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4 Questions with South African Artist Robin Rhode

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Sep 10, 2015, 09:30am EDT

Updated Sep 11, 2015, 12:09pm EDT

 This article is more than 8 years old.

By 1990, chalks-down protests in South Africa were so common they were almost routine. Sure, the beginnings of Apartheid reform and desegregation were present, as slow as molasses as it were, and by now Nelson Mandela had gone from lawyer to militant to prisoner to free, but the conditions of schools in nonwhite townships were deplorable, the country volatile, and teachers would stop teaching as a form of protest.

Robin Rhode was 13, maybe 14, years old. A formidable year surely as most everyone's is, but particularly during this time as the region was on the cusp of a revolution. He participated closely in the subculture that developed, as subcultures do, partly out of circumstance and partly out of necessity. While educators put their

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tools down, students picked the chalk up, stole it even, to draw on walls, to fill in where they had been failed, to create imagined worlds or objects, simple and spirited.



Robin Rhode, still of "Piano Chair," 2011. Courtesy of the artist and Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New... [+]

This is how Rhode approaches his practice, how he always has: using ordinary materials and imagery to remark and create. Through chalk, charcoal, or soap on concrete walls or gallery floors, a light bulb or a bucket, a piano or chairs, bicycles or vinyls become almost duplicitous in his performances and animations, commenting on and destabilizing social and political structures through a poetic lens.

Rhode's upcoming exhibition at North Carolina Museum of Art opens September 26, 2015, adding to an impressive list of solo shows in the last decade that includes Artists Space in New York, Haus der Kunst in Munich, Hayward Gallery in London,



Kulturhuset in Stockholm, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Museum of Art Lucerne, National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, Neuberger Museum of Art at SUNY-Purchase, Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University, and White Cube in London.

On the heels of dual exhibitions in New York at [Lehmann Maupin](#) and [The Drawing Center](#) and his inclusion in this year's [South African Pavilion at the Venice Biennale](#), the Cape Town-born, Johannesburg-bred, and Berlin-based artist discussed with ForbesLife the radicality of his upcoming Performa 15 commission, the importance of humor in his work, and why you won't find him engaging the streets of New York or Berlin anymore. **You often play within a space that exists in between past, present, and future political and social histories. Can you talk about handling collective histories and employing the structure of performance? How do you confront these spaces?**

I think that the key word in your question is the idea of 'play.' Play allows us to engage with unseemly histories that are often fraught with trauma or even repressed memory. Play allows us to destabilize these sometimes heavy social and political experiences, so that a new formation of a group identity can be created that is more inclusive in our already very exclusive reality. Play, too, has a strong association to humor, and humor becomes a powerful mechanism to engage, or even reinvent certain dominant ideals or discourses, therefore allowing us a new understanding of lived experiences. Whether it is past, present, or future. From humor comes gesture. Gesture relates to the use of the human body as a



vehicle to communicate, sometimes without words, narratives that are more fleeting and more intuitive. Through physical gesture one is able to overcome the limitations of written languages or words. I tend to employ intuition quite often in my process. Meaning, I tend to take risks and rely on a given moment to make decisions, whether it is in the process of conceptualizing a work, or in the process of drawing or mark making, but especially when it comes to a live performance. I rely on the energy of the given space as a support structure in generating a line, a mark, a drawing, or a physical action. Most times I intentionally generate the energy for drawing and performance by creating boundaries, or parameters for myself. Even for my ideas. Limitations feed the intuitive muscle. I believe that constraint can lead to the most provocative and interesting aesthetic output.



Robin Rhode, "Light Giver Light Taker," 2015. Installation view, Lehmann Maupin, 536 West 22nd... [+]

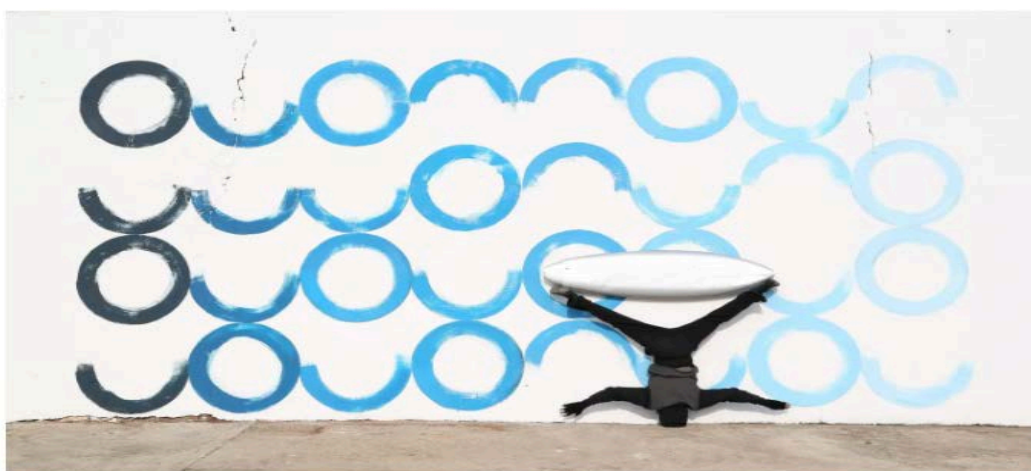
You're having quite a moment in New York right now. Can you talk about your exhibition at Lehmann Maupin, the

