Aldo Damian Menéndez and other Cuban artists, who I refer to as Cuba’s Young Lions, that chose to engage with Rauschenberg at the opening reception in Havana. Menéndez pointed out that Rauschenberg’s effort was an act of what Menéndez called “cultural colonization.” The performance became an indicator that there exists in Cuba a post-colonial condition. Comments and interviews with Roberto Retamar, Antonio Eligio, and Menéndez serve as evidence of this condition and its effect on the exchange. I argue that Menéndez’s performance, although powerful and appropriate, was also predictable. It was a reaction that Rauschenberg foresaw yet he followed through with his global project regardless. He had intended the project to exist above the problems and issues we face in transnational communication due to the post-colonial condition. Yet, because of the performances by Cuba’s Young Lions we know that Rauschenberg failed in at least this particular facet of his project.
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CONFRONTATION

In 1988 renowned artist Robert Rauschenberg opened his exhibition called R.O.C.I., Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange, in Havana, Cuba. Much like many art openings it began with an artist talk. Even though such wine and cheese events are intended to be an introduction to provocative and creative thinking, as well as a social affair, the fact is that they can be remarkably repetitive. The “talk” serves as an opportunity for the artist to explain his or her work to fans, critics, the press, gallery and museum employees, board members, and other interested parties. It is usually an evening of small talk with bits of art theory and criticism thrown in. The artist might say his or her thanks to the host institution and/or city as well as acknowledge those who helped the project come to fruition. Every once in a while someone shows up to one of these events to voice disapproval of the artist’s work. That always makes the event a bit more interesting. However, this particular opening was an exception to the general rule. Oh, I am certain there was small talk and an offering of wine, but the setting and shear gravitas of Robert Rauschenberg, the great AMERICAN artist, made the event one of statements, innuendo, political tiptoeing, international diplomacy, hero worship, national pride, cultural identity and even artistic endeavor. All of these factors were highlighted by the actions of a young artist named Aldito Menéndez, who showed up to the event wearing a loincloth and headdress.¹

¹ Eligio, “Pasó Rauschenberg,” 46.
Some might say Menéndez’s gesture was brash and overly dramatic. Some may have thought with pride that Cuba’s young artists still recognize imperial representations. What I suggest is that Menéndez, with that single performance, became a critical part of the ROCI project. He saw what was at the core and shouted it out to all who would listen. His statement was perfectly relevant, remarkably astute, and managed to both pay homage and disrespect to Rauschenberg and ROCI at the same time. In a way, ROCI doesn’t work without Menéndez’s contribution. His reaction to the work, the project, and the event that is ROCI was, in fact, the third movement in a four movement symphony. Rauschenberg composed the work in its entirety leaving room for jazz-like improvisation that would ultimately serve to complete the whole.

This research is not about Aldito Menéndez. It is, however, about his response within the context of ROCI. I maintain that although Menéndez’s actions were carried out in a unique and thoughtful manner, the statement itself was predictable. I will use the opening in Cuba and the work created specifically for the opening much like a case-study in order to investigate Rauschenberg’s last great endeavor. In so doing, I will explain how Menéndez’s response, in general terms, is an element Rauschenberg must have foreseen and, therefore, must also have been among the results the artist expected. However, this notion of predictability within the confines of response to the project should not lessen the contribution made by Menéndez. My argument is such that both artists had a role to play when we consider the successes and/or failures of ROCI.
The premise for ROCI was a difficult one. Rauschenberg himself admitted that there were many doubters, even among his friends.\(^2\) However, the artist insisted, at great cost, that the project was worthy of risk and sacrifice. In this research it is not the logistics or process that is of greatest concern. This investigation will focus on results. Questions and answers along these lines may help us understand why Rauschenberg felt it of utmost importance to make the sacrifices and stubbornly commit himself to an undertaking that would consume (without the benefit of financial gain) nearly ten years of his life.

I must acknowledge that Rauschenberg did speak in brief about the responses to ROCI in his conversation with Don Saff in the accompanying catalogue. Speaking of acquaintances that looked at his project at its beginning with a level of reticence, Rauschenberg stated, “I’m certainly glad that all these doubters will have a chance to see the results at the National Gallery.” In response to the comment Don Saff remarked,

In a way, they can’t really feel or see the results. They would have to be me or you or one of the others who travelled with us for the entire tour to see Soviets coming from every republic to Moscow, taking weeks to travel and, for all I know, spending their last ruble to see the show. Or to hear the Chinese talk about “art before Rauschenberg” and “art after Rauschenberg”. Or to see the lines at the Tretiakov or sense the anticipation in Cuba. There was something about the way the art functioned in the exhibitions in those countries that rarely seems to happen here (the United States). It was less a commodity and more of a vehicle for human communication. In a sense, the audiences here see it as art; the audiences there used it as art.\(^3\)

These comments by Rauschenberg and Saff are telling about how they viewed the goals and successes of ROCI. Rauschenberg expected viewers in the countries he had chosen to interact with the art differently than American audiences. According to Saff he was

\(^2\) Yakush, *ROCI*, 158.
\(^3\) Yakush, *ROCI*, 158.
correct in his prediction. However, long lines and general enthusiasm are not fully explicative of the direct reaction and impact of ROCI. In this study the investigation will go a bit further.

I have to admit, I did not set out to analyze ROCI or even deal with Robert Rauschenberg. In fact, I spent years avoiding Rauschenberg’s art altogether. I understood his art historical contributions, ideas on subjectivity, and Leo Steinberg’s praise, but I never personally identified with the work. Eventually some questions came up about Rauschenberg that were unavoidable in the pursuit of my interests. During the course of seeking answers the light bulb came on and I found a Rauschenberg piece that altered my perspective. I suppose this opened the floodgates and this investigation followed. As any scholar will tell you, the research often ends far afield from where it began and embracing serendipity can often lead to interesting conclusions. I mention this now because I will spend time in later chapters discussing specific works by Rauschenberg in an effort to express an analysis of his work that has rarely appeared in print. This is, in part, an effort to provide those who do not already hold some personal connection to Rauschenberg’s art an opportunity to see it from a different perspective. In so doing, we are better equipped to discuss the artistic facets of ROCI works. Formal method will be a tool, or a variation of the method, to expose not content, nor his monumental contributions to 20th century art, but to see the nuts and bolts of the art without being consumed by its subjective nature. This is not a traditional means of critical analysis in this circumstance because the artist’s work is Postmodern, and thus, is in many ways created in contrast to modern formal tendencies. However, Rauschenberg had a gift for seeing how pieces could be put together for maximum effect and a degree
of formal criticism is helpful in identifying this trait as it pertains to ROCI works. The critic Leo Steinberg championed Rauschenberg decades ago as a Postmodern artist that had left behind the constrictive parameters set forth by the principles of modern art and criticism. However, the ROCI works are not the “combines” of the artist’s past and any critical tool that may move us toward a greater understanding of the work must be considered.

Rauschenberg is known for randomness and for the items and materials he chose to use. He reinforced this with comments like, “I am always wondering what will look good in a picture.” He would have everyone believe the art is intuitive, which in many ways it is for both the artist and viewer. But that should not lead us to believe the arrangements, nor the decisions on any level, are haphazard. The compositions are directed, deliberate and remarkably effective. The nature of ROCI allows us a unique opportunity for an experiment in examining what is at the core of the experience Rauschenberg seeks to facilitate. This is not necessarily the primary goal or intention of the ROCI project, but an added bonus that I intend to highlight.

Rauschenberg stated his overall goal for ROCI in the accompanying catalog:

I feel strong in my beliefs, based on my varied and widely travelled 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. When I was a student at the Art Students League in New York City, I was surrounded by groups of artists, all investigating the comparable similarities and likenesses between things. It was not until I realized that it is the celebration of

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4 Steinberg, *Encounters*, 10.
differences between things that I became an artist who could see. I know ROCI could make this kind of looking possible.\(^5\)

Rauschenberg’s altruism, and some would say arrogance, is at the foundation of ROCI. The seeing of which he speaks is the learned process that can facilitate trust and understanding. Of course, it is any rational person’s wish that others could see things as they themselves see them. And a celebration of differences is certainly more peaceful than its condemnation. In other words, Rauschenberg’s goals echo the sentiments of John Denver and probably at least two or three films from the 1970s. It would not take long to find individuals on television who, given Rauschenberg’s appeals, would first say they appreciate the thought, and then smile condescendingly before explaining the evils of Fidel Castro. But politics is not the realm through which Rauschenberg makes his efforts. In fact, it was his intention to transcend politics, capitalism, imperialism, colonialism, and a few other isms. He was not so naive to believe abrasive relations, misunderstandings, long held grudges, and military threats would cease to exist post-ROCI. He does, however, believe in the power of art to instigate change. Donald Saff worked for and with Rauschenberg on ROCI. He described Rauschenberg’s goals with a tone of pragmatism that will become a repeating focal point within this research,

There were risks involved in Rauschenberg’s decision to make an individual commitment to bring into sharp focus issues of world peace and understanding. In seeking peace, there is the risk of hostility, and in seeking understanding, there is risk of being misunderstood. Abandoning these goals, however, would be to act irresponsibly with the freedom Rauschenberg cherishes and to accept a lesser result than that intended by the ROCI ideal.\(^6\)

It is made apparent by Saff that Rauschenberg and those working on the project were aware that many may react negatively to ROCI. In fact, Saff has hinted at a fundamental

\(^6\) Yakush, \textit{ROCI}, 155.
factor within this critique: the role of expectation and outcome are the elements that allow us to determine the successes of Rauschenberg’s communication through ROCI. If one’s expectation includes potential for hostility and misunderstanding then can we not include these factors into our critical thoughts regarding success or failure? Also, although Rauschenberg has stated his loftiest goal for the project, we must look at how he intended to lead us down this road of understanding and how his desire to help us “see” materializes within the project in an attempt to satisfy his intent. These are the parts that compose the symphony that I mentioned earlier. Let us, for a moment, apply Rauschenberg’s goals to the art we are looking at in this study. Let us also try to be empathetic. If you are an artist and I gave you three million dollars to get Cubans (not Cuban-Americans) and Americans to recognize and embrace differences, what would you create? What do you suppose the reaction to your American interpretations would be? How would you put American eccentricities on canvas? How about Cuban eccentricities? Would it look like a bad postcard? I think my creation might. This was merely a part of the task that Rauschenberg set himself. Would Menéndez show up in a loincloth to your opening? We will get back to these questions later in the discussion. I simply wanted to give you time to be creative before I offered my theories to you.

Another critical element to this investigation is the post-colonial condition, which is a part of the larger discourse termed Post-Colonial Theory. The effects of colonization on today’s cultures are still remarkably relevant in many ways. To some it is an obvious element in everyday life and to others it is an esoteric undercurrent that affects global and personal interaction. Menéndez chose to illustrate this point at Rauschenberg’s opening reception. In Cuba, as in many countries, this post-colonial reality creates a context that
author Olu Oguibe calls the post-colonial predicament. In his study called *The Culture Game*, Oguibe examines the role of artists within this global post-colonial context. He writes,

As a perpetual outsider to the West, a post-colonial artist is required by Western viewers and clientele to produce work that easily reminds them of the presumed facts of his origins, work that makes a neat and unsullied demarcation between him and the West. However, since by their nature signs of origin bear neither certainty nor clarity, clearer signs of difference are invented and projected on the artist, whose duty it is, then, to accept, reflect, and perpetuate them, or reject them at the risk of professional occlusion.  

Although Aldito Menéndez is not the artist at the Rauschenberg opening, the premise to Rauschenberg’s project and Menendez’s presence at the event combine to create circumstance similar to the one Oguibe describes. From Menández’s point of view as an artist, Rauschenberg has, in an attempt to transcend these positions that are supposed to be clear and unsullied, also served to impose them and, in turn, made them a blatant point of discourse. I contend that this was an intentional outcome of the ROCI project.

The countries that Rauschenberg chose to involve in his project have their own role to play in a global and historical account of colonial endeavors. In the case of this research and ROCI, the effects of post-colonial society in the current global context have manifested in comparatively blatant and specific ways and to some extent Rauschenberg has approached issues of post-colonialism directly. We can certainly say that ROCI was interpreted, at least in part, through a post-colonial lens by Menéndez. His clothing at the exhibition opening was a reference to pre-colonial Cuban culture and his gesture illustrated a contrast between what post-colonial theorists would call the West and the

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7 Oguibe, *Culture Game*, 19. In Oguibe’s argument he references a specific person and occurrence (an artist named William Wilson) to define and exemplify the statement written here.
marginalized other. Rauschenberg calls ROCI a collaborative effort between artists and cultures. However, his higher goals of peace and understanding are approached through confrontation. In this research we will examine these contrived confrontational encounters and settings in order to better understand the ROCI project and Rauschenberg’s overall concepts that led toward his artistic goals. Many of these confrontations are born from a post-occidental or post-colonial present or past.

In an interview with Roberto Retamar, famed Cuban writer and scholar, he referred to Aldito Menéndez and his artist collaborators as “Cuba’s Young Lions.” His comment stuck with me and ultimately became a part of the title to this research. I asked Mr. Retamar about reactions to ROCI in Cuba and in his eloquence he spoke of Menéndez and his fellow artists in proud and understanding terms. It was their job as young Cuban artists to answer Rauschenberg’s statements with those of their own. Retamar had written of his appreciation for the work of Rauschenberg in the past and he does not declare that blatant confrontation was the artist’s means of discourse. However, he recognized that the nature of ROCI had the potential to create such situations. In a later chapter Roberto Retamar and the young lions will be the topic of further discussion.

Some believe Rauschenberg was unaware (at least on some levels) of these confrontational issues when he planned and executed ROCI. Antonio Eligio, known as Tonel, is a Cuban critic, scholar and author that attended the opening in Havana. After watching Menéndez make his statement and considering Rauschenberg’s conduct through the event, Tonel wrote,

There in his chair, in front of the greedy public, inexorably flanked by his damned aura, the man (not the star) would have felt a bit comforted if he had understood

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8 The concepts of the post-colonial condition and marginalized other will be defined and explored in chapter 4.
that those young people came before him and intentionally addressed him with such vital and absurd intentions as those advocated by Robert Rauschenberg some twenty years prior: To make art as if it were real life. To be an artist, but not to the point of appearing to be one. To live, simply, while the gullible in their enthusiasm assume we are involved in safe and important projects, that is, moderately understandable.\textsuperscript{9}

Tonel has written a thoughtful account of the event, which will come up often in this research, but in his writing he did not consider the idea that Rauschenberg deliberately set the stage for these confrontations that facilitated the actions of the young artists of whom Tonel speaks. If Rauschenberg carefully and deliberately set the stage, why assume he did not recognize the ramifications? In this research the case will be made that Rauschenberg used logic in creating his project even though he often promoted the idea that he was a steadfast believer in the whimsical. The evidence suggests that he understood and used these confrontations in an effort to move people past them. In so doing, he carefully considered the reactions to his endeavors.

I recall reading about Jasper Johns’ reaction to questions regarding his work *Flag*. Author and scholar Fred Orten pointed out how Johns used the idea of the work being conceived in a dream as a part of the art itself. According to Orten, the dream was simply a means of confounding those who sought to put the work in a then contemporary critical box. Orten also suggested that, although the reaction was a work in progress, the essential logic of the piece and its surrounding discourse was planned well in advance. The idea is supported with the fact that Johns had destroyed previous works. Many years ago Johns and Rauschenberg were good friends and although there exists no evidence, I cannot help but consider the idea that Rauschenberg took a thought from the John’s playbook. It is obvious that Rauschenberg had a well-conceived plan in place that, in the

\textsuperscript{9} Eligio, “Pasó Rauschenberg,” 47.
short term, resulted in an intentional effect. The interview published in the ROCI catalogue focuses on logistics and over-arching goals. It does not, however, address expectations. He speaks of allowing viewers to see differences through the collaborative art, but he does not hint at what type of discourse may follow the introduction of his efforts that would bring the project closer to its goals of peace and understanding. If anyone had asked Rauschenberg about the discourse following ROCI, I am not certain they would have gotten a straight answer. At the beginning of my research I asked the Director of the Rauschenberg Gallery (now former director), Ron Bishop, what he thought of Rauschenberg the man, as opposed to the artist. Although in retrospect I find it a silly question, Bishop thoughtfully answered, “If you asked Bob a question, his response was never what you thought it would be.”10 Of all the ways in which Bishop may have responded to my query, he chose to focus on Rauschenberg’s unpredictability. However, Rauschenberg’s nature need not preclude the idea that he was aware responses to his efforts might be, in part, predictable.

Admittedly, many who knew Bob Rauschenberg would tell you that the immediate reaction to his art by the public or critics was nearly inconsequential. After existing in the art world for a lifetime, I imagine critical commentary whether negative or positive may become less important than the artistic effort. In a conversation with critic Dave Hickey he conveyed this sentiment in simple terms, “It hardly mattered to Bob whether anyone did or did not like his work.”11 This is not a point that will be argued in this research. The idea can be conceded without hindering the overall discussion regarding confrontation and success. Whether or not Menéndez or Tonel truly “liked”

11 Personal interview October, 2010.
Rauschenberg’s art is beside the point. It was the interaction that the artist sought. The reaction would be what it would be. The real point was that a conversation had been ignited. Rauschenberg had many things he wanted to accomplish through his art and artistic process. To say that the outcomes would hinge on simple likes or dislikes would greatly lessen his endeavors. However, the artist was concerned with the subjective involvement of the viewer. In fact, in his eyes the successes of the work relied upon its analysis from multiple perspectives and this facet of ROCI sets the project in a Post-structural framework that will be another point of inquiry within this investigation.

