

Nathaniel RACKOWE

*Signs of a City*

March 31 - May 13, 2017

*"We will never be able to explain or justify the city. The city is here."*<sup>1</sup>  
Georges Perec

In the solo exhibition of the London-based artist Nathaniel Rackowe, neon light recaptures the city it originated from 2, lighting up the gallery Jerome Pauchant in a halo of fluorescent luminous pulsations. **The artist continues his resolute research on existing structures and signals offered by the urban environment** in the new works presented here, this time **choosing the petrol station as a creative set in an obsessive serial manner**. If petrol stations are inevitably found in History of Art, such as E. Hopper's pale atmosphere paintings, or Ed Ruscha and his famous *Twentysix gasoline stations*, **Nathaniel Rackowe does not suggest a range of built specifics or a tale of a particular experience: he makes it abstract by raising the specific aesthetic it develops in a generic form**. Deprived of its use value, it becomes an empty sign, with no function, a part of a game of construction, deconstruction and rearrangement.

A petrol station's gantry nearly as large as life stands at the gallery's entrance. Two metal beams hold an empty structure crowned with neon lights and an acid-yellow Plexiglas plate, like a fragment of a sign with no meaning. In English, the term used is canopy: like an unmeant coincidence, the use of the term in French "canopée" suggests the top layer of the forest influenced by the solar radiation rather than this typical architectural element. And **this is indeed about landscape, not as an inclusion within the urban fabric, but as an extraction**. The white light pierces the structure, irradiates it, and becomes relevant to the viewer, in its obviousness and accuracy. **The work becomes a ciborium holding visual sensations, the element of a décor of the modern life's theater**.

While it keeps the characteristics of its form, the canopy is reenacted, turned over. The artist tests the framework, puts it on the floor, hangs it on the wall, he thus **creates 3-dimensional objects between architecture, sculpture and painting, such as the intertwined black lines in Kandinsky's work, the vibrant colour and depth in Fontana's, where the interstices have been replaced by Dan Flavin's neon tubes**. Taken from construction sites aesthetics, the materials' roughness thwarts the sober aspect of the works. The artist uses a component for hooping as used to maintain building elements on pallets. The hanging system, the neon fixations and the electric wires do not hide away. As, for Nathaniel Rackowe, **the city itself can be seen as such, a construction site made for creation, where the signs are displayed to reshape the space, to structure the perception and break the one-dimensional aspect of reality**.

If the artist develops a kind of fetishising for what he calls "the honesty of materials", it is not about an inspiration from the abandoned industrial sites 3 from which Robert Smithson theorised the notion of entropy in *Entropy and the Newer Monuments*. If he is interested in *new monuments*, in industrial materials and electric light, for which he summons the same creators Dan Flavin, Sol LeWitt, Donald Judd, the works by Nathaniel Rackowe reverse Smithson's equation: "the energy is more easily lost than obtained" 4. **The urban environment is not interpreted by the artist according to the dark demons of asphalt and of degradation, but according to this kind of beauty that transcends space**, offering a tangible form to the impressions aroused by the signs that pace our daily life, like the refining of a familiar atmosphere, an ode to the contemporary energy. And Smithson's entropy gives way to Rackowe's anthropic. As, through this poetry on space, it is above all about humanity. In the way Anatole France, describing the book as a "succession of small signs", invites his reader "to pull out himself the forms, the colours and the feelings to which these signs refer to", the artist invites the viewer to reinterpret the signs of the city according to its own criteria and feelings; "it will depend on him whether this book will be dull or brilliant, fervent or cold" 5.

Raphaëlle Romain  
Art critic and historian

<sup>1</sup> Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, ed. and trans. by John Sturrock (London: Penguin, 1997; rev. ed. 1999)