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Well, a moment probably, but I'm not getting carried away. I'm very conscious about over-exposure and also how quickly the art world can first consume then becomes exhausted by artists and their ideas. I'm being critical, not cynical. Therefore my approach to the current art season is to produce quite varied projects in the specific venues. My exhibition at Lehmann Maupin focused on the process of drawing using walls and floors, and was deeply rooted in the economical meanings of chalk and charcoal as a basic medium of expression. These accessible materials allowed for a monochromatic exhibition that had a very nostalgic overtone. The sense of monochrome touches on aspects of early cinema as well the aesthetics of historical photography. However, all this manifested into drawings and sculptures that allows the viewer a very ephemeral exhibition experience. Ephemerality is sometimes lacking in most gallery exhibitions due to the market pressure in our current commercial climate, so I felt my approach could rekindle aspects of 60's and 70's avant-garde performances as well as engage with the concept of sculpture as the medium, or starting point, for drawing.



Robin Rhode, "Breaking Waves," 2014. Courtesy of the artist. Collection of Allison & Larry Berg.

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The gallery exhibition contrasted to my project at The Drawing Center, which dealt with the aspects of color theory, as well as the process of drawing as a premise for social interaction. Here a color photographic series was included titled *Breaking Waves*. In the work, we encounter a character that surfs with his surfboard on a white painted wall. The white wall becomes covered in geometric arcs of blue painted hues that mimic rolling waves as the surfer surfs across the surface. I've also created a wall drawing project titled *Paries Pictus – Draw the Waves*. Paries Pictus is an interactive drawing concept I developed a few years ago and it's Latin name means "wall drawing...or...drawing on walls." This drawing concept involves various members of the public, usually a youth-orientated demographic, who have the task of completing a wall-drawing exercise using drawing materials, in this instance large oil crayons that have been sculpted into a range of blue tones and that have been boxed beautifully and placed on the floor.



Robin Rhode, "Breaking Waves," 2014. Courtesy of the artist. Collection of Allison & Larry Berg.



I worked with local school kids that were all under the age of 10 years old to help them draw their waves. These consisted of beautiful organic marks and lines using hues of blue, drawn around black-painted colonial ships that were painted directly on the wall. The point of the drawing exercise was to reimagine the notion of ownership between the artist and the concept/work of art. Here, young kids have the opportunity to engage, play with, reinvent, the concept of the artist, therefore allowing an open dialogue between the viewer/audience, and the work of art. The idea of the artist in this case functions merely as a baton to the young volunteers. Here the artistic process occurs within the given exhibition space and injects a sense of aesthetic tangibility that is quite evocative for audiences who do not have a visual reference point, or an art historical background when visiting exhibitions. The Paries Pictus wall drawing projects hints at an immediacy of line, and an intimacy of a performative drawing action, between artist and audience.

The commission for Performa is entirely something else as it involves me taking on the mantle of artistic director. I've reimaged a context for classical operatic performance away from the safe confines of the concert hall towards the unassuming public, in this case, in the heart of Times Square.

Can you talk in depth about "Erwartung: A Street Opera," commissioned for the Performa Biennial? How have you reimaged the 20th century opera? What similarities were you able to draw? How is Carole Sidney Louis essential to the work?

My inspiration for the opera idea came about by trying to imagine a



new exhibition of sculpture. I was in a phase of questioning sculpture as a medium with limitations. I was influenced by the Japanese art movement called Gutai and deeply inspired by their Manifesto that considers aspects of time, past, present, and future, in the realization of the art concept. Their idea was that through human engagement with the art medium, one is able to project life, or narrative, into the dead material. This concept then brought me to imagining a sculpture exhibition as something quite theatrical or operatic, since the idea of sound too I felt would be deeply emotive to the experience of the audience. It is through this research that I encountered Schoenberg's ERWARTUNG.



Robin Rhode, still of "Piano Chair," 2011. Courtesy of the artist and Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New... [+]

What lead me to this opera was also the influence of the German Expressionist movement called Die Blaue Reiter, especially the relationship between Kandinsky and Schoenberg who both shared very similar creative impulses and approaches within their fields. I was also captivated by the narrative of a single performer/character in the opera, Die Frau, and her subconscious states she experiences



from love, hate, exhalation, fear, horror, anguish, lamentation. It is this feeling of lamentation that drew me towards one of the most powerful feminine figures in political history, Winnie Mandela. It is Winnie's cry, her lamentation and her anguish, for Nelson Mandela when imprisoned for treason that allowed me to develop a parallel narrative to Schoenberg's *Die Frau*. Even though expressionist music denies the individual identity of its characters or performers, rather that they appear as humanist subjects, the similarities between the two women are indeed striking and has served as an inspiration for the set design and my artistic vision for this opera.