It is important to note that Rauschenberg’s fame played a role in ROCI. It was a required element in achieving the access the project demanded and it was key in instigating artist cooperation. Bob Rauschenberg made it a point to use his fame and money in altruistic projects. It had become a part of him that Tonel referred to as his “damned aura.” Biographer Mary Lynn Kotz wrote about Rauschenberg’s notoriety in historical terms, “Rauschenberg’s world fame and iconic status among twentieth century artists have placed him in the annals of artists who have changed the course of art history. ‘In Europe we are taught the Old Masters who have charted the course of modern art,’ said a French art critic speaking in Washington. ‘Matisse gave us color, Picasso gave us Painting, Duchamp gave us objects as art – and Rauschenberg gave us the combination of all three.’” Rauschenberg understood that it was this type of fame and influence that would allow him to attempt a project whose ultimate goal was peace and understanding.

In the ROCI catalogue Rauschenberg states that “emphasis will be placed on sharing experiences with societies less familiar with non-political ideas or

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12 Eligio, “Pasó Rauschenberg,” 47.
13 Kotz, Rauschenberg, 308.
communicating ‘worldly’ through art.”¹⁴ This statement, even though it is well intentioned, is judgmental in nature and sets the groundwork for confrontation. Participants in ROCI may wonder how they so needed Rauschenberg’s helpful facilitation. It was governments that had to allow Rauschenberg to involve people in his collaborations. However, it is the people who must collaborate and respond. Thus, after hearing something about the premise to the project, many would approach ROCI prepared for offense or at the least a healthy dose of skepticism. Therefore, the confrontation began long before the exhibition even opened and if Rauschenberg’s ultimate goal for the project is to be realized, then confrontation must continue until it is no longer relevant to the participants. It must become something else. Rauschenberg would contend that it must become something beyond what our post-colonial, politically aggrieved, marginalized, egocentric contexts will easily allow. A difficult goal when the conversation is initiated by the famed, wealthy, critically acclaimed artist who, despite his altruism, is still a voice and icon of Western culture. After attending the opening in Havana, the critic Tonel illustrated Rauschenberg’s obstacles by writing, “Was this incursion meant to facilitate a dialogue or was it a monologue, deaf and overly long, which we should attend with an excess of patience and good manners?”¹⁵ To Rauschenberg and Tonel’s credit, the remark was phrased as a question. Before I get any further in discussing intentions and responses, let us look at the mechanics of the ROCI project.

¹⁵ Yakush, *ROCI*, 47.
ROCI

At its foundation ROCI (pronounced “rocky”), Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange, was a travelling art exhibition. However, it was not a traditional cohesive body of work packed and shipped like a Matisse retrospective or one of Thomas Hoving’s blockbusters. It was a work in progress that grew from venue to venue and even at its final stop, the National Gallery in Washington D.C., the creation of art had reached completion, but the overall concept dictated that the discourse surrounding the subject matter continue. In other words, ROCI was not a pre-packaged display of aesthetics and curatorial enlightenment. It was an ongoing conversation facilitated and expedited by both creative process and aesthetic medium. The idea was to allow people the opportunity to see themselves and others from a different perspective. To see art as something other than what they have always known it to be. At the project’s core was the very nature of Rauschenberg’s aesthetic vision which has over the decades utilized subjectivity to create impact. It is this particular means of communication, so emphatic in Rauschenberg’s work, that allows ROCI concepts to be plausible. Rauschenberg’s art will be discussed at length in a following chapter, but at the risk of being repetitive, let me begin this discussion on the mechanics of ROCI by examining the accompanying philosophy and how the art is well suited to facilitate it.

In 2009 Rosalind Krauss published an obituary honoring Rauschenberg in which she used the phrase “matrix of consciousness” to describe his work.\textsuperscript{16} It is as apt a

\textsuperscript{16} Krauss, “In Memory of,” 156.
phrase as I have read to describe an artistic vision that is expectant of viewer participation. For thousands of years artists toiled at the attempt to create illusion: a skillfully worked sunset on a two dimensional canvas or a perfectly rendered likeness of a great leader. Modern artists broke this mold and eventually embraced the celebration of the aesthetic and the process. Paint was paint and it need not pretend to be sky or grass. The art looked different because the peoples and cultures that created it were involved in a changing philosophical and visual culture. Over time, criticism embraced the transformation as well. Eventually, the perfect art was judged on things like movement, contrast and truth to material while manipulative factors such as iconography, content and context were dismissed. When artists began to turn away from this self-destructive train of thought Robert Rauschenberg emerged with a new way of using space and the embrace of subjectivity. Ideas that we now consider Postmodern. He recognized that for viewers to personally identify with art they must see something of themselves in the work. He chose to use common contexts. He combined them in ways that were gently suggestive. It was as if the compositions were provocative, but one could not tell exactly what was being provoked. And the response may be different from viewer to viewer, because each person was required to add his or her own experiences to the art. Thus, when Krauss refers to Rauschenberg’s work as a “matrix of consciousness” she is referring to each of these misplaced disparate yet common elements which together compose the consciousness of the artist, the viewer, the culture, the nation, or humanity. His art shows us bits and pieces of our world without demanding how they fit together or how they must be recognized. It is as if he chose to paint zeitgeist. However, zeitgeist is supposed to be examined in posterity and even then it is not some agreed upon
mathematical equation. It is a phenomenon seen from a particular point of view. So, our matrix of consciousness begs the question, whose consciousness. And this leads us to the question, according to whom. Because the work is intended to involve the subjective perspective of the viewer we cannot lay responsibility solely at the artist’s feet. The ROCI philosophy involves an experiment that takes Rauschenberg’s subjective creations global in an effort to compare, contrast and intertwine multiple consciousnesses.

According to Rauschenberg, the goal of ROCI was,

sharing experiences with societies less familiar with non-political ideas or communicating ‘worldly’ through art. I feel strongly 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 informations, 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 understanding… To share our intimate eccentricities proudly will bring us all closer.\(^\text{17}\)

Thus, at its core, the project was meant to facilitate peace and understanding through art. The trick was that even though the art may be considered collaborative, ultimately it was Rauschenberg who created the work. Thus, his process included the subjective consciousness of other people, artists, cultures and identities filtered through his own.

Let me explain how this impacted the reception of ROCI by starting with the procedural aspects of the project.

In 1984 the ROCI concept was presented to the United Nations as means to initiate dialogues globally through collaborative art. Over the following few years ROCI concepts and procedures were further developed. Once the general scope and philosophy were determined issues such as logistics, funding, and international law had

\(^{17}\) Yakush, \textit{ROCI}, 154.
to be worked out. Rauschenberg involved many professionals in different disciplines to help the project come to fruition. Don Saff, who at the time was an artist and professor at the University of South Florida, worked with the artist to figure out which countries would participate in the ROCI endeavor. The over-arching criteria were stated as “societies less familiar with non-political ideas or communicating worldly through art.” This qualifying standard does not tell us much. It reflects Rauschenberg’s vehemence that the ROCI project avoid the turbulence and innuendo of political entanglements. By carefully avoiding terms that connote an “us and them” mentality he shows us an effort to position the project in a way that is least likely to give offense or close minds. However, although he does not use the terms, the statement still serves to separate the participants from the artist. It also tells us that the Rauschenberg has through his own personal experiences developed opinions about how art functions in cultures other than his own. Regardless of intention, the statement firmly sets him into the role of colonizer. A notion that I will return to later in this study. He has allowed himself to mimic the positions of old as if they are no longer relevant in a global artistic endeavor. Positions that were created by the West and which through ROCI we can clearly see are perceived in contemporary communication. In effect, the artist has passed judgement on each country he visits. He has determined that it is his position to enlighten people on how to communicate non-politically and worldly through art. Although he sees his project as an exchange, it is difficult for any Cuban participant to see past a history of colonialism in this circumstance.

There is another key element that is referential to his statement regarding the goal of ROCI, “It was not until I realized that it is the celebration of differences between
things that I became an artist who could see.” Because the juxtaposition of differences opened the artist’s eyes he has imagined ROCI in a way that offers others the same opportunity. Saff refers to this idea when reflecting on the exhibition openings outside the U.S., “There was something about the way the art functioned in the exhibitions in those countries that rarely seems to happen here (U.S.A.). It was less a commodity and more a vehicle for human communication. In a sense, the audiences here see it as art; the audiences there used it as art.” It was Rauschenberg’s intention throughout ROCI to instigate such a reaction. In his reflection Rauschenberg does not tell us how or why this change in seeing happened. Nor does he offer evidence to validate his observations. However, the remark hints at what he was looking for when he selected a particular country to include in ROCI. He selected venues where people might participate with eyes and minds not confined by Western mentalities. Collaborating with people different from himself offered the potential for a more profound impact. However, in describing his choices he needed to avoid the term Western due to the baggage it carries and the statement he chose to make set the entire project on a controversial path.

The critical issue with the artist’s description, and primary reason why he avoided using the term Western, is because it would function in a way that is antithetical to the desired outcomes of ROCI. Even though the term was created by the West and its defining characteristics and connotations are perpetuated by the West, the artist recognized that the use of the term reinforces and even exacerbates the human tendency to think of existence through the equation of the self and the other. The term is divisive in nature and to begin a conversation that would have “mutual understanding for

18 Yakush, ROCI, 154.
19 Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin, Post-Colonial, 169.
the benefit of all” as a goal then it is detrimental to the overall effort if we begin by predetermining the roles of the participants. The term Western carries with it historical, social, and cultural connotations that are imposed on people and these connotations imply a form of hierarchy that is understood differently by each participant. It implies a Eurocentric perspective of knowledge coupled with a history of colonization. In other words, Rauschenberg saw ROCI as a way to collaborate, open minds, and move beyond the roles that the term Western serves to reinforce even though he could not avoid operating from within the Western/Other construct while pursuing this endeavor.

Although the artist managed not to inhibit his process and success with terms like Western, it was still necessary to describe his decisions on which countries and/or cultures would participate while limiting the inflammation of the condition that already permeated the subjects; that of the “us and them” mentality. He chose to do this with the carefully selected words, “societies less familiar with non-political ideas or communicating ‘worldly’ through art”. Rauschenberg has made an interesting effort here, but Cuban critic Tonel’s commentary tells us that he fell short of success. Tonel wrote,

However, I find the relationship of the milestones hidden to date suspicious. The itinerary (still ongoing) appears thus far to have a third world and equally “exotic” nuance from the perspective of the dominant western art centers, conspicuously evaded on the journey. At this level, ROCI suggests to me some perhaps overly suspicious questions: Can we deduce from the route that Mexico, Japan, Cuba or Sri Lanka are “societies in which non-political ideas are rarely expressed? And where, then, are these ideas expressed most frequently?20

When Tonel wrote this comment Rauschenberg had not announced all the “milestones” that would host ROCI, and therefore, knowing only the venues that preceded Cuba Tonel

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20 Eligio, “Pasó Rauschenberg,” 45.
was left wondering who would qualify as a society less familiar with non-political ideas and why. It is perfectly understandable that Tonel should ask such a question and it is not surprising that his tone has a touch of irritation in it. Rauschenberg has, after all, deigned himself to set Cuba into a group of societies that Cubanos may neither agree with nor appreciate. Tonel was more forgiving when he considered the phrase “communicating worldly through art”. He writes, “In Havana, the launch of ROCI occurred at the right time, when, in Cuba, at least the awareness that it is possible – within what is possible – to use art as a means of communication with all worlds (for example, the third world), had become ostensible.”

In this Tonel has allowed for the idea that Cuban art may have recently come to the point where it might communicate worldly, or at least appear to do so. However, that Tonel includes the slightly barbed comment about the third world tells us that his irritation with Rauschenberg’s qualifying statements persist here as well. In any case, it is possible that Rauschenberg was doomed to fail on at least this front, but we cannot assume that the artist was not aware of this before-hand and proceeded with the knowledge that it was this miasma of offense, division, and unease that he wished to challenge. Unfortunately, his defining statement served to exacerbate rather than ameliorate the problems he faced.

While pieces of the puzzle slowly coalesced Rauschenberg considered all potential avenues by which the project might be funded. After much deliberation and discussion the artist realized that it would be detrimental to his overall goal if money was seen to tie him to any governmental, corporate, or non-profit institution. After considering support from the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, Mobil, IBM,

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21 Ibid., 46.
and others, Rauschenberg elected to pay for the project himself. Distancing ROCI from entities with agendas other than his own served to mitigate potential derogatory judgments about motive, message, or goals.

A time-table and sequence for ROCI was essential to assure that the parts and processes fit together as a successful exhibition and event. However, the schedule required a level of spontaneity and flexibility due to both the nature of bureaucracy and the project itself. This is most easily explained through example. In May of 1985 the artist received final word confirming a ROCI exhibition in Tibet. In June Rauschenberg went to Venezuela to begin working on art that would be in the Caracas opening in September. In July the artist went to Santiago to open ROCI Chile and continued work on the art for ROCI Venezuela. In November ROCI China opened with work the artist began producing the previous fall in both China and at his studio in Captiva, Florida. Meanwhile final preparations continued for ROCI Tibet which opened on December 2nd. In preparation for every ROCI opening, eleven in total, Rauschenberg spent time in each country collaborating, collecting materials, learning about the culture, photographing and taking video in order to produce work at his studio that was reflective of the culture and people of the host country. Thus, while creating work for the opening in Tibet the artist was opening exhibits in other countries, flying to and from his studio in Florida, and completing the procedural details for future ROCI collaborations and

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22 Yakush, *ROCI*, 156.
23 Ibid., 180-188. A time-table for ROCI is listed in the accompanying catalogue, with the significant exception of time spent in the artist’s studio in Captiva, Florida.
exhibition openings. This process continued until the final exhibition opening in May of 1991.

At the time of the opening for ROCI Cuba the exhibit contained works from ROCI Mexico, ROCI Chile, ROCI Venezuela, ROCI Beijing, ROCI Tibet, and ROCI Japan. It also contained a group of pre-ROCI works by Rauschenberg that served to set the stage for his more recent compositions. The exhibit included video footage from his travels and opening essays by scholars from host countries. These essays were a critical part in Rauschenberg’s plan to open eyes and minds.

While in the process of maneuvering through bureaucratic entanglements and legal agreements to include a locale in the ROCI experience, Don Saff searched for particular scholars, authors, directors, activists, and poets to make written contributions. Saff appealed to specific well-known intellectuals to assist in taking the first small step toward acceptance in countries where ROCI would face immediate resistance. The results came in the form of essays that served to introduce the artist, his position in the history of art, and his past work. In essence the contributions served not only as informational prose, but also as endorsements for ROCI and Rauschenberg. It is important to note however, that although the essays served in this manner they were not written in direct response to the ROCI art. Due to the time constraints and logistics of the project the authors who contributed were not given the opportunity to reflect on ROCI works. In some cases it was the project’s goals and parameters that served as fuel for the essays that asked viewers to think beyond the conventions of the western/non-western ideational constructs. In others, such as Roberto Retamar’s essay for the Cuba opening,

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the essays were written long before ROCI and were about Rauschenberg’s works as a whole.\textsuperscript{25}

The disconnect between the written contributions and the ROCI project is problematic for a number of reasons. To begin with, the nature of ROCI works involve, in a way, the appropriation of cultural material. Thus, the authors of the essays have given their endorsement without being given the opportunity to be critical of said appropriation. This is not to say that the authors would have included critical thoughts in their essays, but to acknowledge the benefits accorded to Rauschenberg’s enterprise by omitting the opportunity given the potentially controversial nature of the work. It is also important to note that a critical review is not a part of an opening essay. However, it is also unusual to write opening comments without a good idea of what the art will communicate. In some cases the artist met with authors prior to the writing of the essays to allow them the chance to connect with the artist if not the work. It is easy to see in retrospect that Rauschenberg had to work his way through perceptions that reinforced division by promoting unifying aspects of art. The authors, six of whom were published in the accompanying catalogue, were tasked with assisting the artist in this endeavor.

Given the fact that authors wrote contributing essays before seeing ROCI art, it is apparent that they anticipated critical issues that would confront viewers and worked to influence opinions on them. For example, Yevgeny Yevtushenko focused on three key elements in his essay that introduced ROCI to U.S.S.R. First, the author focused on biographical information on the artist that served to set his past experience and standing as an artist uniquely relevant on the world stage. Yevtushenko includes opinions that link

\textsuperscript{25} Personal correspondence with Retamar, August, 2010.
Rauschenberg to Kandinsky in a positive light in the hope of gaining the acceptance of the Soviet people. Secondly, the author prepares the viewing public for the postmodern nature of Rauschenberg’s work. He writes,

Rauschenberg takes pleasure in everything about his “combines,” which mediate between painting, sculpture, and collage. He loves any and all materials, transforming them in service of his fantasies – paints, metals, wood, stone, fur, fabric, tin cans, car tires. He loves photography and his unrealized dream to photograph America inch by inch. He created ROCI and is spreading his materialized fantasies through many countries with unprecedented generosity in human relations. I think if Mayakovsky were alive, he and Rauschenberg would hit it off and would invent something jointly. Only a few on Earth are without fantasies, but only a few possess Rauschenberg’s talent as a “realizer” of fantasies. And now Rauschenberg is in Moscow.²⁶

Because Yevtushenko had not seen ROCI works he has referenced the artists “combines” which were created in the 1950s and 1960s and some of which travelled with the ROCI exhibition. It was the array of materials used with the intent of personal and cultural subjectivity that the author saw as an element that needed a preface before being judged by the general public. Lastly, and most importantly, Yevtushenko chose to focus on the long held divisions between the U.S.S.R. and the West. He does not get bogged down in remarks regarding political and social issues. Rather he guides his readers toward the concept that art should be global and act above the divisive notions that permeate other aspects of culture and identity. He writes,

We do not have the right to lag behind in understanding of everything new that is being done in the West in technology and in art. Otherwise the consequences will be catastrophic and from a former country of the avant garde we will be transformed into an arrière garde, a backward country. Filtering through ourselves all the best of the West that was kept from us for long years, we hope not to become imitators, but at the same time not to invent wooden bicycles. Only the exclusiveness of Western thinking that “they are from Mars” prevents our contemporary artists from being on permanent exhibition in the major

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²⁶ Yakush, ROCI, 52. Mayakovsky was a well-respected avant garde poet who was known as a Futurist. He was critical of Russian and Soviet government and leadership.
museums of contemporary art. Unfortunately many so-called fashion legislators
of art try artificially, by a kind of political vivisection, to divide the globe like a
frog into separate parts. But there are no separate arts.27

The statement makes it apparent that Yevtushenko was fully aware of the confrontations
that would be a part of ROCI not because of the art, but because of the project’s premise.
Rauschenberg knew well that a respected Russian could further his cause as much as
anything he himself could write or say prior to the opening exhibition.

