

ROCKY

A radio play by Nadja Abt

Where do I start? (rummages through papers) Ah, yes:

WASHINGTON, D.C.

On November 9, 1989, a man—perhaps in his late forties, tall, a little lanky—is lying on his hotel bed in Washington, D.C., and turns on the TV. Silent and calm, he listens to the news; his English is passable, not perfect. His home country is passable, not perfect. It was. The man is now stateless—or rather, the state from which he set out for the United States has collapsed. He won't return as a stateless person, only to a new system—some say a better one. He isn't sure. Now that he's here and can buy anything he wants. At the moment, that doesn't make him any happier, though: the stores are still open, even though it's already late. He gets dressed, takes the elevator down, and walks out onto the street toward the liquor store on the corner. He's going to lose his job, since his wages are paid by the state, which no longer exists. He buys a bottle of whiskey and takes it up to his room, where he left the TV on. In the meantime, the news has changed; there are other important things happening in the world. He takes a sip directly from the bottle, without a glass. He's never done that before.

Let's leave that man there for a moment and let him process—or rather, realize—the fall of the Berlin Wall.

I apologize for jumping right into the story; I should introduce myself first. The story is all too dramatic, and I'm finding it hard to tell it chronologically.

My name is Rocky; I'm a performer, a know-it-all, and a storyteller. A veterinarian identified me as a yellow-footed tortoise, but that's not really relevant here. Since the mid-1960s, I've been living on the third floor at 381 Lafayette Street in Manhattan, New York City. My roommate is a very nice artist by the name of Robert Rauschenberg. Everyone calls him Bob. He likes to drink, but he loves me—I know it. We've been living together ever since I took part in a performance with him and the dancer Lucinda Childs in 1965. Well, that's not entirely true. Bob moved to Florida in 1970, and I stayed here—as the housekeeper, so to speak.

I oversee Bob's business ventures and exhibitions. I'm very good at it—he knows that—and so it came to pass in 1984 that Bob came up with an international exhibition tour in my name. I serve as something of a mascot for the tour, which of course makes me proud. ROCI—Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange—begins in Mexico City in 1985 and travels for many years through countless countries. The process is usually similar: Bob flies to the respective country with his assistants (not with me) for

about 10 days, a few weeks or a few months before the planned opening date, takes photos, records video, and collects impressions, materials, maps—all sorts of things. Then he flies back to Florida, creates works from the material he brought back, and sends those works back to the country to be exhibited.

As a South American forest tortoise, I have to say that Bob's project definitely has imperialist traits. It's a bit of an egomaniac endeavor. But he's also spending millions of his own money. I complain, his gallery owners complain, but he gets his way. He tries to secure funding from the UN and gives every UN member a lithograph edition as a gift. No luck. To finance it all, Bob eventually sells the works of his friends Cy Twombly, Jasper Johns, and Andy Warhol. They aren't too happy about that.

But I also know that he sincerely believes in the power of dialogue through art. A cultural exchange that's meant to be built through networking, with me as an ambassador—not physically, but spiritually. It all sounds a bit megalomaniac, I know. That's why I am telling the story. As someone with my feet on the ground. But I'm just rambling.

Where was I?

Right, Washington, 1989. So, this man in the hotel room is called Wolfgang Polak. At the time, Dr. Polak is the director of the Center for Art Exhibitions in the GDR, based in East Berlin. On November 5, 1989, of all days, he accepted an invitation to visit the West. He's supposed to visit art institutions across the U.S. on his tour. And now this! Understandably, Polak doesn't know that many people here, but he knows Don Saff. If I function as Bob's right-hand, then Don Saff is perhaps his left. And Terry van Brunt, who films everything that Bob wants him to.

More on Terry later. In any case, Don has been the director of ROCI since the mid-1980s and tirelessly organizes all the local exhibition spaces, maintains contacts with artists and cultural figures, as well as with authors who write for the catalogs, and coordinates with luxury hotels—to which I am never invited. Don practically lives on a plane.

As early as 1988, Don and Bob come up with the idea of bringing ROCI to Berlin. The exhibition is to open simultaneously in both West and East Berlin. They contact Dieter Ruckhaberle, the director of the Staatliche Kunsthalle in West Berlin. He speaks with Polak, who likes the project but also knows how difficult it would be to carry it out. Perhaps the biggest issue is Bob's idea that East Berliners should visit the exhibition in West Berlin via shuttle bus. Head of State Erich Honecker is not amused by the idea of a shuttle to the West.

Bob and Don contact Armand Hammer. I know, it's a lot of names. Back then, Armand Hammer was something of an unofficial ambassador across the Iron Curtain. Thanks to his oil business, the American had very good connections to Russia and to Honecker.

In any case, Armand Hammer writes a letter to Erich Honecker in which he expresses his support for Bob's exhibitions in West and East Berlin. This is followed by a "Yes, but NO" reply from Honecker to Don.

