



ROBIN RHODE

ARTISTS SPACE | NEW YORK

left & right Robin Rhode, *The Score*, 2004, performance stills. Courtesy: the Artist and Artists Space. Photos: Tobin Welland

The Score, staged by artist Robin Rhode, was an audio/visual experience that lasted about 15 minutes. It marked Rhode's debut in New York. Curated by Claire Tancons, as part of the Emerging Curator series, residue of the performance, including the paint brush used by Rhode and edited video documentation, remained on view for two weeks.

Converting a static white cube gallery into an improvisational jazz happening, Rhode entered the space equipped with a broad brush, black paint, and later commandeered a chair from the audience. Furthering his practice of transforming walls into three-dimensional interactive zones, the artist says that *The Score* also "continues the avant-garde performance events staged at Artists Space between the 1970s and 1980s, which involved artists such as Mike Kelley, Matt Mullican, and Tony Oursler".

Rhode also cites John Cage as a strong influence. Cage himself was related to the Fluxus movement (which emerged in New York in 1960 and encouraged the combination and fusion of all media and artistic disciplines), as well as Japanese avant-garde Gutai performance artists (who were active between 1954 and 1972 and promoted kinetic art performance). Rhode says that it was important to "work with musical elements, echoing fusion art, while at the same time linking it to the lyricism of the painting medium with its overtly weighted quality when compared to chalk or charcoal". In the artist's view, paint has permanence over ephemeral materials and its fluidity echoes bodily movement.

During the performance, Rhode (clad in casual street gear, which included a red cap, blue Nike trainers, and a plain white T-shirt) quickly mapped rough forms of four instruments (trumpet, bass, drum kit, and an electric keyboard) onto the wall and then proceeded to 'play' them. The artist pressed his face and hands up against his painted trumpet, strummed at the bass, beat on and kicked at the drum kit and played the electric keyboard. The performance was backed by an original score of the artist's voice mimicking and interpreting the featured instruments. Citing Bruce Nauman's interest in the ability of the untrained, Rhode created his first sound monologue in 1996 without any musical training. Furthermore, Rhode notes that creating ballads, or dance pieces with-

out receiving formal schooling has strong political resonance in marginalised communities in South Africa.

Moving beyond art historical references (which has been part of the fabric of his practice), Rhode's urban performance style fused with that of the legendary, late Miles Davis. Known as a constantly self-reinvented innovator, Davis rarely addressed the audience and often kept his back to the crowd during performances. Responding to audio cues, the spirit and energy in Rhode's performance resided between the wall, his paint brush and the newly created instruments. With his focus directed at the wall, Rhode seemed oblivious to the crowd of onlookers.

Naming additional sources, such as Laurie Anderson, for the inclusion of music in live performance, Rhode states that his original score was composed without referencing other musical pieces and included cues to the playful melodies of ice cream trucks. Rhode further explains that the ice cream truck melody recalls his own repressed childhood memories that have become a point of departure in his creative process since he left South Africa to live in Berlin. Working as an artist in Germany, Rhode states that local conventions, language barriers and spatial limitations have forced him to develop new working methods.

As a performance artist, Rhode depends on the audience buying into his simulated reality. In the absence of an artist's statement, one has to wonder whether people were able to pick up on the Miles Davis reference as the ensemble of musical instruments was fairly generic and the only direct Davis citation was Rhode's lack of interaction with the crowd. Even while each audience member may not have picked up on every reference, or understood the transmission of each idea, Rhode employed enough signs and symbols to provide points of entry into his piece. The success of *The Score* is due to Rhode's deft reinterpretation of a jazz ensemble. Furthermore, he translates his mastery at communicating space and movement during his charged moments on stage. While the residue of a charged performance can never simulate the verve of a live performance, visitors spent time engaging with the visual playback and the abandoned instruments.

The artist plans to employ a similar practice of playing with time, location and found objects to tap into repressed memories in three forthcoming projects scheduled for September 2004, in New York.

■ Laurie Ann Farrell

Laurie Ann Farrell is Curator at the Museum for African Art, New York