Both Wu Zuguang from China and Laba Pingcuo from Tibet make written
contributions that are poetic and rely on the same foundations of unity and world peace.
They have written in a style that is perhaps more acceptable to their particular cultures in
that they are neither confrontational nor argumentative. Yet each author has found a way
to speak of Rauschenberg’s use of art as a means to transcend the divisions rooted in our
identities. Wu Zuguang writes,

No matter which era we live in, people who live together on the same planet all
wish to live in a peaceful environment and lead a happy life. Yet so much misery
exists in our lives. Distrust develops into hatred and war. Blood and tears fill this
world we all share. Mr. Rauschenberg, an artist with a generous and kind nature,
bemoans the state of the universe and pities the fate of mankind. I am moved by
all this.28

Although Zuguang avoided speaking directly of the West and/or specific historical
references that link cultures, as Yevtushenko chose to do, the message is essentially the
same and serves to pave the way for Rauschenberg’s gesture. Remarkably, it is not the
art or the aesthetic theory that requires facilitation. Zuguang and Pingcuo show us their
belief that acceptance of open, meaningful, and altruistic dialogue is the first hurdle that
must be cleared in order to appreciate ROCI.

27 Yakush, ROCI, 52.
28 Ibid., 99.
Among the written contributions there are those that focused on the art rather than the gesture. The essays for the Germany, Mexico, Chile and Cuba openings are among those. This may be expected in Germany and Mexico because the notion of a free exchange of ideas, appropriated material, and an exchange of culture with the United States or the West no longer begins with the staggering weight of an “us and them” mentality. This is not to say that the condition does not exist in the exchange, or that it is undeserved in others. Only that it does not present itself as an initial hindrance that, if not overcome, will result in a breakdown of meaningful communication. One might argue against this opinion or base its validity on many different phenomena. However, in this case the reaction of Cuban author Tonel and Cuba’s young artists are the validating factors I seek to explore.

The essays written by José Donoso (Chile) and Roberto Retamar (Cuba) are the most intriguing of the group. Not simply because by all outward appearances they deal directly with the art rather than the circumstances of ROCI, but because of the degree of subtlety with which they engage readers and viewers of ROCI. At the time Rauschenberg and ROCI went to Chile the country was in a state of severe political and social stress. The Marxist leader Allende had been replaced by the anti-Marxist dictator Pinochet and due to economic and social attitudes of his government, along with human rights violations, the Chilean people had begun to revolt against the leader. When Rauschenberg arrived to begin work on ROCI Chile armed military patrolled the streets, violent protests were commonplace, and there was an oppressive stance taken against anyone that spoke out against Pinochet and his tactics.  

the artist formulated the works created for ROCI Chile. According to Robert Mattison, author of *Robert Rauschenberg: Breaking Boundaries*, Rauschenberg had arranged a private meeting with Donoso to discuss what the author might contribute to ROCI.\(^{30}\) We do not know the contents of the conversation, but we can see the results in Donoso’s work.

The essay speaks of Rauschenberg as “The Great Transgressor” and how the art is the facilitator of new perspectives. Although Donoso’s essay is strictly about Rauschenberg’s art, it can be viewed as a larger allegory that refers to the political, social, and cultural situation in Chile. If we concede the idea that Rauschenberg is a transgressor in terms of his artistic contributions, we are referring to the concepts in the world of aesthetics and critical theory that permeated the arts leading up to the 1950s and how Rauschenberg’s work broke from those molds and brought something new to artists, aesthetic theorists, and the viewing public. Thus, Rauschenberg has transgressed established norms on what art is, what it should aim to be, how it is to be viewed, and how we might interact with it on a psychological, aesthetic, and/or cultural level. Donoso eloquently states his case of Rauschenberg as transgressor with words such as, “everything has to be changed to alter the meaning of everything, and our glance has to be reborn with the purpose of accomplishing the freshness of true contemplation.”\(^{31}\)

These are sentiments that can be seen as an endorsement for change not simply in how we view art, but about the means through which a Chilean may view his or her environment. Donoso takes his prose so far as to speak of identity in specific, although he never strays too far from the path that dictates his commentary remain about art. He

\(^{30}\) Ibid., 235.
\(^{31}\) Yakush, *ROCI*, 125.
writes, “This is the invitation that Rauschenberg brings to us since the bottom of the 1950s: the Great Transgressor rises against the single history, to their single destiny, to a single identity, and in re-inviting us to examine with a critical eye the boundaries of these identities, proposes other ones and leads us to share this dramatic pleasure.”

Donoso has made ROCI and Rauschenberg’s art about identity before he even saw a single work of those Rauschenberg made specifically for the Chile opening. His writing uses ROCI as a stage to hint at the larger implications that often surround art, communication, and cultural interchange. He makes a case for what he believes to be central components of avant garde thinking. To break with the status quo and at the same time attempt to be both introspective and empathetic. His essay suggests to the reader that these components are not simply applicable in the world of art, but are also desired parts of the individual. They are all qualities that Rauschenberg would value greatly in those who in one way or another would act as ROCI collaborators and qualities that Donoso sought for compatriots in the midst of social and political upheaval.

In Cuba Roberto Retamar chose to write an introduction less political. His essay is subtle in that the author calmly and quietly, with just a few words, foreshadows the critical element in Rauschenberg’s project that he knew would cause skepticism in an already wary public. In fact, Retamar was aware that a negative knee-jerk reaction was likely. Because Rauschenberg places himself in the position of creating work and appropriating material that is directly reflective of cultures other than his own and basing his work on a visit that lasted no more than three weeks, the artist opened himself up to a number of criticisms that include being labeled a tourist. In Mattison’s 2003 publication

32 Yakush, ROCI, 125.
33 Ibid.
he included the opinion that, “The major criticism that has been leveled against ROCI was that Rauschenberg could not possibly learn enough about a country to represent it accurately in the time allotted, and that the works were too much Rauschenberg and not enough the culture of the host country.” This is a valid criticism. It exposes Rauschenberg’s arrogance, or naiveté, and hints at the complexity of the position in which those who chose to engage with ROCI and the artist were obligated to operate. However, to this criticism I ask, how much time should the artist have allotted? Would a year be enough? Is five years sufficient for the Westerner to understand? The answer is that this sentiment, which Retamar is attempting to mitigate through his essay, would exist in almost any circumstance. Time is not what is at the core of the disagreeable element. Although Retamar’s opening essay is about the art, he recognized that issues such as personal, national, and cultural identity are a part of the equation and at the heart of these pieces of the self resides the ever so touchy phenomenon called pride. He, in his foresight, attempted to address the criticism and potential reaction with a remarkably clever statement.

It is understandable that a man with such a passion for new things should travel around the world setting up camp in the most remote places, enriching them with new visions, born of those places. Of course, no one should look for the spirit of those peoples in such visions, but rather these should be sought in the spirit of Rauschenberg himself. A spiritual man descended out of Whitman and Hemingway, his works, like huge collages, take what they need from the world. Retamar has honed in on the single most controversial element of ROCI and for the sake of all who would view ROCI works has approached it with the simple dictate that one should not look for the artist to capture the spirit of a people in his art. Thus, any Cubano

34 Mattison, *Rauschenberg Breaking Boundaries*, 225. Mattison references Robert Hughes and John Perrault in his argument that this was “the major” criticism.
whose pride may have been encroached upon by a visiting artist making assumptions can rest easy because the work is not supposed to encapsulate you, your life, your family or culture. It is a romantic vision of differences and commonalities in which all cultures may share. Of course this sentiment is one that Roberto Retamar will maintain based on his wealth of knowledge, his love of Rauschenberg’s art and his due diligence as a proud Cubano. It is not necessarily how all viewers will see the artist’s efforts.

Eleven years and five months had passed between the artist’s review of the first written plans for ROCI and the project’s close in May of 1991. As a part of the ROCI philosophy the artist refused to sell ROCI works. Instead he donated pieces to each of the participating countries, as well as several to the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. The BBC put together a feature about the project, but critical discourse in the form of books and articles aimed directly at ROCI have been few and far between since its completion. It seems a comprehensive study has proven too large an undertaking and the project’s main critical flaw has already been acknowledged. Thus, scholars and authors have chosen to write about ROCI in short articles related specifically to the concept and/or the art, or dedicated chapters in larger books that attempt to encapsulate ROCI in a manageable format. I have chosen to look specifically at ROCI’s critical flaw in an effort to show that we need not think of it as such. Critics and authors have been too quick to point out the obvious and move on. The next step in this examination is to look specifically at the art and the criticism surrounding it.

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36 Don Saff suggested such a comprehensive study in my conversation with him on 10/22/14. He acknowledged that those directly involved with ROCI “aren’t getting any younger.”
A CELEBRATION OF DIFFERENCES

The American writer, critic and scholar Leo Steinberg admitted that he had mistakenly dismissed Robert Rauschenberg’s art in his first written review of the man’s work.\(^{37}\) It was an easy mistake to make given the unusual nature of Rauschenberg’s creations and the critical climate of the 1956 American art scene. Although he failed at first to see the importance and impact of Rauschenberg’s ideas, he quickly recognized his error and was one of the first to champion the work that helped to remove art and critical theory from a dead-end road. In the end, one could argue that Rauschenberg and Steinberg together became the inertia that was needed to push artists and critics in a direction that, at the least, offered new creative freedoms.

New freedom implies that a state existed where it was lacking. So, freedom from what you ask? In short, Formalism. But that is not the complete answer. In this chapter I will address some of the literature surrounding Rauschenberg and ROCI. This includes building a critical context for Rauschenberg’s art in order to define a method through which we can be critical of his ROCI works. Even though a particular brand of Formal method was the critical theory that both Rauschenberg and Steinberg railed against, in this chapter I will define a version that will assist us in understanding ROCI art and how this analysis is compatible with Rauschenberg’s vision and Steinberg’s critical process. After all, even though we do not want to hinder our creative tendencies or new experiences with self-imposed boundaries, which a strict adherence to Formal aesthetic

\(^{37}\) Steinberg, *Encounters*, 3.
theory certainly facilitates, we must still explain why a dab of red in a picture works better than a dab of green. If we are being strictly subjective then all those who like red can stand stubbornly against those who prefer green. In this case no one will ever be right or wrong and aesthetic critical analysis no longer holds any value other than to sway or explain subjective opinion. Some would argue this to be the case with all art criticism. Before you bang your fist on the table and say “here here” in agreement, consider Steinberg’s comments,

A work of art does not come like a penny postcard with its value stamped upon it; for all its objectness, it comes primarily as a challenge to the life of the imagination, and ‘correct’ ways of thinking or feeling about it do not exist. The grooves in which thoughts and feelings will eventually run have to be excavated before anything but bewilderment or resentment is felt at all. For a long time the direction of flow remains uncertain, dammed up, or runs out all over, until, after many trial cuts by venturesome critics, certain channels are formed. In the end the wide river which we may call the appreciation of Jasper Johns - though it will still be diverted this way and that- becomes navigable to all.

Most people-especially those who belittle a critic’s work-do not know, or pretend not to know, how real the problem is. They wait it out until the channels are safely cut, then come out and enjoy the smooth sailing, saying, who needs a critic?\(^38\)

I do not wish to argue the value of criticism, but to suggest how it can be used as a considerate process in the midst of subjective art. A useful critical method, when it comes to Rauschenberg’s ROCI work, must recognize both subjective and objective parts of the equation. I am not proclaiming this method, or methods, as a revolutionary idea. Steinberg argues similar ideas in his collection of writings called Other Criteria.\(^39\) In 1988 critic Donald Kuspit published The New Subjectivism: Art in the 1980s in which he acknowledges this process in any critical evaluation of art.\(^40\) A critic must acknowledge

\(^{38}\) Steinberg, Other Criteria, 23.
\(^{39}\) Steinberg argues the process and means for an ideal criticism on pages 63 and 64.
\(^{40}\) Kuspit, New Subjectivism, 547.
that some level of Formal analysis is a necessary tool. But its application in examining Rauschenberg’s subjective creations is a bit tricky for a number of reasons. I simply propose that ROCI works can be viewed with greater appreciation if we include this mode of inquiry. Steinberg put it well when he wrote, “Though we all hope to reach objectively valid conclusions, this purpose is not served by disguising the subjectivity of interest, method, and personal history which in fact conditions our work.”

Finally, I will examine specific ROCI works to show how viewers experience them differently and why this element of the ROCI project was in Rauschenberg’s mind the critical facet around which all other parts of ROCI circled in a supportive orbit. In the artist’s words, “It was not until I realized that it is the celebration of differences between things that I became an artist who could see.”

There are numerous books and essays available that help us understand the art and life of Rauschenberg and I will not spend time reviewing each contribution. Instead I will examine some of Steinberg’s contributions, as well as those recent publications that engage ROCI directly. Also, in order to set the stage for a contextual discussion regarding Rauschenberg and the artistic freedoms of which I speak we must acknowledge the role of Clement Greenberg and other Formalists in shaping the artistic context from which Rauschenberg’s art emerged.

When we look at a work by Rauschenberg there is a basic human tendency to search the composing parts and images for an identifiable overall logic. We look for a narrative or even the thought process of the artist. Rauschenberg himself stated that his

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41 Steinberg, *Other Criteria*, 309.
compositions contained, “a juxtaposition of imagery that is hopefully non-logical.”[^43]

This does not mean that Rauschenberg used no logic. If this were the case we would not see images of astronauts combined with President Kennedy in his work. We would not see consistencies, considerate titles and successful fundamental characteristics either. Rauschenberg’s idea was that the viewer not be imposed upon by an apparent logic dictated by the artist that would hinder subjective involvement. One result of his efforts toward non-logic was a severe case of uncertainty for the viewer. We are conditioned to having artists or critics lead us down some path toward communication and understanding. Yet, Rauschenberg was not one to offer what we expect. Thus, for a time critics attempted to “read” his works through traditional iconographic methods and the results were ultimately inaccurate.[^44] It is completely pointless to examine a Rauschenberg work like Van Eyck’s *Arnolfini Betrothal* in which the dog signifies this and the shoes represent that. The results will lead nowhere. We cannot assume the image of an object in a Rauschenberg collage is there to provide some clue that leads us like Sherlock Holmes to the perfect solution.

There was a time when critic’s blamed the use of disparate objects and images on the Dadaists that preceded Rauschenberg and the Post-Modernists.[^45] The assumption was easy to make. Without an alternate theory or explanation presenting itself immediately why not look to historic reference? When we see art that looks nothing like the art of the past we are often left feeling a bit uneasy, bewildered, annoyed, or just apathetic.

Yet, we are determined to defend opinions beyond the simple phrase, “I may not know

[^44]: Joseph, Random Order, 11.
[^45]: Steinberg, Other Criteria, 24.
art, but I know what I like.” The situation is a challenge for both the viewer and the artist because we demand of our artists things like creativity, innovation and profundity. Leo Steinberg engages this phenomenon in his essay *Contemporary Art and the Plight of the Public* which he penned in 1962. He writes,

Modern art always projects itself into a twilight zone where no values are fixed. It is always born in anxiety…It seems to me a function of modern art to transmit this anxiety to the spectator, so that his encounter with the work is – at least while the work is new – a genuine existential predicament. Like Kierkegaard’s God, the work molests us with its aggressive absurdity, the way Jasper Johns presented himself to me years ago. It demands a decision in which you discover something of your own quality; and this decision is always a ‘leap of faith,’ to use Kierkegaard’s famous term. And like Kierkegaard’s God, who demands a sacrifice from Abraham in violation of every moral standard; like Kierkegaard’s God, the picture seems arbitrary, cruel, irrational, demanding your faith, while it makes no promise of future rewards. In other words, it is in the nature of original contemporary art to present itself as a bad risk. And we the public, artists included, should be proud of being in this predicament, because nothing else would seem to us quite true to life; and art, after all, is supposed to be a mirror of life.⁴⁶

Unlike Steinberg’s acceptance of the frustrating and complex predicament imposed upon the viewer, some would mitigate its power. One means of doing this is to embrace a critical method that is in its purest form wholly objective. Instead of taking a leap of faith one might analytically and objectively apply a system of judgment that is repeatable and provable. In the era of Modern Art some believed the only means through which we might come close to reaching this goal is to embrace Formalism.

There are many ways to approach the use of Formal method and, indeed, many critics and scholars over the years have manipulated it to suit their particular needs. The basic concept of a Formalist inquiry in art is a focus on the aesthetic. This means that factors such as content, iconography or artist intent take a back seat, or are wholly

⁴⁶ Steinberg, *Other Criteria*, 15.
irrelevant, compared to factors such as line quality, color, negative space, implied line, compositional organization or the physical materials and their application. A complete examination of Formalism would be intertwined with an examination of aesthetic theory. We need not delve this far. For this discussion let me begin as the principal players in Modern aesthetic theory did, with academic art (or what some may call art of the establishment).