(Reads Honecker's reply aloud—clears her throat)

Dear Mr. Hammer,

It is with great interest that I read your letter of January 11, 1989, in which you informed me about the exhibition project by the renowned American artist Robert Rauschenberg, dedicated to peace and international friendship. As is well known, the German Democratic Republic is also committed to realizing these ideals with all the means at its disposal.

I welcome the fact that this exhibition will be shown—as agreed—this summer at the Neue Berliner Galerie in the Altes Museum in Berlin, the capital of the GDR.

*With best wishes and the highest regard,
Erich Honecker*

At first, we all think the exhibitions can go ahead. Then Honecker backs out. They can't open at the same time in East and West Berlin. The East has to go first, then the West. No shuttle service. Don, Bob, and I discuss it in the kitchen. The exhibition doesn't make sense that way. Not even a turtle is allowed to cross the border. It's already spring 1989 when Don sends a rejection letter to Polak and Ruckhaberle. Polak is disappointed, but he understands the problem.

Now another time jump. A little later, in November 1989. In the meantime, Polak has traveled from Washington to New York.

Now Polak recalls (Don says Polak called him in New York; Polak says Don got in touch with him—I can't remember): In any case, the two of them talk on the phone and agree to meet at my place in New York. It's an emotional moment, for me as well. Don takes Polak to a fancy restaurant. I remember the stylish leather jacket that Polak had a friend in the GDR tailor for him. It was very... un-American. The two of them toast the fall of the Wall; Polak is celebrated a bit at the restaurant as an ambassador from the East. Theoretically, he could just stay here now, I think to myself. But he's far too dedicated to his colleagues. Don plays the role of the good New York guide and takes Polak onto the Staten Island Ferry. As they approach the Statue of Liberty, Polak gets sentimental. Don tells me later that Polak said something really wonderful about freedom at that moment—so wonderful that Don can't recall.

Right then, out on the water, Don asks if they shouldn't go ahead with the exhibition in East Berlin now—after all, there's only one Berlin left. Polak agrees.

Don comes into the kitchen, all excited, and calls Bob. Bob is in Zurich at the time. Don buys Bob a plane ticket, and together with Terry, they fly to Berlin at the end of November to photograph the fall of the Berlin Wall. Terry, whom I mentioned briefly earlier, is also one of Bob's assistants. So, if I'm Bob's right hand and Don is his left, then Terry is his right eye. He films everything Bob photographs, always standing half a step behind him. He films West Berlin—currency exchange, the hustle and bustle of the market, border crossings—and he films East Berlin—street and shop signs, the Wall, storefronts.

Bob looks at hundreds of photos of the Brandenburg Gate.

In December, Don receives the following Christmas greetings:

(clears her throat)

Berlin, December 21st 1989

Dear Donald,

Back to the GDR it's my wish to thank everybody whom I met in the U.S.A. for the friendly and free discussions for all the kind support for my english knowledge and the help for me to understand aspects of american „way of life“ and problems of art and artists life.

All these impressions, experiences and offers for cooperation I took with me to my country, in which has happened big changes in last weeks. A lot is possible now, that change is our chance.

With pleasure I'm looking forward to a meeting once with you in Berlin in coming future.

I'm taking this opportunity to send you my warm greetings, a Happy New Year and peacefull 90's.

Sincerely, yours, Wolfgang Polak

PS: And many thanks for the telephone-possibilities

Back in Florida, the Berlin works are taking shape in Bob's studio. At the same time, the East German playwright Heiner Müller is writing his catalog text for the planned publication.

In early March, Bob travels back to Berlin, where the installation team has already completed most of the work. Hundreds of *wallpeckers* are chipping away at the Wall with hammers and selling the pieces. Polak is proud and happy, even though Bob needs the most expensive hotel and a constant flow of whiskey. Dance critic Jill Johnston flies to Berlin. Rebecca Horn comes to the opening. Ed Kienholz. Barbara Bloom.

Bob is happy. And so am I. A little peace returns to my third-floor apartment. I read the newspaper reviews. Most of them are quite positive; some don't understand what Bob is doing there and why, of all people, an American is being shown in East Berlin right after the fall of the Wall. Bob doesn't really care. He's flying on to Kuala Lumpur right away. In Malaysia, the penultimate ROCl show opens, before everything comes together in a final exhibition in Washington, D.C.

The Berlin exhibition was just one of many, and yet its story really moved me. I've grown old. Talking exhausts me. You'll have to excuse me; I'm going to retire now.

(CUT)

Rocky, the forest tortoise, lived in Robert Rauschenberg's Manhattan home from 1965. She passed away in 2008, shortly after the artist's death.

Narrator and radio play production: Sophia Roma Weyringer
Text: Nadja Abt

The script follows facts and fiction that made ROCl in Berlin possible. Special thanks to Wolfgang Polak and Don Saff for speaking in person with Nadja Abt. The artist also thanks the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation in New York—in particular Francine Snyder and Erika Hendrix—for their generous support of the ifa exhibition project.