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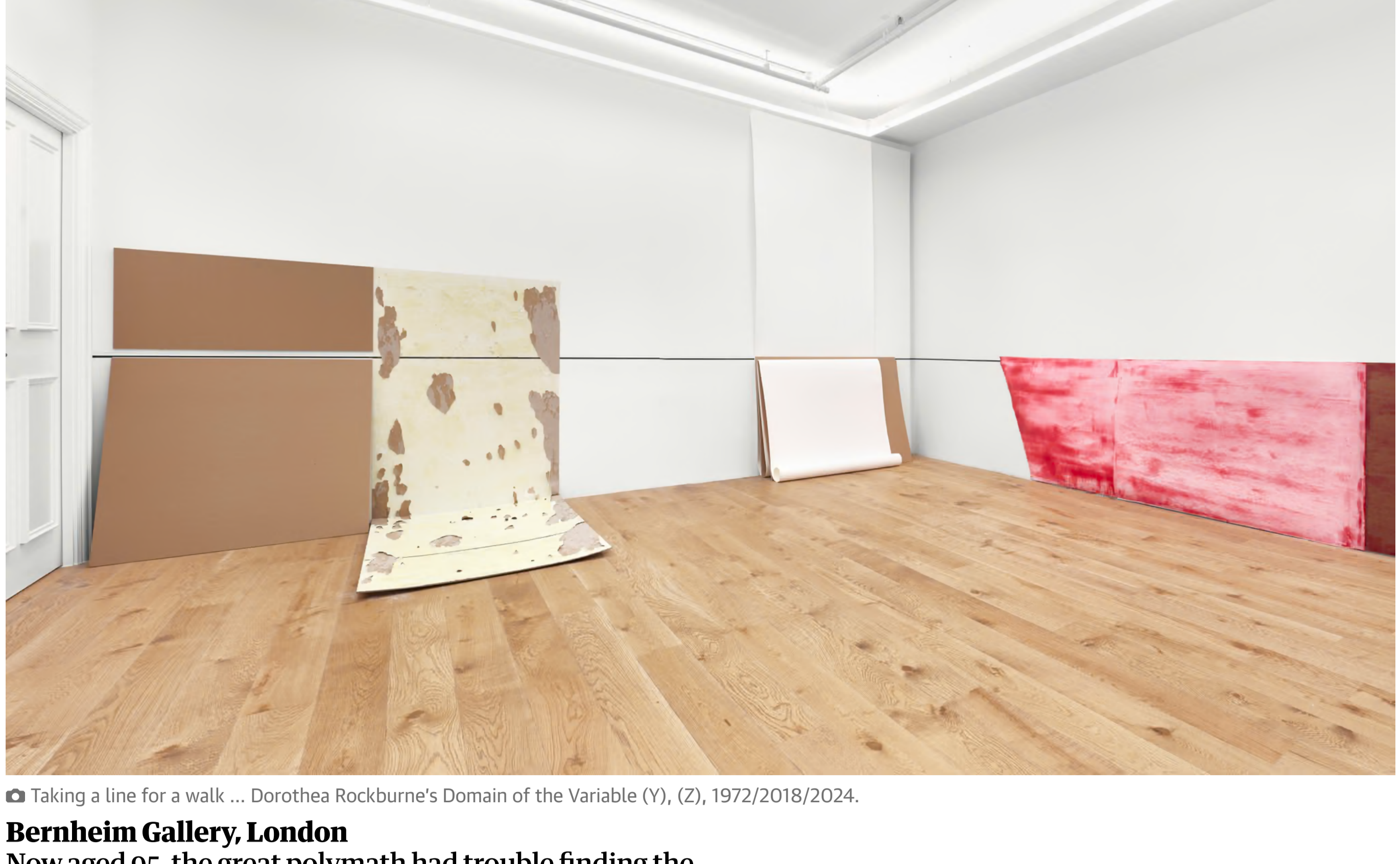
Adrian Searle

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Review

Dorothea Rockburne - New York great's first big UK show all comes down to one long, mesmerising line