We can say that Modern Art is the result of a larger cultural transformation that we call Modernity. According to author and scholar Jonathan Crary this transformation, which occurs in the nineteenth century, is the result of many factors beyond the realm of the arts and is reflective of the adaptations, including changes in subjective vision, made by all those participating in the society. 47 In other words, the shift to Modern aesthetic theory is a symptom of a gradual change in how those at the time perceived the world around them. However, in the art world we eventually come to a point where the new vision as it appears in art struggles against the old. There are many participants in this struggle: the artists, the patrons, the critics, the writers, the art appreciators, et al. For the establishment and the academy it eventually becomes an issue of expectation (or the possibility of exceeding it). There has always been a group of people that define what is expected of art and artists. This group uses consensus, based on many different factors, to determine parameters for what is acceptable and what is the epitome of artistic endeavor. Ultimately the art that becomes expected is based on the shifts, changes, and adaptations that have occurred within the culture itself even if this is not readily apparent within the artistic expression. The means by which expectation is determined has

47 Crary, Techniques, 9.
changed over the years, but the general result has been the same. Once the standard has been set and the academy embraces it as curriculum then we have established convention and Academic Art. However, there always comes a time when rules of convention are successfully breached. Since the birth of the Renaissance no successful breach has been more profound in terms of aesthetic, philosophical, and existential impact than the shift to Modernism and the resulting Modern Art. This new art, even though it was a reflection of larger cultural changes, demanded a rethinking aesthetic theory. A rethinking of convention. A fight against the academy’s prescribed characteristics for the epitome of artistic endeavor. And in the case of Modernism, the nature of the art demanded a rethinking of the role of Formal analysis.

This demand is perfectly illustrated with a comparison of the Formal qualities in Bouguereau’s academic painting called “Nymphs and a Satyr” (1873) (figure 1) and Monet’s well-known effort “Impression: Sunrise” (1872) (figure 2). In Bougeureau’s work the act of painting is disguised. The appearance of brush strokes would work against the illusion of supple skin. Color and contrast are used in service to movement, but not in and of themselves. They must convey the construct of a realistic space first. The light hues of white, yellow and pink stand out starkly against the black, brown and green and move the viewer’s eyes around the composition, but they also make the upper and lower portions irrelevant other than their service to the illusion of space. In contrast, Monet’s work accentuates a loose brush stroke. One is confronted with the notion that a hand and brush were used to apply paint to a surface rather than in an attempt to deny the two-dimensional nature of the canvas. Line is erratic, broken and blatant which makes the composition chaotic even though the implied scene is a sunrise on the water, which
Figure 1. Adolphe-William Bouguereau *Nymphs and a Satyr*, Oil on Canvas, 9' 3/8" x 5' 10 7/8", 1873. Image from Kleiner, *Art Through the Ages*, 805.
Figure 2. Claude Monet, *Impression: Sunrise*, Oil on Canvas, 1’ 7 ½” x 2’ 1 ½”, 1872.
would in an illusionistic sense convey some notion of serenity. The loose and quickly applied strokes of color give the viewer a sense of haste. These formal qualities have become tools used to affect the viewer beyond their service to content, narrative, or illusion. So what was a critic to think? How could the academic standards of 1873 cope with a work where formal characteristics were not an underlying foundation meant to be subtle or hidden, but active participants that speak their own language to the viewer?

The Academy did cope, eventually. But not without ongoing debates, grudging concessions, and new contributions to a changing view on aesthetic theory that needed to adapt, as the artists were, to the modern world. By the 1930s Western art had changed dramatically as had its accompanying theory and its academic presentation. By this time our two players, Leo Steinberg and Clement Greenberg, had just entered the theoretical debate. In 2007 Steinberg illustrated the changes that had come to academia while reminiscing about attending art school in 1933,

The family fled Nazi Germany to settle in London, where art school soon made a man of me. I learned that the perusal of painting demands other criteria. You don’t ask a depicted saint how his martyrdom feels. Grownups track visual rhythms and ‘significant form’. What they admire is ‘the integrity of the picture plane,’ or ‘truth to materials.’ And if some over-expressive St. Sebastian (such as Mantegna’s) advertises his agony, pay no attention, because expressiveness of this sort blunts ‘the essential purpose of painting.’ I got the message and studied to internalize the criteria of Formalism.48

Steinberg was just thirteen at the time, yet his early education led to a growing disdain for the use of Formalism as a guiding principle of criticism. Although Greenberg received a similar education, his reaction to the state of contemporary critical theory was quite different.

48 Steinberg, Other Criteria, preface vii 2007 ed.
Clement Greenberg not only internalized Formalism, but made it his own. Between 1940 and 1970 he developed his own method and used it through publication to endorse unknown artists (mainly Abstract Expressionists) who later became recognized as some of the greatest artists of the 20th century.\textsuperscript{49} He made Formalism an overwhelming force in the art world and his dominant voice and success changed how we think of art criticism. Greenberg had many detractors who found flaws in his method although many of these detractors operated within the bounds of Formalism themselves. Greenberg’s method was an attempt to make criticism an objective and scientific endeavor. According to art historian Donald Kuspit, “Grennberg’s art criticism is the first serious intellectual attempt by an American art critic to understand artistic value. It was he alone who first attempted to fuse immediate perception of art with intellectual responsibility for it. In general, Greenberg attempts to make art criticism a purposeful act of knowledge. Put on a sound basis, it would never again relapse into the partisanship that always threatens to undermine it from within.”\textsuperscript{50} Thus, through Greenberg’s impetus critics began to accept a sense of responsibility for the subjectivity within critical judgments. According to Greenberg, the only way to make personal taste objective, and thus valid, was through consensus over time.\textsuperscript{51} Therefore, subjective judgments on contemporary art submitted by any critic are inherently flawed. Yet, Greenberg was perfectly willing to tell you what was good art, what was bad art, and how his repeatable method could prove it.

\textsuperscript{49} Kuspit, Greenberg, 4.
\textsuperscript{50} Kuspit, Greenberg, 154.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 144.
In brief, his process, much of which is based on the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, considers the medium, the process and the perfection of form the key elements in judging a work of art. A simple definition of pictorial form given by Richard Wollheim is; how a painting represents what it represents. Content in a work of art was simply a detractor. According to Donald Kuspit, “Greenberg’s call for “perfection of form” then, does not mean emptying it of content. The strength of perfected form comes from the resistance of content to transformation. The greater the resistance, the more difficult the unity, and the more demanding and steep the perfection.”

Without getting too deep into the nuts and bolts of Greenberg’s method and the points of its detractors, let us just say that his desire for the above mentioned characteristics led to the idea of what a great work of art should be. Thus, in the United States art scene Formalism dominated academia, critical discourse, and indirectly what type of art was finding acceptance. If Greenberg’s voice, and early endorsement of artists such as Jackson Pollock, could influence what art should be then it had an impact on what types of art and artists might have the opportunity for success. It was in this environment that Steinberg and Rauschenberg railed against Formalism. If form, process and materials are the ultimate definable factors in determining great art, then successful art would eventually evolve into something that offers little or nothing to be subjective about. This was not the art or critical theory in which Steinberg or Rauschenberg believed.

Leo Steinberg wrote about his disdain for Formalism in his 1972 publication called Other Criteria.

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52 Wollheim, “On Formalism,” 133.
53 Kuspit, Greenberg, 36.
Given the complexity and infinite resonance of works of art, the stripping down of artistic value to the single determinant of formal organization was once – in the nineteenth century – a remarkable cultural achievement. The attempt was to discipline art criticism in the manner of scientific experiment, through the isolation of a single variable. Art’s “essential purpose” – call it abstract unity of design or whatever prevents buckling and wobbling – was presumed to be abstractable from all works of art. And the whole range of meaning was ruled to be disposable ‘subject matter’, which at best did no harm but which more commonly burdened the form. In the formalist ethic, the ideal critic remains unmoved by the artist’s expressive intention, uninfluenced by his culture, deaf to his irony or iconography, and so proceeds undistracted, programmed like an Orpheus making his way out of hell.54

The entire theme to Steinberg’s book, that is still relevant to today’s criticism, is that the critical analysis of any work of art requires other criteria, beyond those that dominated the first half of the twentieth century. Steinberg believed in subjective value judgments on art.55 The re-evaluation of past judgments, say a seventeenth century critic’s comments on Caravaggio, tell us something not only about the artist, but about culture, aesthetic theory and history. However, he would have value judgments given in a logical manner with the acknowledgment that they are subjective insights. It is the critic’s job to use experience and knowledge to interpret work to the best of his or her ability and be conscious of the fact that in time these interpretations may be discounted as naïve.

Based on these critical stances Steinberg was willing to embrace Rauschenberg’s work where the Formalists were not. In the end he championed Rauschenberg’s art for several reasons, but they are all connected to one larger quality which in Steinberg’s words goes beyond “the relationship between the artist and image, image and viewer.”56 He explains the significance of this trait through the defining elements of what he calls the flatbed picture plane. It is important to note that the flatbed picture plane is much

54 Steinberg, Other Criteria, 66.
55 Ibid., 311.
56 Steinberg, Other Criteria, 91.
more than what its moniker suggests. It is not simply about the dimensional aspects of art. It is about the change between the Modernist idea of the purity and acceptance of the two-dimensional surface to the Post-Modern concept of the viewer and artist being intimately involved in the work without the boundaries imposed by previous concepts of what art need be. This involvement includes physical space, implied space, culture, elements of subjective context, and even our own personal expectations that define art. Steinberg wrote,

What he (Rauschenberg) invented above all was, I think, a pictorial surface that let the world in again. Not the world of the Renaissance man who looked for his weather clues out of the window; but the world of men who turn knobs to hear a taped message, ‘precipitation probability ten percent tonight,’ electronically transmitted from some windowless booth. Rauschenberg’s picture plane is for the consciousness immersed in the brain of the city.57

This invention of Rauschenberg’s ultimately is a move to include the subjective context of the artist and viewer and in so doing becomes art that looks and communicates differently than art of our past which grew from a significantly different context. This, in turn, requires consideration as to how we view art critically. The idea seems simple, but a long history of aesthetic theory and art appreciation make our ideas on art ingrained on personal and cultural levels. Steinberg maintained that Rauschenberg’s art and the concept of the flatbed are, “part of a shakeup which contaminates all purified categories. The deepening inroads of art into non-art continue to alienate the connoisseur as art defects and departs into strange territories leaving the old stand-by criteria to rule an eroding plain.”58

57 Ibid., 90.
58 Steinberg, Other Criteria, 91.
It is in this critically argumentative context of the 1950s and 60s that Rauschenberg’s art found traction. Steinberg’s concepts have maintained their relevance over the years as has Rauschenberg’s art. However, the art of ROCI is at least thirty years removed from his early combines. The artist, at this point, had evolved in his own process and sought to further explore aesthetic and cultural issues. Although based on the same principles, the art not only looks different, but asks new questions of it viewers. Thus, when examining ROCI we must not only acknowledge the channels formed by previous critics, but find the methods to address that which is new. Steinberg’s own philosophy relied upon the idea that critical analysis must often rely on the examination of “other criteria”. In this research I suggest what some of those criteria need to be if we are to understand ROCI.

When I first encountered ROCI art it was through the reproductive images. I perused the catalogue taking a moment to scan the works and note that, in general, they induced culturally specific subjective responses. I noted one image, called *Pegasits*, that immediately initiated a specific subjective response from me, but before delving any further into critical analysis on any one piece I chose to gain some information about the ROCI project. It was here that I began to consider artist intent. This is not to say I endeavored to figure out why or how Rauschenberg made *Pegasits* look the way it did (at this point), but why the artist created ROCI. At the time this decision seemed trivial. However, in retrospect I have come to see that the path I chose has led to a possible flaw in the logic of my argument that I must recognize here.

By attempting to ascertain artist intent (as it pertains to the project as a whole) I developed fact based opinions that have the potential to skew critical analysis of specific
works. In this project there are two factors at play; the ROCI project with all its complexity and the specific paintings with their subjective yearnings. These elements are intertwined. Thus, we must ask ourselves to what extent we should acknowledge information beyond the realm of the canvas to fully experience these works of art. In other words, should we include context and artist intent in our critical analysis of the art and, if so, how does this inclusion change our analysis? A pure formalist would say these elements should not be included. However, if we look at the reactions of viewers like Menendez and Tonel these factors heavily influenced how they experienced the art and, in essence, manipulated their subjective judgments. Therefore, I have chosen to examine the works in a manner that serves to acknowledge all of these factors. However, during the process of critical analysis I will endeavor to recognize how the interplay of these elements have affected my judgments, and likely those of any viewer.

The means by which I will examine ROCI art is a three part process, the last of which includes ideas on the post-colonial condition and Cuba’s young lions and will be addressed in the next chapter. The first part of the process is an examination of formal elements. This is not to say that a Greenbergian analysis will do, but that the formal qualities have an impact on how the work is received and therefore must be addressed. One reason Steinberg was against the use of formal analysis is that, not only did it leave out much of what is necessary to understand a work, but any particular formal critical philosophy often failed to be effective and consistent even when its own definitive rules were applied. Richard Wollheim points out this phenomenon in his essay “On Formalism and Pictoral Organization”. I do not wish to argue these points. In fact, I agree with

them. However, it still stands that the formal qualities in ROCI works have significant impact on the viewer’s experience. The problem is that the formal cannot truly be separated from the subjective elements. Wollheim states,

> We can no longer hope for a general (formal) method – though possibly there will be in particular cases particular methods that work – for separating off the form of a painting from its non-formal aspects. And, since, as we have seen, our understanding of form itself is, to a considerable degree, dependent on the smooth working of some operation for extracting form from pictures, that understanding is correspondingly in doubt.\(^6^0\)

As I have stated, formal criticism is confining. In explaining different types of formal analysis (what he calls Normative, Analytic, Manifest, and Latent) Wollheim has pointed out the flaws and restraints in each and considered the overall idea that formalism is inherently flawed. In fact, due to physiological characteristics of the human perceptive process we often cannot avoid imposing an imaginative three dimensional space on two dimensional form.\(^6^1\) It is a natural reactive phenomenon. This is a quality that makes formal method problematic (regardless of whether it is considered a hindrance to successful art or not) and it occurs often in Rauschenberg’s work.\(^6^2\) It is as if we must deny certain cognitive and perceptive processes in order to render a complete formalist study. My solution here is to color outside the lines in the hope that a logical argument can rise above the minutia of the declared rules of formal pictorial engagement. In other words, I will talk about how aspects of formalism, or simply the examination of formal elements, are a useful critical tactic on ROCI art to further the understanding of Rauschenberg’s communication as opposed to how ROCI works do or do not benefit

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\(^{60}\) Ibid., 132.

\(^{61}\) Arnheim, *Visual Perception*, 248. The physiology of how we perceive space in art, among other elements, is explained at length in *Art and Visual Perception*. Here I am referring to facets of Arnheim’s rule of Simplification.

from previously established philosophies of formal methodological examination. In this case formal analysis can only work when coupled with a carefully and deliberately considered subjective one. Thus, my overall method is not that formalism (to be imposed), but one built of necessity.

In ROCI art there are many different layers of subjective information each with its own effect. This is not to say that all works of art do not have subjective components, but that ROCI art is built on deliberate and specific avenues of subjective engagement. The second part of my critical analysis addresses the two dominant avenues which are based on personal and culturally specific subjective communications. Of course, these two elements are difficult to separate (some would say impossible), but it is helpful to make the attempt because of the larger issues at stake in the ROCI project. This idea will become clearer as we move forward. It should also be understood that these elements are meant to be experienced and interpreted within the context of the viewer’s subjective reality even though they are communicated through that of the artist. These are Poststructuralist and/or Postmodern concepts that are at the core of the artist’s practice.

In an effort to put all my cards on the table before proclaiming particular insights about specific ROCI works I must acknowledge that this foray into an analysis that openly embraces subjectivity opens the door for questions regarding my own judgement. I must justify my criticism even while admitting my perspective is not wholly objective. Critic Donald Kuspit would couch my need for the evaluation of ROCI works in psychoanalytical terms that emphasize the narcissistic role of any critic. He writes,

The demand that the critical evaluation of art be objective in basis, and as scientific as possible, and the assumption that it can only make sense and be
reliable if it is, is a partialization of the critical act which functions to support the illusion that there is nothing psychologically special about one’s relationship with art, and that there is a normal, well-adjusted relationship with art to which everyone must aspire. No doubt in rebellious overcompensation, I want to carry my emphasis on the subjective aspect of critical evaluation to an extreme, even an abnormal reductionist extreme. By doing so I want to make a point as strongly as possible: that the most serious reason one turns to art is to satisfy a profound need – the need for a coherent sense of self – that has not been satisfied in life, a need that becomes all the more pressing the more the world forces one to recognize one’s limitations, undermines one’s fantasy of omnipotence, treats one with insulting casualness and subliminal indifference which it uses to assimilate everyone into its daily flow. It does this to everyone big or little, but it is those with pretensions to lasting significance that it most hurts with its callous appropriation, which is as good as disregard.63

I introduce Kuspit’s thoughts here, in part because they are remarkably entertaining in their depressive (and potentially accurate) view on critical engagement, but also to emphasize the battle a critic must endure between subjective pitfalls and valid conclusions. I am certainly not immune to such pitfalls. However, the corrupted portions of a subjective analysis cannot deter us from expecting some level of truth be exposed. This is the mantra we must repeat to ourselves if we are to invest in the critical process necessary to engage with ROCI works such as Pegasits because these subjective positions are an expected part of the communicative process. The equation Rauschenberg creates is, in part, about the sense of self. Kuspit goes on to explain how the subjective analysis can be a flawed, but potentially valuable contribution.

