



## On Product Versus Process: Robin Rhode's 'Paths and Fields'

[Robin Rhode](#)  
By [Thuli Gamedze](#)

February 13, 2017

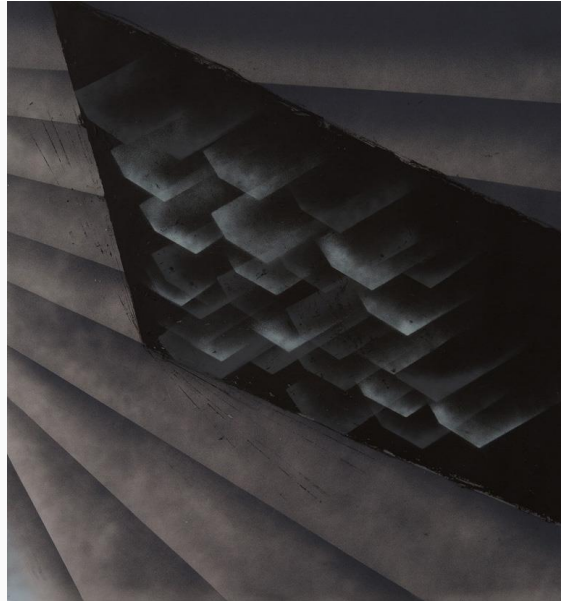
[Stevenson](#), Cape Town

26.01 – 04.03.2017

There is significance in the fleeting moments of Robin Rhode's 'Paths and Fields' where the artist appears to relinquish snippets of his process. In these moments, Rhode seems to extend a (highly reluctant) invitation to his audience to think through his practice as a cohesive, and embodied engagement with space, spatial relationships, and how these operate in context.

Looking to the practices of the Italian Arte Povera movement, characterized by its use of inexpensive and 'non-art' materials as a way of articulating relationships between poverty and

elitism and anti-institutionalism, particular works on the show begin to extract materiality and spatial potential, re-working in many ways, the artist's own practice.



Robin Rhode, *Works on Black Paper V*, 2008. Oil stick, spraypaint and chalk on paper, 150 x 161cm

Rhode's charcoal and chalk paintings, process drawings, solemn video shorts, and experiments with material begin to unlock the under workings of his overall approach, delivering a dynamism to the exhibition that is unfortunately undermined by the obvious gap of integrity between this commitment to creative experimentation, and the simultaneous inclusion of a number of stylistically predictable photographic works.

I understand the title 'Paths and Fields' to be an accurate metaphor for the two distinct bodies of work we see throughout the project. This path seems to talk about an intuitive creative journey with the potential to unearth new content and context, which, while perhaps unresolved, or having not yet reached its final destination, speaks wordlessly to an engaged production process. Of significance in this way are effective micro-curatorial decisions that, while not integrating the show as a whole, make visible Rhode's curiosity in thinking through how art can engage space in interesting ways.

In his *Works On Black Paper V*, a chalk drawing, we are invited into an enticing version of this spatial engagement. A clumsily composed image of corners and architectural impulses, shadows and dimensions, the work kept whispering to be turned over to right its unbalanced weighting and implied aggression directed at the floor of the gallery.

Beside this image, a huge wallpapered black and white photographic work, *Slalom*, itself quite awkward, shows a tracksuit-clad figure with skis on his feet, holding ski-poles and leaning precariously forward in a ready pose atop a rocky and obviously un-snowy mountain. His downwardly directed energy hits the same spot on the floor of the gallery as his strange drawing,

and the effect of this curatorial moment, I would argue, is its instructiveness in drawing attention to the space around and within the works, rather than to the works themselves.

The uncertainty of the overall *vibe* of this show however, seemed to speak much louder than these moments – an uncertainty that has in many ways abandoned Rhode's signature commitment to playfulness as a crucial mode of engagement, one that *informs* the object outcome, rather than being a consequence of it.

The *Grass is Singing* does show Rhode's ability to navigate playfully, and un-confrontationally the relationships between the arbitrary and the realistic. This short video shows a figure playing a mournful violin tune on what appears to be an enlarged plastic fork. Behind him, detailed plant-like structures drawn on the wall appear and disappear, growing and dying as they mirror the sad melody, recalling, for me his 2013 *A Day in May*. Through a similarly minimal object palette, this work explores very loosely the politics of 'Labour Day' and 'Worker's Day', invoking a global capitalist critique that shares a relationship with *The Grass Is Singing*, in speaking into discourse engaged too by the Arte Povera movement.

'Paths and Fields' is framed as a conscious exploration of Rhode's own creative relationship with various European art-making discourses – those less popularized by the canon – that we perhaps do not commonly consider when thinking through South African contemporary art practice. There is a historicist nag in his best work that I feel is so important to our context. Using unlikely interventions, Rhode offers re-historicisation and alternate ways of seeing a subject, not slipping into the Albie Sachs-sanctioned aesthetic of post '94, which has been given great economic value by the market.

In this sense, the five included photographic series – *Paradise, Inverted Cycle, RYB, Lavender Hills, and Three Nudes* – appeared, in their buy-in to Rhode's own previously successfully established style, to function as a safety net to the relative risk of the rest of the show. Ironically it was their inclusion that seemed to tip the show's potential, betraying an unwillingness to genuinely follow through on the works' articulated explorative aims, and thus bestowing upon the gallery a difficult curatorial task with intent to marry two schools of art objects whose site of origin presented perpetual disagreement.

'Paths and Fields' invoked this feeling of an abandoned site of conflict, wherein both voices had been undermined with neither pushed far enough to cave in to its own undoing. So while the body of work may have lacked cohesion, it is certainly to the artist's credit that he is beginning to unlock discourse and make creative connections that are fresh and interesting. There would be little merit in completely discounting the emergence of the new direction of Rhode's work, which, in its attention to the constructiveness contained within its own process, has given way to multiple interventions and effective new works in recent years. 'Paths and Fields', however, presents two voices of production, of product and process, that seem in this case, to be irreconcilable.