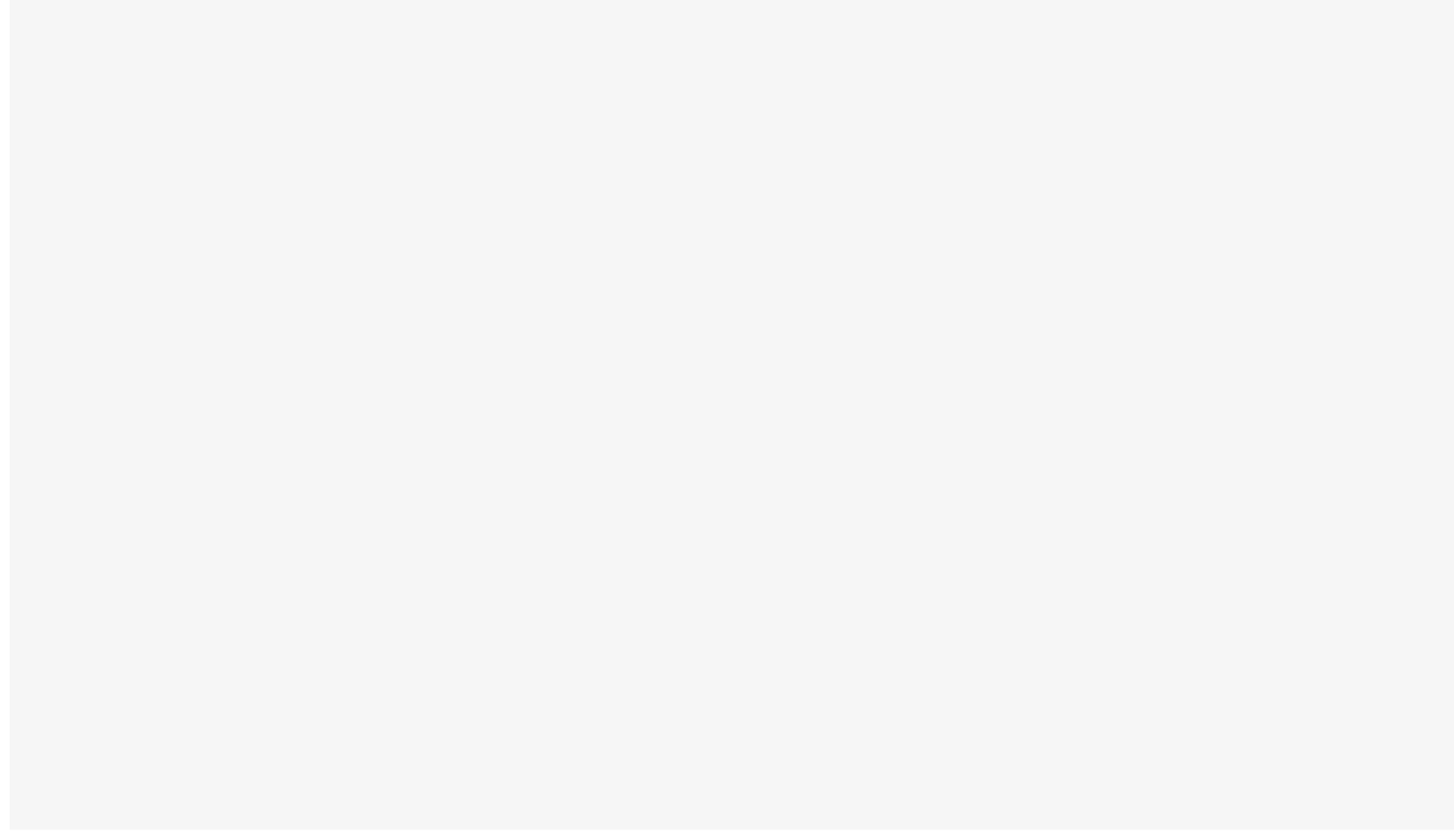


Taking a line for a walk ... Dorothea Rockburne's Domain of the Variable (Y), (Z), 1972/2018/2024.

Bernheim Gallery, London
 Now aged 95, the great polymath had trouble finding the right chipboard in Britain - but this is still a show of disarming simplicity with one stunning standout work

Sometimes a work gets to you and blows everything else away. It begins with a narrow black line, about the breadth of a pencil, running at waist-height around the walls of the ground floor gallery. The line negotiates the mouldings, runs under a mantelpiece, takes the corners and recesses, makes a turn, gets interrupted by a set of French doors and disappears from view. The line leads us from room to room. Regular, unvarying and relentless, it sometimes leaves a breathy residue on the wall or a build-up of fine graphite dust in the corners and crevices of a window-frame as it passes.

Drawn using fine charcoal powder and fixative, the line at times appears to have been incised in the wall rather than just sitting on top of the paintwork. Sometimes it looks like a cut, as if someone has sawn through the entire building, making me think of Gordon Matta-Clark's chain-sawed buildings. The only other thing in this bare room is Dorothea Rockburne's 1967 Tropical Tan, a group of four abutted black steel panels leaning against the wall and reaching above our heads. The panels look flat, but each steel sheet is precisely bent on its four diagonals, the angles muted and disguised by a layer of pallid wrinkle-finish paint. The line runs behind the panels, re-emerges on the other side and carries on, oblivious, dragging me with it. Unlike me, the line never hesitates. Even when you can't see it the line is there, as present as an invisible horizon. It is always with us. Like the line itself, the questions keep on coming.