Where the art may or may not reconcile its wish for immortality with the reality of its mortality—offer us elements which can be regarded as making it of lasting significance as well as those which seem all too bound to a passing world, or rather put the elements of a particular world together “artistically” so that they seem memorable rather than matter-of-fact – criticism seeks to resolve the conflict, that is, offer us a sense of art as a harmonious whole despite the contradiction which animates and threatens to disintegrate it. Criticism gets its credibility not only by articulating the contradictions that mature the art, but by showing that the art does in fact have a secret integrity. While it is overly tense

63 Kuspit, New Subjectivism, 547.
with contradiction, it is covertly a harmonious or cohesive whole, that is, has a deep-lying unity of self. This ‘unity’ is proposed by the criticism, and becomes a kind of ideal fiction against which the art is measured. In a sense, it is as fictional as the art itself…

So, according to Kuspit, any criticism that I convey to you in this research is, at its core, a fiction that serves as an attempt to give the art integrity and/or immortality. I must admit that his point makes sense. If I am writing from a subjective point of view about work that is made as a subjective commentary to viewers of different subjective contexts, what facts might we possibly find? I am of the opinion that, in this case, searching for facts is of minor importance. What is of consequence is understanding the language so that our own judgments hold enough value that they may be compared in the hope of finding successes and failures as to the ROCI project as a whole.

In this research I have sought to examine artist intention as it pertains to the desired effect of ROCI. However, when we look at specific works one might argue that the notion of intention is irrelevant. It is the artist’s job to create work that communicates what he or she intends, but once the work is in a stage of consumption it is not the viewer’s obligation to consider what the artist meant to say. Only what is perceived as being said. However, if we are to be truly critical about a particular work then we must identify not only what is being communicated, but also attempt to determine how and why the art looks as it does in the artist’s effort to communicate. Because we have an idea of what Rauschenberg intended for the ROCI project, when we look at specific works we may find that what the artist intended and what we are receiving from the work are dissimilar or that our interpretation has made them so. Each of these questions (the what, how and why) have subjective elements that involve multiple parties. We must

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64 Kuspit, New Subjectivism, 550.
also acknowledge that, given the desire for subjective reactions, Rauschenberg’s art may communicate elements that have little or nothing to do with the larger goals of ROCI, but rather exist as a result of the intention to exacerbate the subjective circumstance.

Instead of attempting to ascertain all of Rauschenberg’s intentions and the effects there of, my criticism addresses only those that overtly drive the viewer’s subjective reactions (such as avoiding an obvious directed logic). I will call these efforts, as they pertain to the art rather than the project, elements of primary intent. However, the artist’s subjective point of view is certainly at issue (more so for the project than specific works) in so far as it effects what we see, as well as what we think about what we see, regardless of intention.

In truth, I am using a combination of methods or techniques to address ROCI art. The first tactic, a variant of Formalism, is rooted in the discourse of Structuralism in that it suggests a repeatable system of engagement that seeks to recognize general laws within the realm of visual communication.\(^6\) The second stage of my analysis, examining subjective communication, is firmly set within the confines of Post-structuralism. It is an inquiry that recognizes the role of the viewer to be, at the least, equally relevant to that of the artist. In fact, Rauschenberg’s actions through ROCI are Post-structural in character, and thus, demand our attention with this philosophical stance in mind. The Post-structural dialectic is an over-arching philosophical position that encompasses multiple critical theories that can be applied in a multitude of ways to the human condition. It is a reaction to Structuralism just as Postmodernism is a reaction to Modernism. In fact, at times it is considered synonymous with the term Postmodern as it is applied to visual

Postmodern in the visual arts characterizes work that has embraced context. Author and critical thinker Madan Sarup echoed sentiments of Rauschenberg and Steinberg when he wrote, “Among the central features associated with Postmodernism in the arts are: the deletion of the boundary between art and everyday life; the collapse of the hierarchical distinction between elite and popular culture; a stylistic eclecticism and the mixing of codes.” To his list I would add the Post-structural concepts examined by Derrida in his formation of Deconstructionist dialectic which, in terms of visual art, concern the unstable condition of the artist, object of art, and viewer. The unstable quality, which is referential to its undefinable nature given factors such as perspective, is ultimately the effect of subjective context. This is an issue that Rauschenberg explores in ROCI, albeit in his own terms.

Rauschenberg delivers to us signs or signifiers in his art. He has certain ideas about what he might communicate with these signs, but is fully aware that the meaning or communication of any particular thought is ultimately dependent on how the viewer is involved with the signs. In fact, it is our task as a viewer to be aware that it is not meaning that we should necessarily be seeking (because there is no factual, concrete, definable one), but how the signs are different or similar from viewer to viewer. This process of engagement between those involved is, in the end, the goal rather than written word, silkscreened image, or any other object represented within the composition. It can be argued that these concepts echo the philosophical positions put forth by Derrida. Ultimately, this method of analysis is in many ways similar to the Post-structural concept

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66 Sarup, Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism, 133.
67 Ibid., 132.
68 Ibid., 53.
of Pragmatics. Johannes Angermuller, in his book *Poststructuralist Discourse Analysis: Subjectivity in Enunciative Pragmatics*, explains that the method, “Allows us to analyze how, in the act of reading and writing, utterances are contextualized with respect to who speaks, when and where. Inspired by the critique of the sovereign subject in Foucault (1969), it shows how subjectivity is constructed in a multitude of voices, sources and speakers and tied to the linguistic forms and formal markers which organize the enunciation.”

My method in examining ROCI works uses similar ideas to not only recognize the subjectivity of a multitude of sources (as applied to art rather than text or speech), but to consider the notion that this type of examination is an intentional result of the created work. However, rather than delve into linguistic, philosophical, or metaphysical points of interest it is more important, for my purposes, to examine how the signs work in order to illustrate the comparisons in which Rauschenberg hopes we will engage.

The primary question, in its most basic condition, I am seeking to answer through my Formal inquiry is *How do the formal elements effect our subjective judgments?* This question is most easily answered through an analysis of the ROCI USA piece called *Seminole Host* (figures 3.1 and 3.2). The work is relatively simple, in comparison to other ROCI works, in its communication and form. The title of the work prompts a subjective response in and of itself and can influence how we view the work so disregard it for the moment.

The reproduced image of the piece is misleading, even compared to traditional examples of art reproduced for this type of format, due to its composite materials and

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Figure 3.1. Robert Rauschenberg, *Seminole Host*, acrylic and fire wax on stainless steel, 72 ¾” x 96 ¾”, 1990. Image from Yakush, *ROCI*, 20.
Figure 3.2. Robert Rauschenberg, *Seminole Host*, acrylic and fire wax on stainless steel, 72 ¾” x 96 ¾”, 1990. Image from Flickr.com, mamarazzi13 photographer, accessed October 3, 2015, https://www.flickr.com/photos/mamarazzi13/5850900511
scale. Rauschenberg has used a process similar to encaustic to apply wax and acrylic to a reflective stainless steel surface that is six by nine feet. Therefore, much of the empty space acts as a mirror-like surface which in effect makes the viewer a visual part of a transient composition. It also serves to create layers of illusory depth that are imposed upon the viewer. At six by nine feet the scale further exacerbates the effect by making the illusory space compatible with our psychological expectations of an easily interactive environment. The resulting image is a bit like standing in front of a store front window. There may be signs or messages that adhere directly to the glass that draw our attention to a particular depth, but we ultimately try to peer inside while at the same time peripherally acknowledging the reflection of the street activity behind us. But before we get caught up in subjective interpretations we must ask how the formal elements effect the composition’s communication.

The composition is divided into two rectangular sections that are unequal in size. Because the left rectangle is slightly larger than the right it communicates the sense that it is crowding the rectangle on the right. This is emphasized through the line and form within both rectangles because the rectangle on the left offers significantly less empty space. A repetitive pattern of line dominates the section on the left which is itself divided into two rectangular sections. Each of the two sections on the left repeat the same pattern although they are at slightly different angles and are represented in different colors. The line quality on the left has four or five variations and at no time does it communicate stability with anything perfectly horizontal or vertical. If the left side gives us any stability it is from the horizontal line implied with a color change between the top portion and the bottom. Otherwise, the angle of the varying lines causes the entire left portion to
lean toward the left. The block of color in the center left (not quite rectangular in shape) adds a sense of disorder. It is not truly a rectangle and emphasizes the instability of odd angles. It reaches the left perimeter of the composition, but fails to reach the line that divides the left from the right. It creates contrast that draws our attention in a way that offsets the contrast on the right. Finally, it serves to break up the reflective negative space that exists throughout the composition. To offset the disorder is the order projected through the overall composition of neatly arranged and firmly set rectangles. Even though the straight and determined quality of the line and the direct and definitive nature of the material give some sense of stability, the overall effect of the formal elements on the left is that of a crowded, busy and slightly unstable condition. Had the pattern of the lines in the upper and lower left sections been continuous, or unskewed, and the color constant, the effect of the left would have been closer to stability due to the constancy of pattern. However, the work would also have a significantly different, in my opinion less successful, effect on the viewer.

In comparison, the right side of the composition, in part due to its juxtaposition to the left, is remarkably calm. A singular shape containing its own pattern of curvilinear lines sits slightly to the right of center on an unfettered plane of empty space. A lack of color allows the communication to maintain a level of simplicity and yet the amorphous nature of the shape and the delicate state of the organic line retain enough intricacy to hold the viewer’s attention. Admittedly, when we look at this shape we cannot help but think of the term “float” or “floating”, but the term carries subjective connotations. Formally, the right side of the composition relays a sense of quiet calm because when compared to the left there is an expanse of space, a complete lack of rigid line, and
although there is contrast it does not come with the complications of color. The only tension here is caused by the position of the shape. Because it is set slightly to the right of its own rectangular space it gives the impression that it is being imposed upon by its opposite on the left.

The unifying factor in the composition is the reflective surface that acts as empty or negative space. It permeates the piece regardless of dividing lines, sections or shapes. Formally, it does not matter what definitive assignment you give to the reflected shapes on its surface. You may see yourself, a painting on the opposite wall, the illusion of a room, or the activity of a crowd. On this surface they all act as curvilinear shapes that move among those imprinted in wax. In fact, we cannot help but think of these shapes as existing on a plane behind the wax and acrylic materials. Thus, it is a unifying contrived space that allows the viewer to become an active participant in the physical composition. If we react to notions of a ground plane or gravity (floating shapes) inferred from the reflective surface then we have gone beyond formal analysis.

The formal aspects of Seminole Host are not illogical or coincidental. They are aesthetic decisions that serve to reinforce the subjective suggestions in which we involve ourselves. There are a multitude of subjective facets that we might consider when analyzing this image. We might ask how Rauschenberg’s Dyslexia effected both process and results or how the artist chose exhibition locations and how the sites influenced the critical approach of viewers. However, as I mentioned earlier, in this research I am focusing on elements of primary intent. The first consequence of engaging with Seminole Host is a personal subjective reaction. This is as the artist intended regardless of how the
viewer reacts. Thus, subjective analysis begins with my notions on his juxtaposition of opposites.

A sense of quiet calm permeates this work because we are visually and psychologically drawn to the right half of the composition. There is a need to move toward space and away from confinement, to identify with the human figure, and to indulge in the illusion of a space into which we might move physically. Eventually we seek to identify the parts of the composition. What are we looking at on the left and is this figure on the right meant to suggest the cultural concoction of a ghost? The answers here are whatever you are comfortable with. However, the artist has set this up so that a majority of viewers will recognize a juxtaposition of cultural opposites: modernity/tradition, present/past, noise/quiet, chaos/solitude, etc… I recognize that the image on the left is composed of at least two photographs. They appear to be the fire escapes on the side of multi-story brick buildings. One of Rauschenberg’s tactics is to recognize parts of our environment that have become so ingrained in our psyche that we no longer notice them as active aesthetic elements. He uses photographs of these elements to bring them to our attention in an aesthetic environment. Personally, I have little experience with fire escapes beyond that which I have gained through “Law and Order” episodes. However, I do recognize that they speak of modern life in a city. Thus, a group of subjective mental images and thoughts accompany the image presented by the artist. These thoughts are personally subjective, but the roots are firmly set in a cultural framework and emphasized by formal aesthetic choices.

The right half of the composition involves the same process. Most viewers will recognize traditional clothing worn by many cultures. Some would say it is the clothing
of pre-modern life. Like the artist, I have spent many years in southwest Florida and this image immediately spoke to me of the Seminole or Caloosa tribes of the area. It is an image that carries different subjective notions depending on your perspective. However, it is certainly an image that exists in opposition to modernity. Rauschenberg has taken it a step further by representing the figure like a floating apparition that speaks to us from the past. However, through the reflective surface the artist places each viewer alongside the figure suggesting that whatever you believe the figure to represent it remains a part of our environment, our present or simply a part of us. Oddly, I find this tactic a bit gimmicky because it reminds me of the Haunted House ride at Disney World. However, the communication is successful in that it does what it is intended to do. The entire composition is an experiment involving aesthetics that emphasize a comparison between artistic suggestions, assumptions of the artist’s subjective context, the viewer’s subjective response and elements of ingrained cultural perspectives.

The title of the composition is a play on words. The image that appears to be a ghost is in actuality a host because it is projected into the gallery setting reflected on the stainless steel surface of the art. However, the title is not a critical facet of the functionality of the piece. The specific identity of the figure or the patterns produced by the buildings is only important in that it engages the viewer in a personal dialogue based on his or her own subjective perspective. So what type of dialogue would occur if the viewer were not an art historian from southwest Florida? What would be the commonalities and differences among viewers that speak different cultural languages? These are but a few of the questions Rauschenberg has posed through ROCI and I will soon oblige him with some answers.
The composition called *Pegasi* is considerably more complicated from a formal standpoint and emphasizes Rauschenberg’s desire to deny the viewer his subjective logic by attempting the initial appearance of non-logical formal presentation (figures 4.1 and 4.2). However, as I stated earlier, there is a successful visual logic that serves to make suggestions rather than give directions to guide a viewer’s subjective contemplation. The artist uses his own version of the process called collage (and in this case assemblage) to make connections between art and life, viewer and culture, and identity and culture. He also attempts to set the viewer on a path that makes no demands other than those determined by psychological and physiological attributes. On collage, in general, Kuspit maintains that,

> Decisions are involved in its creation – from the choice of material to the ‘composing’ of the incongruous effect – but these seem secondary to the expectation of easy crossover between life and art, the easy ‘translatability’ of the one into the other, with only minor artistic adjustments, represented in the dictionary definition by ‘relating lines or color dabs.’ However, these relational factors are crucial, for they complete the crossover. On them, as the formal confirmation of transposition, depends on the success of the collage – its viability as a ‘structure’ of relationships between fragments of material, and as a demonstration of the reversible relationship (the continuum) between life and art. The gathering together which collage is about becomes abstract and assumes the mantle of art only when token signs of art are added to the mix; i.e., only when it is aestheticized by being ‘treated’ (shall we say ‘purified’?) with the residue from the convention of art, traces that signaled a full-fledged act of artistic creation. The artistic fragments refine the life fragments, giving them appeal to a more contemplative level of consciousness than is customary in everyday life, making them safely formal and aesthetically significant.\(^{70}\)

Although Rauschenberg has refined or manipulated collage, in its traditional definitive sense, with artistic processes such as of photography, silkscreen and encaustic, he still relies on what Kuspit calls the “reversible relationship between life and art.” However,

\(^{70}\) Kuspit, *New Subjectivity*, 504.
Rauschenberg’s ROCI works are thematic, not in a narrative sense, but in a way that involves identity and culture. They are at times less about the “detritus” of life and more about the psychological connections and subtle subconscious information that we attach to the things around us. In some ways it is about how they define us as opposed to how we define them. He brings an artistic eye to the individual elements as well as the collage-like compositions. Also, by using his own photography, and other various processes, he is able to manipulate through formal aesthetic decisions how the viewer interacts with the art on a psychological, and potentially physiological, basis. Evidence of this manipulation can, in part, be shown through an appraisal of formal elements in Pegasits.

Rauschenberg uses color, shape, line and empty space to manipulate the viewer’s perception of space while engaging with the work. This is not the simple artistic or photographic rendering of the illusion of space. Rauschenberg has utilized tactics that effect what we objectively perceive as depth in this work. He has enhanced the effect with the physical presence of a chair attached to the two dimensional surface. Although identifying or extracting form in Pegasits is a troublesome task at best, objective parts of this equation are critical factors as to the success of the subjective parts. In order to impose depth objectively the artist uses tactics such as those discussed by Rudolph Arnheim in Art and Visual Perception; namely factors that involve what he calls the law of simplification. For example, Arnheim poses that when we look at the simple contour of a circle on a blank sheet of paper we perceive the area around the circle as slightly less dense than the area within. He writes, “This impression may be nothing but a carry-over from our experience with physical objects, which are seen against the empty space of
their surroundings. Experiments suggest, however, that it probably derives from physiological factors underlying the perceptual process itself, quite independently of previous experience. Therefore, when we look at *Pegasits* we can understand why the reflective negative space that surrounds the central rectangles is perceived as both less dense and existing at a depth behind the central positive shapes. Of course, there are many factors at play here, but Rauschenberg has used these physiological nuances to great effect. The same physiological effect occurs with the two central rectangles. On the left is a horizontal black and white area that contains a variety of lines, shapes and images. On the right is the colorful rectangle composed of various line qualities and shapes. The fact that the shape with color is slightly taller than the black and white rectangle on the left makes the viewer perceive, according to the law of simplification, that the rectangle on the right overlaps the one on the left. If we imagine them at equal depth then we must arrange the shapes so that they abut one another. This scenario is, apparently, more complicated to our physiological processes than imagining them overlapping. Thus, we have objectively implied illusory space. Of course, each of these elements is reinforced with others. The use of color, for example, also serves to bring the rectangle on the right to the front of the canvas. However, it is the combination of many effects that complete the manipulation of our engagement.