The stage setting in the original opera is quite interesting in its simplicity and subtlety. In the original stage setting we encounter the soprano, *Die Frau*, at night, walking in a dark forest, her only light source is that of a moon that shines through the darkened branches of trees that surround her. I began to imagine Times Square as a setting for my 21st century version. The skyscrapers here act as mountains and tall trees in an imaginary urban forest, the bright neon ambient lights from the billboards becoming the moonlight for *Die Frau* while she is in her hallucinatory, disordered mindset. The stage concept for the opera becomes quite a departure from the original scenography.

The soprano Carole Sidney Louis provides the opera with level of confidence with her poise and experience, having sung this work many times, in concert in the original version with full orchestra (with Arturo Tamayo as conductor), in Malaga with the Orquesta Filarmonica de Malaga in 2012 and in Bologna with the Orchestra Comunale del Teatro (an orchestra with a famous Wagner tradition) where Sidney Louis sang *Erwartung* together with Wagner's



Isoldes Liebestod (2013). The radical inclusion of a male actor in this reimagined opera also functions as a major departure from Schoenberg's original libretto. In the original the male figure appears as a dead body that is stumbled upon by Die Frau. In my new interpretation a male figure wanders through the environment, engaging with the various objects that occupy the stage. This male figure, to be portrayed by emerging German actor Moses Leo, represents a man, who has returned home only to become ghost-like, unable to be seen, who appears invisible to the eyes of Die Frau. The idea of returning home tells the various stories during the Apartheid struggle of men who had left their family homes in search of labor, migrating to the mines or cities, or even political exiles who had taken a pact to leave the shores of South Africa as a means to take up arms against a brutalist regime. These narratives reflect back on the women of this period who have sacrificed and lamented the loss of a loved one whose whereabouts are unknown, and whose return is undetermined. The props, or sculptural objects the audience encounters are all reminiscent of objects found in a domestic space but have all undergone a transition towards a more surrealistic form. These forms act as a magnet to which the male character, Die Man, gravitates towards, and eventually engages with, all adding to the experience of a familiar domestic world shifting towards a space that is fictional and unfamiliar.



Robin Rhode, "Chalk Bicycle," 2011-2015. Installation view, Lehmann Maupin, 536 West 22nd Street,... [+]

You activate your work in public areas through performance. How does the approach to your work change depending on the physical location you're in, be it a city such as Cape Town, New York, or Berlin or a space such as a white box gallery, a museum, or in the street?

Initially I avoided having any hierarchical structure, or divisional approach, between the street and the gallery/museum space, whereby one was more important than the other. My intention was to reflect both. In other words, when I worked on the street I would attempt to engage with very high-order references from art history within a low-order system, being a street corner or abandoned plot where one could find protruding concrete walls. Whether it would be Russian Constructivism as a point of inspiration, or Der Stijl, I would use these conceptual references as templates for wall drawings on the streets.



Portrait of Robin Rhode. Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin

My intention is to inject art historical subject matter into that particular street context. I wanted to bring the art museum to the street as a means to allow art to become accessible to a greater public. In my street pieces, the process becomes public viewing and has developed into it's own live street theater. Recently I have produced a body of abstract 'Color Theory' works on a street corner in Johannesburg. My idea was to bring a strong formalist and abstract aesthetic into a community that is plagued with violence, drugs, gangsterism, and unemployment. In this context, the idea of color abstraction as a backdrop to the social ills of a community becomes almost absurdist. Here we see first hand the tension between abstract imagery and the world and the society it reflects. This approach, to work within the exterior world of a city and its streets, is probably a context that I feel most comfortable in as an artist. It's almost as if I'm able to control the mark-making, the line, even the visual content, by channeling the energy of the city and it's people. However, I have abandoned working on the streets in certain parts of the world. I hardly ever work on Berlin streets,

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neither New York, in many years. I feel no real desire, as if nothing is compelling me. I am most comfortable creating street pieces in Johannesburg. There seems to be a kind of spiritual calling on those streets that has inspired me more than anywhere else over the last years. As an artist from South Africa I feel obligated, almost socially responsible, to work within my community, to bring new ideas to its streets, to share its stories with other societies of the world. It's almost as if I'm recording a history of wall pieces over a period of time. The period is the 21st century and my wall pieces are mirrors to the reality. My approach to the white box is quite different in that I want to bring the outside world into the neutralized space of the exhibition. Therefore both spaces, street and gallery, interior and exterior worlds, reflects the other.

Robin Rhode at North Carolina Museum of Art is on view September 26, 2015-January 31, 2016. Performa 15 occurs November 1-22, 2015.



Courtney Willis Blair