Now 95, Rockburne is still working, and this exhibition amounts to a mini-survey of her long career. It is the artist's first major show in the UK. Born in Montreal in 1929, she moved to the US in 1950 to study at Black Mountain College, where her teachers included painters Franz Kline and Philip Guston, along with scientists and mathematicians, dancers and thinkers. It was the kind of art school that doesn't exist any more. Cy Twombly and Robert Rauschenberg were among her fellow students, and she later became Rauschenberg's studio manager in New York, where she still lives today. Heavily involved in the downtown scene, she studied dance with Merce Cunningham and performed with the Judson Dance Theatre, and in Carolee Schneemann's infamous 1964 Meat Joy, in which participants writhed around onstage with raw meat and poultry, fish, paint and paper while Tamla Motown hits and Millie Small's My Boy Lollipop played loudly over the writhing bodies. Things got very messy.

If the visceral and material, the body and space, informed Rockburne's early work, so too did mathematics, topology and astronomy, semiotics and phenomenology, which she'd been fascinated with since college. She has a polymathic mind. Here, everything depends on the line, with its thrumming insistence, like a continuous, single note, a timeline or a stave. It joins and it divides, it measures and it directs. Its blackness has no sheen.

A certain inherent perversity ... Tropical Tan, 1967, by Dorothea Rockburne.

The gallery's second ground floor room is where things start to get really complicated. A stack of thin chipboard sheets lean against the wall, just below the line. Another sheet is stuck to the wall, above it. Next to this, two identical pieces of board have been stuck together using layers of contact adhesive, then torn apart and opened like a book. You can see areas of stretchy goo still trying to maintain contact between the opened-up sheets, one of which lies on the floor, its warped edge lifting into space. I look and wince. This looks like evidence of a terrible bit of DIY or something the cowboy builders have left behind. The adhesive has also torn away areas of the prepared board, leaving areas of damage. Is there a difference between accident and detail, cackhandedness and subtlety? Nearby, a length of heavy, pristine white paper suspended by nails from the top of the wall drops, getting jammed between more sheets of chipboard before it flops over the outer layer of board and ends in a roll on the floor. Then I notice that the skirting board's been lifted and removed, and the wooden floor doesn't meet the wall, leaving a narrow gutter. Suddenly, this seems important. There are lost screws down there, and little jumbles of residue.

The line races on, eventually getting covered by a length of paper whose leading edge is cut at a steep angle, similar to the angle of the leaning sheets of board on the previous wall. Everything starts to line up, and then it doesn't. The paper has been treated with a magenta-hued industrial oil, roughly scraped on in horizontal striations, and stuck to the wall with a bare nail. Shunting along to the end of the wall, the sagging sheet of paper folds and doubles back on itself, to yaw and curl out into the room, ending in a roughly torn edge.

That's it, or not it. What a strange and compelling work this is. Everything has a certain logic, and everything is subject to change. When Rockburne first made her Domain of the Variable (Y), (X) in 1972, she'd have had to use spirit levels and string, tape measures and plumb-lines. Technology has moved on. A laser-level now keeps the plotting and the drawing true when the work is being installed. The line is just the start of it. Assistants have had to assemble the work in the artist's absence, and she has had to direct the installation by video call. Some of the commonplace materials she originally used are now hard to source. You can't buy the right kind of chipboard in the UK so she had to fly it in from Philadelphia. Since it was installed last week, the materials have already started to bend, warp and cockle in the humid London air and the gallery's heating. The work is at once fragile and specific, precise and open to conditions. That magenta oil will, apparently, change colour in the coming weeks.

The simpler the better ... Exstiasie, 1983, by Dorothea Rockburne.

Domain of the Variable has been shown several times over the last half-century, in different spaces and locations. It is always the same and always different, each time remade anew. The process of making, of doing and redoing, and the ways in which it is both a product of its time and entirely fresh, and subject to change, keeps it alive. It has its own internal logic and a certain inherent perversity. Every space reconfigures it. A sequence of operations and gestures, moves and counter-moves, under the rule of a line drawn in time as well as space, it surrounds us, capturing us in its orbit. You might shrug and think it's nothing, or be captivated.

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Rockburne has gone on to develop in different ways. Perhaps her process-based rubric proved unsustainable. In Bernheim's upper galleries are numerous shaped canvases and butted-together panels, which to me feel much more like products of their time and have not dated well. They depend, largely, on the fold and on the rotation of forms that flex, repeat and rotate. Some make use the golden section, and the simpler they are, the better. Some of Rockburne's drawings, with their reticent touch and clear formal preoccupations, are extremely beautiful, but something is lost in her later work. The compound geometries of her shaped canvases, with their often strident surfaces, feel strained. The more complex they get, the less I can follow their moves, or care about their tendency towards the spiritual. The show's overall title, The Light Shines in the Darkness and the Darkness Has Not Understood It gives a measure of their tenor. Give me instead The Domain of the Variable, which seems both anchored to the material world and unbounded in its possibilities.

• Dorothea Rockburne's The Light Shines in the Darkness and the Darkness Has Not Understood It is at Bernheim Gallery, London, until 25 January

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