Imagine for a moment that the winged horse at the center of the work is the same rusty orange color as the portion on the right. The effect would be to bring both elements to the same imagined depth within the larger composition. One result of such a decision would be a change in how we perceive the black and white elements that currently

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surround the horse. They would appear to occupy a space behind the horse and lose relevance as to the composition as a whole. Small aesthetic decisions, such as the color and placement of the horse, have consequences as to how we perceive not simply space, but also the subjective suggestions that we receive. If the composition exhibits qualities that allow the physiological and psychological processes to complement one another it is easier for the viewer to satisfy the need to impose some level of order to the encroaching chaos. Our mental need to move the chair to a position in which all four legs are firmly placed in a more natural position creates a kind of movement and tension within the composition. This tactic, which is based on subjective considerations, is reinforced with physiological factors that affect how we interact with the physicality of the chair in comparison to the physicality of the remaining surface of the composition. The artist made similar decisions involving the reflective surface through its discontinuation on the left side of the composition. In order to appreciate the work we should recognize that via the rectangles, colors, contrasts and varying line qualities we have been manipulated regardless of content. The successful composition is one that allows the two to work together rather than oppose each other. In *Pegasits* Rauschenberg has allowed the two to coexist in a way that does not create order, but instead gives us just enough information that allows our brains to move toward an order built of each viewer’s need. This is not simply the result of taking every-day objects and asking us to look at them as objects of art. For Rauschenberg, it is the result of combining aesthetic and subjective decisions within a subtly directed composition.

*Pegasits*, created for ROCI USA, offers suggestions that lead to a wide range of potential personal and cultural subjective responses. It also helps us to understand how
Rosalind Krauss’ description of Rauschenberg’s work, the matrix of consciousness, is applicable. Rosetta Brooks, author of the essay for the opening of ROCI USA, writes that,

The entire body of work is about a belief in, and a celebration of, the instinctive ‘here and now’ of human experience…A regenerative, resurrective impulse informs all his work. Rauschenberg confers value on the incidental litter of consumerism and thereby subverts politics. Directed at the experiences of our divided, fragmented world, the ROCI works are acts of recovery and restoration. Rauschenberg seeks out and finds levels of continuity deep within the most disconnected, partial signs of cultural disjunction. Ultimately, ROCI is about the pursuit of a certain kind of integration.²²

Even though the concepts that I attempt to convey in this research echo these sentiments by Brooks and her comments are not meant to be a full consideration of one work, there is a divide between our approaches when it comes to the analysis of individual pieces. In brief mention of Pegasits Brooks writes,

Images appear and disappear in the satin-sheer flatness of the surface, creating fractured implosions within the “technological skin” of the material. ROCI USA implies a sense of space travel, an implication that is not new to Rauschenberg’s art. But in ROCI USA, the references are by turn ethereal and physical, a memory and a reality. Here the presence of icons such as Pegasus (in Pegasits) or the American eagle (in Treadle) evoke dreams of flight. Wheels and ladders—two other dominantly recurring images in ROCI USA—are images of movement and ascent.²³

Although Brooks’ analysis is not incorrect (and its inclusion in Rauschenberg’s catalogue is a testament to that), it relies too much on the Sherlokian interpretation of signifiers that lead us to believe there exists a proper reading of the artist’s specific subjective suggestions when, in actuality, the point of the “non-logical” composition is that the artist perspective not dominate that of the viewer. He simply expects to have subjective

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²² Yakush, ROCI, 13.
²³ Ibid.
commonalities with the viewer that assists in provocative communication. Yes, the title is suggestive and a play on words, but it works on multiple levels. When I look at *Pegasits* I do not think of flight even though the image of the winged horse seems a blatant reference. I do not think of myth, or movement, or anything of the sort. Rauschenberg’s commentary through the communication is not reliant on my initial acknowledgment that this particular part of the piece implies reference to an ancient Greek and Western myth or some notion of breaking our earthly bounds. It is reliant on the idea that I identify with the image as some ingrained, even subconscious, part of my personal cultural id. Its meaning is intentionally unstable and contextual, in a post-structural sense, much like words or utterances rely upon those surrounding them to further a written or verbal communication. This idea is not new to some of those that have reviewed Rauschenberg’s work in the past, including Krauss, but it has not been approached as a central tactic within the larger concepts of ROCI. Let me explain.

Mobile, Alabama. That was my first thought upon viewing *Pegasits*. Actually, a road trip to Mobile to be more specific. The thought expanded as I considered the piece further. I am cognitive of the fact that to be properly critical of any work a simple knee-jerk reaction does not suffice as careful consideration. However, with ROCI art the artist has made it a point to force it upon us. Thus, I can tell you that this work acted like a familiar scent that lingers in your mind for a millisecond before it reveals its familiarity. Of course, *Pegasits* is reminiscent of one of those old gas stations one might see in the South. Complete with ply-wood, bottles left by the locals that gather on its “porch”, and the food that might be served (or used to be served) within. However, there was one troublesome element. I had seen this gas station a hundred times. Why did I keep
coming back to the trip to Mobile I made with my family years ago? The art spoke of the 1970s. It spoke of cheesy billboards about some hotel called South of the Border and the summer heat of the South. It spoke of grass growing through cracks on old asphalt and businesses that didn’t look as prosperous as those in the city. The thought expanded to include heavy hanging trees, unstable looking roofs and Cicadas. The work of art had initiated a small chain reaction of associative thoughts that were as a whole much more than the work itself. Then it dawned on me. The graphic design that I was looking at in the form of Pegasus was an old logo for Mobil Oil. I did not think of the Valdez. I did not think of how the state of Mobil service stations had changed. My brain played a little word/image association game in my subconscious that led to Mobile, Alabama. The hints were there, of course. The partial word “oysters”. The feeling that depicted surfaces had an age that did not exist in the new construction of suburbia. Rauschenberg had put suggestions into the work. However, he did not create the art as a reflection on Mobile. What he did do was capture something that to him was uniquely American with the hope that others would identify exactly as I had. Not with the attempt to define ad nauseam the pieces and parts of the composition, but to potentially identify with them and consider the overall effect with the acknowledgement that one’s Mobile may be another’s Portland. The word association may come in some other form, but Rauschenberg could only attempt to present a catalyst. Just like the smell of baking bread doesn’t necessarily demand you immediately consider the defining elements of the recipe. To some it is the smell of home, to others it is the smell of the local factory that produced it and to many it has no familiarity at all. And to accomplish his task Rauschenberg used everyday objects like a composer might use the noise of a train
whistle or a rain-storm. In the correct context why is one sound inferior to the next if it achieves the desired result? That analysis of the work, according to Kuspit, is my fiction.

I am certain that many do not or will not identify with Pegasits and some may have contrived their own fiction based on the parameters that Rauschenberg has set. But one of the artist’s tactics is to put viewers in a position where they are confronted with differences and similarities that become pronounced through this process. With this concept in mind it became easier to understand the artist’s practices in other ROCI works even if I failed to find a similar connection.

This idea can be illustrated through an examination of the work called Cuban Acre which was created for the ROCI Cuba opening (figures 5.1, 5.2, 5.3). Formally, the work is remarkably simple. Although the tactics employed are, in general, the same as the USA works, in Cuban Acre the reflective material is not used (nor is it used in any work for ROCI Cuba) and the implied depths are not a focal point as they are in either Seminole Host or Pegasits. The composition is seven by eighteen feet and because of this size the juxtaposed rectangles that make up the work are seen as much individually as they are parts of a larger work. The photographic imagery within the rectangles that beckons subjective interpretation also serves to keep the overall piece balanced. In some areas, like the lower right, a busy gathering of varied line qualities, shapes, and contrasts are counterbalanced within the larger composition with the complimentary blocks of orange and blue. Contrasts and colors are placed strategically so the eye can wander easily. However, because of this balance the artist has allowed the psychological factors to guide perusal of the art. The yellow design that is neatly divided by the border of the blue and orange color blocks serves as a formal element that keeps us from lingering too
Figure 5.2. (Detail). Robert Rauschenberg, *Cuban Acre*, enamel and acrylic on galvanized steel, 84 ¾” x 216 ¾”, 1988. Image from Yakush, *ROCI*, 68-69.
Figure 5.3. (Detail). Robert Rauschenberg, *Cuban Acre*, enamel and acrylic on galvanized steel, 84 ¾” x 216 ¾”, 1988. Image from Yakush, *ROCI*, 68-69.
long on the composition’s outer reaches. As one might expect, our eyes and thoughts are
drawn to the imagery on the far left and right because of our psychological need to assign
identifying criteria and to rely on familiarity. People, cars and clothes lines certainly
qualify as familiar. Although the formal elements are used here to assist in a subjective
analysis, in this case their task is accomplished in part by simply not getting in the way.

It is a given that a viewer of one culture will see this Rauschenberg piece
differently than a viewer of another. This is not necessarily an aesthetic fact, although
different cultures appreciate aesthetics differently, but it is a contextual one. The artist’s
point in creating ROCI goes much further than this simple concession. Although
Rauschenberg did make an attempt to identify with the people and cultures he visited, he
was fully aware that he would not be able to see the world around him the way someone
that lived their entire life in Havana might. However, he also believed he could show us
elements of multiple cultures and the commonalities and differences would not be based
on his aesthetic and cultural perspectives alone. If confronted with his art the viewer
would come to his or her own insights about commonalities and differences. In the case
of Cuban Acre I found that I did not identify with the work as I had the ROCI USA
pieces. In fact, it took a few moments to recognize thoughts based on stereo-types and
attempt to look beyond them. This, of course, is one of the purposes of the composition.
Rauschenberg has not only taken everyday objects and images and presented them in new
aesthetic contexts, but he also asks the viewer to consider his or her own personal
context. I cannot view Cuban Acre as anything but an American. However, I can view it
while considering how my Americaness colors what I see and think. Also, with
knowledge of how the artist spoke through Pegasits one might endeavor to avoid making
judgements based on whether the work can be “properly read.” In other words, if the identity of the person shown as a black and white photograph in the top right corner cannot be determined, that does not mean that the point of the entire composition is lost. With this critical stance in mind one can work to separate the stereotypes and assumptions from unique aesthetic and cultural communications. The process also serves to point out cross-cultural elements through which we find some level of commonality.

For example, *Cuban Acre* conveys a sense of history, place, pride, and work. These qualities are conveyed not because I have some knowledge of Cuban history or I can guess that the figure on the top right might be Jose Martí, but because the artist has used indicators that are both universal (within a modern society) and culture specific. He gives us images that bring about assumptions based on our own cultural perspectives, but because the images look slightly different than we would generally expect we are forced to consider them beyond the qualities that our assumptions provide.

For example, the white star on a red background in the lower right portion of the composition is a reference to the Cuban flag. Context indicates this. Those who recognize it as such will define it in an endless variety of ways. Elements communicated from this small aesthetic symbol will vary greatly depending on personal notions regarding Cuba, how the viewer thinks about his or her own national flag (if the viewer is not Cuban) and how the viewer interprets the contextual setting developed in the remainder of the composition. We are all aware of what, in general, a national flag is supposed to communicate. Thus, we apply those qualities to the communication. We assume that pride and national identity are a part of the equation unless the context presented by the composition tells us otherwise. We repeat this process for all the
elements that Rauschenberg presents in *Cuban Acre*. What does scaffolding mean to me? What does a horse mean to me? What does a skull or an old car mean to me? Yet, given the context developed in the entire composition, and ROCI as an event, the viewer is struck by the fact that the work is not only about how he or she might personally identify with the parts. It is also about the contexts and subtleties that make them *unlike* the car or scaffolding or horses that we carry around in our heads. When was the last time you saw scaffolding made entirely of wood? How about a skull that wasn’t in a medical text, a television show or printed on someone’s shirt? Did you ever look at the aesthetics of the patterns created by a clothes-line? In fact, ask a ten year old American child if they know what a clothes-line is. When did you last see a car made before 1970 that wasn’t immaculately restored for some auction or car show? These qualities cause a non-Cuban viewer to think. When I look at this composition I can see indicators of history, place, pride and work, but each element is in part an assumptive figment of my own cultural make-up combined with cross-cultural characteristics. One of the interesting parts of the work is the act of trying to see more because you know it is there.

For example, the black and white portrait at the top right portion of the composition draws our attention, but if you do not know the identity of the figure it has a significantly different impact contextually and psychologically. These qualities effect how we interact with the aesthetics by changing how we intellectually process the work. Another work called *Quote (J.F.K.)*, created by Rauschenberg in 1964, includes the image of President John F. Kennedy (figure 6.1) and due to its political connotations would never have been a part of ROCI, but it is effective in making a point here. Try to imagine viewing *Quote (J.F.K.)* as if you did not recognize the President (an altered
image shown as figure 6.2 may assist in this). Imagine that you recognize him as the foreign leader that attempted to assassinate your own. The composition offers a different experience because of the informational and cultural context of the viewer. However, we may still understand that the figure is nationally important and has something to do with leadership and/or space exploration. Rauschenberg has chosen to present Kennedy in a variation of the ancient western notion of the “orators’s pose” with the outstretched finger emphasizing a verbal communication. It is a tactic many are able to comprehend regardless of whether or not the posing individual is recognized. Now look at Cuban Acre with the knowledge that the figure shown in the top right may serve a similar purpose. Indeed, the figure is Jose Martí who, according to my Cuban friend Polo Cerro was, “our George Washington.” Although not shown as an orator, he is shown looking down from above posed in the traditional bust position complete with a three-quarter turn. Again it is the pose of a person of importance, leadership and worthy of veneration. If you are not Cuban the image will not have the same impact or carry the same connotations. However, we can still come to some understanding of the composition and appreciate the notion that these commonalities and differences within the ROCI works and viewers are a part of the subject matter.

This comparative proposition offered by Rauschenberg is made strikingly clear if you ask a Cubano to talk about Cuban Acre. As you might expect, the response will be more like my response to Pegasits. I asked three of my Cuban acquaintances (Airam Rivera, Obert Pina, and Polo Cerro) to engage with the works I have chosen to address in
this study and discuss their reactive thoughts with me. Mr. Rivera and Mr. Pina have been in the United States for less than two years and are skilled craftsmen, while Mr. Cerro has been here for nearly ten years and is a former physics professor at the University of Pinar del Río. All three have immediate family who remain in Cuba. Although my conversations were not intended to be scientifically analytical, the responses are helpful in facilitating a greater understanding of the way we respond to the subjective creations.

The universal theme in experiencing Rauschenberg’s ROCI works, for a casual viewer, is the driving need to define and identify with the individual pieces and parts of the compositions. There were commonalities between Airam, Obert, and Polo’s experiences that were communicated while describing this process. Airam and Obert each saw the scaffolding and clothes-line as indicators of Havana Vieja or Old Havana, a place they spoke of at length and with enthusiasm. They recognized Jose Martí as both a poet and leader and when asked both were adamant that the ROCI Cuba works had nothing to do with politics. Airam spent time explaining to me how the cars we see in Cuban Acre are likely not owned by individuals. They are used like company cars in an economy where nine out of ten people do not own a car. It was not the objects themselves that Airam spoke of but the subjective contexts in which he came to identify with them. Polo spoke about Cuban Acre for more than ten minutes in an effort to facilitate my understanding of his thoughts on Cuba. In this conversation it was obvious that the imagery in the work spoke to him of Pinar del Río rather than Havana. He took time to speak about Jose Martí and how he believed the leader, although rightfully

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74 Interviews with Airam Rivera, Obert Pina and Polo Cerro were conducted in Fort Myers, Florida in April of 2015.
venerated, had spent too much time in United States. Airam went so far as to explain how the black and white image on the lower right represented people involved with dissention efforts at the Peruvian embajada or embassy and the notion that many Cubanos had less than benign ideas on their role in Cuban history. The conversations I had with Airam, Obert, and Polo were certainly enjoyable and informative, but the most interesting element was the extent to which each viewer imposed a slightly different context on individual parts of the work. Yet between the three the engagement as a whole with Cuban Acre was consistent. Each perceived notions of pride, place, history, and work. Yet, in comparison to my engagement they encountered a significantly more profound experience. When asked about Pegasits or Seminole Host, the group had strikingly little to say. Although Polo took the time to draw commonalities between American and Cuban imagery he explained (in his own words) that he simply did not personally identify with the work, and thus, the art I wanted to talk about was as uninteresting as his physics equations were to me. Airam suggested that the human figure in Seminole Host reminded him of Spanish colonial figures wearing traditional garb. As I mentioned earlier in this research, I believe the artist was searching for such a reaction. Even more to the point of this research (to be discussed in the next chapter), we must recognize and investigate the differences between Airam, Obert, and Polo’s reactions with those of Tonel and Menéndez who experienced the work in the contrived setting produced by Rauschenberg’s ROCI project.

In the end, when we look at ROCI art with a critical eye we must recognize that we are forced into a purposely subjective conversation. This fact causes professional critics to steer the critical conversation towards ideas on the use of materials or
generalities about culture and art that have appeared in Rauschenberg’s work for decades. The attempt at writing or speaking intellectually about subjective engagement often offers the critic little more than discomfort. A fact that Greenberg was all too aware. However, the real story about ROCI is the juxtaposition of subjective positions with which the artist has asked us to engage rather than a single subjective notion about a particular element within a specific piece of art.

