

ROBIN RHODE

BORN 1975, SOUTH AFRICA; LIVES AND WORKS IN BERLIN, GERMANY

Robin Rhode approaches his multidisciplinary and unconventional art practice through the high energy of street inventiveness and youth culture, often drawing on the subcultural codes of hip hop, popular sports, film, and fashion to render the everyday as art. A self-proclaimed “revolutionary contemporary artist,” his strategic interventions in galleries and public spaces explore issues of culture, identity, history, and the socioeconomic realities of a South Africa newly welcomed back into the global fold. Utilizing lo-fi techniques such as charcoal drawing, performance, and simple computer animations, he transforms the quotidian into humorous, evocative experiences laced with sharp commentary on the politics of leisure, global branding, and the commodification of youth cultures.

Rhode’s visual and conceptual alphabet is built around issues of desire, loss, and dislocation in a capitalist world while also acknowledging the specific indignities of growing up “colored” in formerly apartheid South Africa. For instance, Park Bench (2000) was a life-size drawing of said object on the wall of the Parliament building in Cape Town, in an area that used to be off-limits to all but white South Africans. Dressed in dark, hooded clothing associated with trouble-making youths, Rhode then proceeded to loiter around his bench and was eventually arrested for defaming state property. Likewise, in Car Theft (1998/2003), he uses various objects to attempt to break into a car he has drawn on the gallery wall, highlighting his signature method of attempting to playfully transform flat renderings of everyday objects into illusory three-dimensional ones through his physical interactions. Very much a provocateur and cultural subversive, he shares conceptual links with artists as varied as Marcel Duchamp, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and David Hammons. Yet, these “high art” associations do not negate his equally strong ties to popular cultural phenomena such as rappers Wu-Tang Clan, the Nike brand, graffiti art, and music-video director Hype Williams.

In 2001, Rhode was nominated for South Africa’s FNB Vita Art Prize. He has been included in several group exhibitions, including Dislocation. Image. Identity. South Africa, Centro Cultural de Maria, O’Porto, Portugal (2002); Shelf Life, Gasworks Gallery, London, England (2001); and Juncture, The Granary, Cape Town, and Studio Voltaire, London (2001). His solo exhibitions include Fresh: Robin Rhode at South Africa National Gallery, Cape Town (2000). Rhode is an artist-in-residence at the Walker Art Center in 2002–2003.

—Olukemi Ilesanmi