In 1983 Cuban artist Leandro Soto created a work called *Kiko Constructor* (figure 7) a part of a group of works called *Retablo Familiar* (Family Altar Piece) within which the concepts are reflective of Rauschenberg’s earlier art and in some ways a prelude to those in *Cuban Acre*. Soto is one of the “young lions” that attended the ROCI Cuba opening. The author of *New Art of Cuba*, Luis Camnitzer, describes *Kiko Constructor* as,

A series of showcase like boxes filled with family memorabilia – photographs, postcards, toys, mantelpiece fetishes – set among lit light bulbs and accompanied by scribbles and words written on the glass. Describing them, I once excessively synthesized them as hybrids between Joseph Cornell and Robert Rauschenberg. The references are only valid as a superficial lead-in. Soto’s showcases are to Cuban shop windows what Cornell’s boxes are to Tiffany’s windows. The parallel also clarifies the involvement of the public. Soto avoids the intimidation of preciousness and stays out of the arcane. His work has the mystery of memory in which banality is shamelessly included. But more than shop windows, the boxes of Soto are altar pieces. While the aesthetics and aims of shop windows and altar pieces are by no means unrelated, in Soto’s work the precision is important. The themes in his work are mostly of heroic nature, but he is not selling or promoting heroes. He is paying homage to his own heroes, the ones who came from his family and were his childhood supermen. His father, his uncle, like many others who anonymously helped create and defend the Revolution, become sacred through family romanticism and childhood projections of mysterious reverberations that act as secular halos.⁷⁵

Figure 7. Leandro Soto, *Kiko Constructor (Kiko the Builder)*, mixed media, 38” x 50”, 1983. Image from Camnitzer, *New Art of Cuba*, 33.
In his apt description, Camnitzer has focused in on the idea that Soto has identified something beyond the altered presentation of everyday objects. He has attempted to tap into an element that exists as a building block in the identity of both an individual and collective Cuban subjective context. I argue that in ROCI works Rauschenberg has attempted to do the same, but on a multicultural level. We must remember that ROCI was a collaborative effort and the artist was likely aware of Soto’s work. When we look at *Cuban Acre* we can see an aesthetic similarity between the image at the lower right and Soto’s *Kiko Constructor*. It is not simply about the common man or work, as Camnitzer observes, but also about the mystery of memory. One could argue that this idea is simply a function of the medium of photography. However, both Rauschenberg and Soto have attempted to move beyond this through the manipulation of context, the addition of other media and the intention of involving our concepts of identity. It seems there has always been some form of collaboration between Soto and Rauschenberg, although through ROCI the exchange was meant to be more direct.

On May 14th, 2008 the art critic for the Los Angeles Times, Christopher Knight, published an extended obituary/article about Robert Rauschenberg. Within over three thousand words there were a total of two sentences referencing ROCI. They read, “He launched ROCI – the Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange – in 1985, spending five years travelling the world collaborating with artists and non-artists alike. The ROCI agenda was well received by more than two million participants in China, the Soviet Union and elsewhere, although few projects resulted in significant art.”76 I will give Knight a break here because none of us will always produce our best work, but at the

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same time statements like “few projects resulted in significant art” give art critics a less than stellar reputation. Here Knight is suggesting that the critical consensus on ROCI art is that, although people may have appreciated it, it is insignificant as an aesthetic contribution to the art world. Yet, he refuses to commit to the opinion by throwing in the idea that he knows of a secret few that are significant of which he has chosen not to speak. In his defense, by adding the last bit he has avoided giving a more serious insult to the artist in his obituary.

Knight is not alone in his opinion that the art is less than significant and the reason he has come to this conclusion has been a theme throughout this chapter. First, the work is not ground-breaking in the realm of aesthetic theory. The visual devices the artist uses to communicate in ROCI are the same concepts he used in his work since the 1950s. The physical processes, materials or contextual ideas may have changed, but the post-modern mechanisms remain consistent. In other words, in ROCI Rauschenberg has not pushed the establishment, or the academy, into new aesthetic territory beyond that which he has already pushed. Most critics, including myself, tend to agree with this assessment.

Secondly, Rauschenberg’s interest in the role of subjectivity, as evidenced in his art, leaves critics in a difficult position. One cannot deem a work of art innovative or ground-breaking through determinants that are solely based on personal subjective experience. For a proper critical analysis there must be something more, something logical, to grab on to in order to qualify a work beyond personal taste. Thus, if one looks at the aesthetics and subject matter without examining the larger concepts, such as
comparative aesthetics and subjective contexts, the critic is left with little to say about ROCI art.

The last reason why Knight and others determined that ROCI art is less than significant, and the reason why that opinion needs to be questioned, is because there are other criteria inherent in the project that critics have either failed to see or have deemed insignificant as to an analysis of the work. These other criteria involve the increasingly global nature of the art world and the idea that aesthetic communication in ROCI art places viewers in a position where comparative subjective contexts are a part of the work. Rauschenberg has instigated a conversation that deals with identity and how we experience art differently. This was his intention, rather than attempting to create some new aesthetic concoction that might challenge critics. At the least, ROCI art can be considered a significant contribution simply for the fact that in order to understand global appreciation of the work we must consider contemporary factors such as the post-colonial condition: which will be considered in the following chapter.
Dear Brett Beatty,

I am sorry to have taken so long in answering your letter that took quite a few months in getting to me. You are familiar with my opinions on Rauschenberg’s work, as I wrote in the catalogue you mention.

Years before R.O.C.I., Rauschenberg was an influence in at least one important Cuban artist: Raúl Martínez (1927-1995). But as to R.O.C.I.’s show in Cuba, my impression is that it was not well received by our younger artists, our young lions (as Rauschenberg was in his time). Maybe they felt that R.O.C.I. was a tourist’s output.

I must point out that my comment (catalogue essay) was written quite some time before R.O.C.I. (and Rauschenberg) arrived here, so it had to take into account Rauschenberg’s work as a whole, not so as to R.O.C.I.

The cold reception of R.O.C.I. by the younger artists could possibly explain the absence of written comments in Cuba...so as not to hurt the artist's enterprise.

I would have liked to write you more positive accounts, that Rauschenberg certainly merits, but I must be faithful to real facts.

Sincerely,

Roberto Fernández Retamar

In the summer of 2010 I initiated correspondence with Mr. Retamar about the ROCI opening in Havana. This letter was the first of several exchanges that served to influence the core of my theories about ROCI and this research. The comments by Mr. Retamar lead to several questions. Who exactly were these young lions? Why did they react coldly to ROCI? Why did Roberto wish it otherwise? What can we say about the ROCI project given this response? These are the questions I seek to investigate in this final chapter. Even though Retamar suggests the idea that the young lions saw the ROCI work
as having the shallowness of a tourist’s observations, as did many critics some of whom I have mentioned, I do not believe this notion fully explains the response or the art of ROCI. There is certainly something more at work here and I suspect Rauschenberg knew it. It is my intention to explore the response by artists and critics in Cuba and how, given Rauschenberg’s missteps and provocations, they chose to engage with the artist and the project in an effort to make a statement of their own. A statement that served to give the exchange value beyond what was found on the steel canvases and manicured gallery walls.

The artists that Retamar referred to as young lions were present at Cuba’s National Gallery of Art for the ROCI opening in February of 1988. Through further correspondence with Retamar, art critic Adelaide de Juan and Alejandro Alonso, the former Director of the National Art Museum of Cuba, some of them were identified. Adelaide explains,

Roberto Fernández Retamar, my husband, has spoken to me about your interest in the ROCI show in Havana. I thought of mentioning it yesterday to Alejandro Alonso, who held a very important post at the National Art Museum (MNBA) at the time. He remembered working with Robert Rauschenberg and the names of some of the “young lions” who took part in the heated encounter with Rauschenberg at the MNBA. He recalled Aldito Menéndez, Leandro Soto, Flavio Garcianía and Tomás Sánchez. They all were part, in the 80s, of the groups of new artists who, as was natural, practically denied any form of previous art. This is, as you know, a usual feature in the emergence of new expressive art forms.77

As Adelaide mentions, the young lions are not simply the artists that confronted Rauschenberg at his opening reception. The description is referential to those artists who at the time were known as public provocateurs in the areas of aesthetic, cultural, political and social issues. These leading artists formed groups that identified themselves through aesthetic interests or ideologically based on socio/political positions. During the mid-20th

77 Personal correspondence with Adelaide de Juan on 8/28/2010.
century in the United States Rauschenberg was a young lion along with others such as Jasper Johns, Robert Motherwell and Andy Warhol. To name these artists young lions imposes some characteristics upon them. First, a young lion must be brash. Wisdom and propriety are not qualities a young lion needs to advance. Secondly, he or she must challenge the establishment. What young lion can succeed if at some point the old lion is not dethroned? As Adelaide explained, this challenge usually comes in the form of denial as to earlier forms of art. Finally, the young lion must earn some level of respect in order be successful in a challenge to the establishment. So, Retamar has attributed these qualities, in this case, to those that initiated the “heated encounter”; Menéndez, Soto, Garcianía and Sánchez.

Menéndez, who attended the ROCI event dressed in stereo-typical pre-colonial native garb, was well known as an artist and provocateur. At the age of seventeen he was considered the leader of a group known as Arte Calle (Street Art). According to Camnitzer, “Arte Calle was a more organized, rigid, and ideological group (in comparison to other arts groups). It had a clear leader, Aldito Menéndez (b.1970, son of artist Aldo Menéndez), who acted as the undisputed spokesman and who had achieved some sort of mythical stature in the Cuban art scene.”78 Camnitzer recorded Menéndez’s artistic ambitions in a 1987 statement that reads, “I am not interested in any art expression. I want to question institutions, art for the elite, the copying of foreign artists. I want the repercussions of my work to go beyond the realms of art.”79 Menéndez made this statement the year before ROCI opened in Cuba. It is almost as if the artist knew the perfect opportunity to realize his goal, at least in part, was imminent. In other words, it

78 Camnitzer, New Art of Cuba, 181-182.
79 Ibid., 194.
was not specific artistic works by Rauschenberg on which Menéndez made his comments. The young man had an agenda and Rauschenberg assisted him in moving it forward. The agenda included questioning the system within which he and his fellow artists were obligated to operate. Even more, he questioned the system within which all Cubans operated. Menéndez wrote,

As I reflect on the Cuban art boom of the 1980s from 90 miles away in search of the original causes that led to its explosive period in the late 1980s, I determine once again that to understand it I must look at it sociologically rather than aesthetically. All artistic movements relate to the times in which they are born, but in this case the sociopolitical circumstances were so extraordinary that they shook up the course of everyday life in a small country. The 1980s was the decade when the first generation to be born and raised within the revolution reached their twenties. They were living out one of the few utopian projects of the twentieth century. It was an imperfect utopia, but it did generate some fantastic experiences, such as the avant garde movement of the 1980s, which has left an indelible mark on Cuban art. While the rest of the world was talking about the death of art and many vanguard movements were held back by a return to painting and other conventional forms dominating an increasingly frivolous and implacable art market, in Havana hundreds of people took on the most daring means that modern art had at its disposal and transformed them into weapons to intervene in the process of Cuban history. Some were artists, many were students; others were just sympathizers who got involved as active spectators.  

For Menéndez the weapon of choice was performance art which he used to communicate his point at the Rauschenberg opening. In this research my argument defends the idea that Rauschenberg also had an agenda (beyond the specific works of art) that Menéndez’s performance brought to light. The two artists, one a youthful and charismatic beginner and the other a worldly icon, assisted each other. When we discuss ROCI both artists require our attention. Menéndez wrote these comments about his performance at the opening,

The same year (1988) at the National Museum of Fine Arts, I undertook the performance of “The Indian,” during a conference Robert Rauschenberg was

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giving about his tour of Havana. For this piece I did not publicize anything before-hand. On the contrary, I took advantage of the massive public attendance and entered the museum as just another observer. However, I was dressed as an Indian, with a loincloth, feathers, bow, and arrow. With my piece I was trying to establish a symbolic presence, since my behavior was the same as any other person there. The anachronistic character of my dress and its implications in this context parodically revealed that the encounter between the public and the visitor was an obvious act of cultural colonization.  

Menéndez’s point that Rauschenberg’s effort was an act of cultural colonization was certainly not the overall effect that Rauschenberg wanted to instigate. However, Rauschenberg was certainly aware that his “obvious act” may be construed this way. So, we are left with a glaring question: Why did Rauschenberg move forward with the project knowing this issue, with all of its deep-rooted ties with identity, could potentially be the central area of discourse brought about by the entire project? Logic dictates that the artist saw some benefit, either for himself or others, in doing so.

Rauschenberg had been questioning institutions since the 1950s. His break with the aesthetic establishment is but one example. The artist’s work had always been about everyday life and culture. The elite may have bought his art, but the work itself was never meant to be for any specific class or group other than those interested in the aesthetics of the world in which we operate. In Rauschenberg’s efforts through ROCI his aims echoed those proclaimed by Menéndez, for the work to go “beyond the realms of art.” Thus, Rauschenberg and Menéndez had much in common. Yet, they also had significant differences.

In order to better understand Menéndez’s commentary we must know something about the post-colonial, or neo-colonial, condition in which Cubans live. Although subjective context cannot truly be communicated here, some elements of Cuban history

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will lay the groundwork for further inquiry. The pre-colonial peoples of Cuba are known as Taíno. They were colonized with the rest of the cultures and peoples of the Caribbean by what we now consider Western powers. Cubans officially earned their independence in 1899 although the country was immediately occupied by the United States for the following four years. Over the following fifty plus years Cubans experienced a condition deemed by Antoni Kapcia, author of Cuba in Revolution: A History Since the Fifties, as Neo-colonial. The status was reinforced through various treaties between Cuba and Western powers including the United States. The main issue in Cuba that some would argue still exists today is that a restrictive level of economic dependence has hampered its growth and ability to function as an independent country. In other words, the interests of Spain, Britain, the United States and the Soviet Union have been imposed to the point that Cuba has yet to reach its potential as a sovereign nation.

The Cuban Revolution came about due to many factors that included this economic dependence (or interference depending on how you look at it) and what was seen as corruption of those in power. Since 1959 Fidel Castro and his brother Raul, both revolutionary leaders, have been in power and lead the country in a Communist political system that until 1990 was dependent on the U.S.S.R. The crumbling of the Soviet Bloc resulted in severe economic hardship and eventually lead to a period of gradual change. To many, including Kapcia, the Cuban Revolution has yet to conclude. It is possible that for this neo-colonial condition to pass Cubans must gain not only economic stability, but a sense that the status of their country is no longer dictated by elite powers within and

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82 Kapcia, Cuba in Revolution, 14.
83 Ibid., 15.
without their borders. According to Holy Block, who edited and contributed to the 2001 study *Art Cuba: The New Generation*.

The “Cuban way of life” is difficult for an American to understand. Cubans live in a double economy: they have jobs and purchase goods legally, but they also buy and sell goods through the black market. (Food such as meat and eggs, as well as tools, are still more accessible through the black market.) These dichotomies extend further – most Cubans have two jobs, one for which they are paid in pesos and one in dollars. Cubans live a duel life, with their own words, phrases and “isms” to describe their unique situation. The “utopian state” of forty years earlier no longer exists; “post-utopian state of collapse” is a more appropriate description.\(^{84}\)

The state controlled media system did not give Cubans a voice through which one might rail against the “state of collapse”. Thus, many artists also played the role of activist in an effort to instigate change.

The Cuban art scene of the 1980s may be best described as difficult and tumultuous. However, many success stories grew from the challenging conditions.

Ramón Cernuda, owner of Cernuda Arte, a gallery in Miami that specializes in the international sale of works created by the world’s most respected Cuban artists, believed one of the greatest hindrances for Cuban artists in the late 80s was the difficulty in making art a monetarily successful occupation.\(^{85}\) If you were an artist that gained patronage through the state then some level of sustainability was possible. However, for most there was no local market and profits through international sales were hindered by the state. Thus, the road to success was an onerous one at best. Author and critic Gerardo Mosquera agrees,

> Over time, the 1980s have become a kind of cultural myth in Cuba. The movement that began within the visual arts at the beginning of the decade spread throughout Cuban culture. This was not a change within the old framework: for the first time since 1959, cultural discourse became separate from “official

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\(^{84}\) Block, *Art Cuba*, 7.

\(^{85}\) Based on personal conversations in the fall of 2010.
discourse.” It established a distance, cultivating its own plot – to the extent possible in a centralized and authoritarian country – and evolved into the critical culture it is today. While the media and schools remain in strict government control, the arts have provoked and questioned the status quo. At the end of the 1980s the sharp critical edge of the visual arts exceeded the limits the regime was willing to tolerate. Liberal officials were fired and censorship increased. It is no coincidence that this occurred at the same time as the fall of the Berlin Wall, the end of Soviet subsidies to Cuba, and the tightening of the economic embargo imposed by the United States.86

The flourishing years in the Cuban art scene of which Mosquera speaks occurred before and during Rauschenberg’s ROCI visit. However, even in these years of relative optimism it was still understood by the artists, Rauschenberg, Menéndez, Cernuda and others invested in the Cuban artistic culture that the condition was precarious. Without a less restrictive economy and laws regarding activism and international exchange the challenges offered to any Cuban artist were daunting. Mosquera continues,

Art critics have emphasized the differences between the generations of the 80s and 90s. However, the main difference has not been stressed: the dollar. Before the collapse artists lived modestly on their salaries as designers, teachers, or in other occupations. The state functioned as a patron, buying and commissioning art, to such an extent that a number of unimportant artists became wealthy because of their connections within the bureaucracy. But not even the National Museum bought new, cutting-edge art works; the most serious emerging artists never received this type of governmental support. When the economic crisis occurred at the beginning of the 1990s, it was illegal to receive payments in U.S. currency for the sale of artwork. This absurd restriction was one of the principle reasons for the stampede of the 80s generation, who suddenly found themselves with no utopia to believe in and no way to make a living. The approval of sales in dollars some time later is the basic reason why the artistic diaspora has almost completely ended.87

This information gives us some contextual understanding concerning Cuba’s young lions at the ROCI opening. Coloniality is a term, much like post-colonial condition, that is referential to the legacy of colonialism and its contemporary effect on race, identity,

economics, politics, and knowledge production. It is also a term that is descriptive of a struggle for agency within a global system of unequal positions of power. The Cuban Revolution is not simply about power structures and government within the country. It is also about the struggle for Cubans to free themselves of the post-colonial condition or the coloniality of power, as Anibal Quijano would call it. Menéndez explained how it affected Cubano life in the 1980s when he wrote,

People had a need to express themselves and we (Arte Calle) were the Robin Hoods who transgressed the censors for and with them. When we would paint a text on a city wall at night, the next day a rumor would spread like wildfire, and when it got back to us the single phrase that we had actually written would have grown to an entire paragraph, embellished by the rebellious popular imagination. When, for example, we made the mural that said “Art is just a few steps from the cemetery” in front of the Colon Cemetery in Havana, the rumor that spread was that a group of youngsters had painted a poster on a tomb in the graveyard that said “Freedom has been buried by the Revolution.” Or, when we abbreviated our group name in signing a mural as “AC,” people would interpret it as “Abajo Castro” (Down with Castro). Our works functioned as collective texts with multiple meanings, and in our inscriptions people saw reflected their own obsession with the suffocating reality in which they lived.  

This struggle that Menéndez is so passionate about was not simply about the Revolution. It was in a large part about agency. An agency that was continually threatened not only by their own government, but also by issues involving the post-colonial condition. To Menéndez the art scene in Cuba had finally gained a voice. One that Cuban s embraced. Even though that voice was under constant threat, those involved had found some level of agency. Thus, when Rauschenberg shows up to a country he deemed as a “society less familiar with non-political ideas or communicating worldly through art” Menéndez saw him not only as a colonizer, but as an artist that did not understand the struggle he and many Cubans had been fighting for their entire lives. In this context, Rauschenberg’s

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ideas about a free exchange and collaboration threatened Menéndez’s agency and likely appeared superfluous when compared to more serious concerns.

It is also important to note that the opinions expressed at the opening by Menéndez were not solitary among Cubans. Another group of artists, known as Grupo Provisional, attended the opening reception and made their own comments about a post-colonial condition. Camnitzer refers to them in this statement,

At a lecture given by Rauschenberg in the National Museum of Fine Arts in 1988, Glexis Novoa, Carlos Rodríguez Cárdenas and Francisco Lastra appeared with a big banner bearing the profile of an Indian saying, ‘Very good, Rauschenberg,’ pointing out how the setup around the admiration for Rauschenberg put the young artists in the role of being colonized.89

Here Camnitzer has interpreted the comments made by Grupo Provisional as dealing with two identities; the colonizer and the colonized. However, the post-colonial condition of which I speak in this research is not nearly so straight forward or nicely demarcated.

The post-colonial condition, or the coloniality of power, in Cuba that was remarked upon by Menéndez has been a factor in Cuban life since Cubans earned their independence in 1899. Even though the colonial period in Cuban history had officially ended the ramifications of colonial rule have deep-roots in Cuban society and identity and are perpetuated still. After the fight for independence was won Western powers operated to retain the position of dominance through capitalism and the world market, Eurocentric ideas on racial inequality and gender, its control of knowledge production, and the outright manipulation of these factors for the benefit of the West and detriment to Cubans. It was an unending campaign to homogenize Cuban culture in order to maintain power and further its agenda on the world stage. The Cuban Revolution of 1959 was, in part, a reaction to this reality. However, as Menéndez has pointed out in his earlier

89 Camnitzer, *New Art of Cuba*, 181.
comments, the experiment born from the Revolution to create a utopian state free from Western control was less than successful. The post-colonial condition of which I speak is not a result of wars of independence or Revolution. It is a consequence of the imperialism that the West undertook. It cannot be eliminated by a Revolution or economic freedom. The condition has over time become a part of both personal and national identity. An identity that is reinforced by those outside of Cuba. From Menéndez’s perspective the battle for agency amidst ingrained systems of power has always been a struggle for Cuba and himself. Factors of the post-colonial condition effect his education, his opportunity, and the very mental framework that guides his actions. It is about his freedom, his notion of self, his notion of what it is to be Cuban and it includes his fellow artists, his neighbors, his family and all those that struggle with him. The post-colonial condition for Menéndez is very real and because it effects the communication between Rauschenberg and Cubans, regardless of intention, it is also real (albeit in a different way) for Rauschenberg. Menéndez saw Rauschenberg’s efforts as the latest item on a centuries old list of instances where the West has attempted to homogenize, manipulate and condescend for its own benefit and without consideration for the position of the Cuban people. Critical theoretician and author Walter Mignolo describes the voice of those in Menéndez’s position as one from outside the dominant structural positions of power in a colonial or post-colonial context.90

Subaltern rationality linked to colonialism, arises as a response to the need to rethink and reconceptualize the stories that have been told to divide the world into Christians and pagans, blacks and whites, civilized and barbarian, modern and premodern, and developed and underdeveloped. Modernization and development have been the key words of colonial discourse and subalternization since the mid – 1950s.91

90 Mignolo, “(Post)Occidentalism,” 91.
91 Ibid.
Menéndez’s statement tells us that he experienced something related to this subaltern rationality in which he is resistant or responsive to anything that may attempt to impose upon his notions of his own position as a person and Cuban.

Interestingly, Menéndez chose performance art to make his statement for multiple reasons. According to Diana Taylor, “Performances function as vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity through reiterated, or what Richard Schechner has called “twice-behaved behavior.” Performance can be an act of identity and culture that can work in ways that the written word or painted canvas cannot. For Menéndez it was the means by which he could create and transmit identity, myth, and social agenda without incurring the wrath of state censors. Diana Taylor would call Menéndez’s performance an act of cultural memory. One that connects past and present and acknowledges cultural identity. The performance was also a statement that Menéndez knew would connect him with others that understood the Cuban plight. It was the type of artistic/social statement that earned him the “mythical status” that Camnitzer mentions. If we are still writing about Menéndez’s performance, it is certain that it became a part of the cultural memory in Havana and is still spoken of to this day. The performances by all those artists that attended the Rauschenberg opening, all those young lions, may not have become messages to the rest of the world, but were embraced by those in Havana as agency for each and every person that chose to identify with the art.

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92 Taylor, The Archive..., 2.
Menéndez explains,

The explosion of performances started in 1986 with the appearance of two groups - PURE (puree) and ARTECALLE (street art), - and lasted until 1989, when the grand exodus of artists to other parts of the world began. The moment of splendor of these groups was 1987 and 1988. It took the Cuban government two years to dismantle this phenomenon which, like a child, had slipped between its legs…Debates and group shows took place in galleries, museums, universities and all kinds of cultural centers, and in private homes, parks, and streets. We were not focused on personal benefit or transcendence, but rather on fraternal collaboration based on common goals. Not a week passed without something taking place, and sometimes as many as two or three in one night. Artists met almost every day, since there was a strong sense of the historic role that we were playing, and the leaders of the movement wanted to achieve certain goals by setting our collective strategies to meet them before we were neutralized. We were working against the clock, and immediacy and the ephemeral were the only means of achieving transcendence.”

Thus, Menéndez’s contribution is clear. Not only did he speak for generations of Cubans through his work, he also spoke to the world about the post-colonial condition that had brought Cubans to their current state of being. His contributions are remarkably compelling.

This being said, I have often played the role of defender for Rauschenberg’s ROCI project in this research and there is a reason why I have done so, aside from my fascination with the art. The problems that we face in an increasingly globalized world will require effective global communication and by we I mean all those that must in one form or another recognize the post-colonial condition and find ways to communicate with an effort to reduce its perpetuation. This includes the ideal to which Rauschenberg espouses that, in the case of ROCI, is a free exchange of ideas and collaboration. The world in which we live will inevitably become increasingly globalized and this type of exchange will also become increasingly necessary. We have no choice but to meander

through the problems that were created in a colonial past. Thus, even given his mistakes, offenses or ignorance his project and its ideals have merit. This is something to which Retamar would agree. There must come a day when the post-colonial condition does not override an exchange of ideas and there must come a time when an exchange of ideas is not an attempt at homogenization or power manipulation. It is possible that this time will never come. As I have stated, colonialism has had a profound impact on our identities and this is something that each affected person must both keep and move beyond. However, I contend that Rauschenberg was fully aware that his project would receive a post-colonial response and chose to move forward regardless because of the ideal. He is an artist and artists push boundaries. Menéndez would not argue this point. Yet, it is commendable that Menéndez chose to resist this transnational exchange if only because he is aware that to have free exchange without the repeated ramifications of a history of imperialism the positions of power should be equal.

We know through remarks made by Don Saff that there existed various forms of resistance in many countries to the idea of hosting ROCI. Thus, we can say that Rauschenberg was aware that he may find in some countries a welcome that he no longer had to consider when exhibiting in Western locales. A welcome that offered something other than smiles, open arms, and curiosity. As I have stated earlier in this research, the artist chose to move forward regardless. This tells us something of how the post-colonial condition affected him. In many ways Rauschenberg is a product of the same colonial past and if this past, regardless of the role you are obliged to play, hinders one’s effective transnational communication then the post-colonial condition has taken its toll here as well. Rauschenberg believed he could use his fame, talent, interests, and industry to offer
audiences and artists the opportunity to look at art and life as existing above the plane on
which exists, among many things, the post-colonial condition. In presenting this
opportunity he self-authorized from a position of power, even inadvertently, to suggest a
vision of art in which we “celebrate the differences between things.” Is there a message
here that goes beyond aesthetics? I believe so. It involves the same thoughts that caused
the artist to choose the venues he did. Thus, Rauschenberg saw himself as something of
an artistic ambassador. It was easy for the artist to view the world as problematic and
filled with unnecessary squabbles that need not bog down artistic communication. He
was also aware that some would not see it this way. The fact is, all the evidence suggests
that ROCI was meant to exist above the fray, but knowing that it could not the artist
chose to make the statement anyway. With this decision his work became
confrontational. But what is an artist to do if not question, create, communicate, and push
boundaries. Many would argue that this is the typical character of dissemination from the
West.

Those young lions that welcomed ROCI in Cuba made this analysis somewhat
inevitable and less burdensome by making their statements clear. If someone from the
West knocks on your door and offers opportunity while at the same time appropriating
and manipulating cultural property for an ideal concerning the greater good, regardless of
the gesture’s altruistic roots it still sounds like imperialism. Although Menéndez was still
a teenager, he represented many Cubans at the ROCI opening by reminding
Rauschenberg of the roles they have played historically and still grapple with today. No,
Menéndez did not consider the ROCI art at the time. He likely did not consider
Rauschenberg’s intentions. Why bother? At the time he was involved in something
much more important. We must now consider whether Menéndez had, to some extent, been goaded into making his statements. As I stated earlier in this research, his opinion was both appropriate and predictable. Yet, provoked or not the event served as an opportunity to further his own agenda and use the agency for which he and other Cubans struggled. But what is an artist to do if not question, create, communicate, and push boundaries? Menéndez let us know that, among other things, the post-colonial condition is real and it will affect our worldly exchanges more and more often as we become increasingly globalized. It is not simply about pride or national identity. It is about the roles we either assume or refuse to assume in any exchange between positions that have been historically opposed or unequal. It is also about the qualities that have become a part of our identity that push us to operate within these parameters. Menéndez explained in his own words that his problem lay not with Rauschenberg in specific, but with the systems that force his struggle for agency.

Roberto Retamar, if you had not figured it out, is the old lion in this tale. His appreciation of Rauschenberg’s efforts and respect for his work are based on wisdom, careful consideration, the knowledge of the arts over time and across borders. His essay that opened ROCI Cuba was a thoughtful nod from one old lion to another. Retamar was fully aware that young lions like Menéndez would react as they did. We know this because we can see it in the subtle instructions he imparted through his writing. However, Retamar was the person that coined the term post-occidentalism decades ago. He, more than most, had a grasp of the challenges that faced Rauschenberg, as well as those that struggle to come to terms with the inequities left to us. But Retamar appreciated Rauschenberg’s contributions concerning the connections between art and
life too much to push the artwork aside for its confrontations and complications. Maybe his empathy for Rauschenberg’s romantic cause was greater than any possible unintended assumption or slight. After my brief communications with him, I prefer to think of it that way.

If we consider the post-colonial condition as it is applied to the art rather than the ROCI project there are a couple things we can conclude. Rauschenberg’s work is a contemporary culmination of Western aesthetic theory. The rift between the Modernists and Post-Modernists, Formalists and Anti-Formalists, Structuralists and Post-Structuralists in which Rauschenberg’s art and Leo Steinberg’s theory were involved is set within a larger framework of Western thought. This is evident in the way the art looks. Rauschenberg has chosen to use objects and materials to speak about culture, history, memory and identity through means by which the Western mind can easily identify. However, there is also an element to his work that transcends Western aesthetics. The idea of art and life coming together has a place in all cultures even if the manifestation of it may appear different. Don Saff spoke about one of the artist’s ROCI China pieces in which there was a cropped photograph of a blindfolded ox. It was an image for which I had no chance of finding a personal connection. Saff divulged that Rauschenberg had visited a rural community where, in the center of town, an ox was tied to an apparatus. The beast walked in a circular path all day every day giving power to a wooden machine that was essential to the town’s viability. The man that owned the ox had blindfolded it for obvious reasons. Even though this image was set in a Western framework of Rauschenberg’s aesthetic ideational milieu, I imagine that a person from

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94 Don Saff told this story in a lecture/reception I attended at the Rauschenberg Gallery in Ft. Myers, Florida on 10/22/14.
rural China would have little trouble understanding the reference. The reason I communicate this information is because it is descriptive of the language in which the artist was speaking. Even though his work is Western we can look at the pieces with which we are familiar (ROCI USA, ROCI China, ROCI Venezuela, etc…) and begin to understand how we might consider those that are not. Ideally someone that lived their entire life in Beijing might look at the ROCI China works and see visual language that is at least remotely understandable. Thus, he or she may use that visual linguistic knowledge to view works that are descriptive of other countries with the hope of some connection there as well.

Another element through which Rauschenberg has caused us to confront the post-colonial condition is his attempt to push the viewer into a state of empathy. Not with the artist, as would be expected, by in my case with Menéndez, Obert, Airam, and Polo. By knowing through the ROCI USA images (for me) the language in which the artist speaks one must attempt to put oneself in the shoes of those whose culture the work is based in order to consider ROCI works from cultures beyond our own. In other words, I am not going to “get” ROCI Cuba unless I make the attempt to view it as Retamar or Menéndez did. Even though this is impossible, from a post-colonial perspective the attempt is a necessary process. However, I can also grasp the material and aesthetic commonalities that are manifest across cultures. How can I look at a work from ROCI Tibet and not wonder how an old beer keg fits into the aesthetic and everyday life of a Tibetan (shown in the work titled *The Brutal Calming of the Waves by Moonlight II*, figure 8)? Is this an imposed Western symbol? Is it a metaphor that only works through a Western construct? Is it purely about aesthetics? The questions are just as important as the answers.
Finally, when we look at the work we must wonder to what extent it was collaborative. Without the added element of collaboration Rauschenberg’s efforts become blatantly condescending and more of a lecture than an exchange. Although we cannot define the level of collaboration, its mere involvement gave the critic Tonel a moment of pause when he considered,

Did they speak (Rauschenberg, ROCI) with us, about us, or both at the same time? While we consider possible responses, some of our youngest artists answered in their own manner. A manner that combined joy, pity and irony, capable of making the old devourer remember the tone of his young representatives.\textsuperscript{95}

However, if we seek to pry loose from the art that which is Rauschenberg and that which is not we would be once again attempting to separate and define that which is West and that which is not. The point here, for Rauschenberg, is that the subtle differences are as important as the similarities and the subjective involvement of the viewer should make the work something more than the simple offspring from the mind and context of Rauschenberg.

In the end the project called ROCI was/is more than a collection of art based on the whims and naïve fancies of a wealthy and famous artist. It is art of context. The context in which we live. The context in which we view the work. The context in which it was created. And the context in which we respond to it. The premise and responses are fodder for discussions within post-colonial discourse. However, this study is by no means comprehensive. A complete study of ROCI would include other venues, interviews with artists, and a consideration of its impact, if any, over time. Can we consider the project a success? I considered dodging this question with an answer like

\textsuperscript{95} Eligio, “Pasó Rauschenberg,” 47.
“time will tell” or “the answer is just as subjective as the art,” but a worth-while critic cannot sit on the fence. Yes, the project is a success…on one condition. If we are to say that Krauss’ “matrix of consciousness” has been realized or my “intertwining of multiple consciousnesses” has in some way come to pass, then we must acknowledge and include the role and voice of those like Menéndez as a part of the whole. It was in this area that Rauschenberg chose to push boundaries, rather than through pure aesthetics. We must consider Menéndez’s contributions the final movement that makes the symphony both time-specific and timeless. The art is always the manifestation of the idea, but the idea means nothing if it sits in a dark, quiet room. In this instance, Menéndez facilitated its rightful impact.
REFERENCES