<sup>2</sup> Georges Claude is the inventor of the neon tube. It was presented to the public for the first time in 1910 during a car show, "Salon de l'Automobile" in the Grand Palais in Paris. The company Lampes Claude installed the first neon sign in the world on a hairdresser's window, Le Palais Barbier, located 14 boulevard de Montmartre in 1912, then an advertisement for the aperitif drink Cinzano on the Champs-Élysées with 1 meter-high white neon letters. "Who remembers today that Paris was the absolute capital of neon signs before Los Angeles and Las Vegas, since Claude's patent was sold to America only in 1923?" Yann Moulier-Boutang, foreword in Luis de Miranda, "L'être et le néon", Éditions Max Milo, Paris, January 2012, p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Smithson used to make journeys to abandoned industrial sites with Carl Andre, Michael Heizer, Robert Morris or Claes Oldenburg.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Smithson, essay in Artforum, June 1966. On line: [http://www.robertsmithson.com/essays/entropy\\_and.htm](http://www.robertsmithson.com/essays/entropy_and.htm)

<sup>5</sup> Anatole France, *Le Jardin d'Épicure* (The Garden of Epicurus), 1895.

*Transcendent Moment of the City*  
*How we experience environment that surrounds us*

"The way a man composes his space, therefore the way he places himself in imagination next to all things, is identical to his way of thinking."  
Czeslaw Milosz, *The Land of Ulro*, 1985

In an imaginary conversation about the city and the notion of space, a small play starring Winston Churchill and Georges Perec -, Nathaniel Rackowe would further say:  
- on the politician's declaration:

W.C: "We shape our buildings; then they shape us"<sup>1</sup>

N.R: "and fascinate us!"

- on the writer's definition:

G.P: "A city; stones, concrete, tarmac"<sup>2</sup>

N.R: "Lights!"

Nathaniel Rackowe, by conveying urban landscape, extracts the signs from the city, isolates the shapes, while displaying their lights as a necessary vehicle to perceive an architecture, an object within space. Fluorescent rays of the neon light are unveiled through the construction elements made from recovered materials. Monumental or intimate, mobile or fixed, his works show the existing structures while dematerialising reality. Redefining the figures of the city or its outskirts, functional and familiar elements - signs, electric boards, tower blocks, petrol stations, and more components of the modern metropolis; the value of their usage is replaced with an alternate history. In the scaffolding network of his thoughts, these urban units, reduced to their most simple form, become images of memory open to reinterpretation.

A worthy successor to the different trends of ABC Art, from 1960's America, and following the neon masters such as Piotr Kowalski and Dan Flavin, Nathaniel Rackowe asserts his connection with minimal art. He adds a more personal link to space, combining the mathematical precision of the former; and the consistency of materials from building sites' aesthetics to the latter's sparse aspect. The artist commonly engages the range of artistic practices he is influenced by, sometimes citing them in his work: "SP3" honours Tatlin's architectures and their reinterpretation as given by Dan Flavin, "NLP2" or "Block Shelf" forthrightly reinvents Donald Judd's work, the aligned neon squares of "Black Cube", installed in Copenhagen in 2014, directly evoke the architecture of Den Frie.

"The Luminous City", "Radiant Trajectory", "Reflections on Space", "What the City Left Behind", "Signs of a City": every exhibition title specifically refers to space and a way to be located within it, a statement of existing in the world. As for the works' titles, Nathaniel Rackowe strives to keep them literal, each series bearing the materials' initials numbered by order of creation - SD05 for a work part of the Sliced Door series, DG06 for part of the Dichroic Glass series -:

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<sup>1</sup> Winston Churchill, cit. Philippe Saint-Marc, in *L'Economie barbare*, Paris: Frison-Roch. ed. 1994.  
<sup>2</sup> Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, 1974. Ed. and trans. by John Sturrock, London, Penguin, 1997, rev. ed. 1999.





**Galerie  
Jérôme  
Pauchant**

"The fact that the titles, say DG06, end up resembling industrial part numbers pleases me and gives a function to the titles."<sup>3</sup>

Following industrial poetics and his belief of "Truth to materials", the artist uses steel, glass, wood, paint, concrete, aluminium, Perspex, joining them with steel bolts and electrical wires left exposed, enacting the notion of a building site, the idea of the present being transformed.

The light is thus a medium, a material for creation and an object for revelation; the artist seeks to "capture the way the light transforms these environments"<sup>4</sup>. His kinetic sculptures – "Black Beacon", "Sixty Eight Door" or "Dead Reckoning"

– masterfully change the environment they are set in with their projections and shifting nature; his three-dimensional fixed objects are transformed by their surroundings, inside – museums, galleries, institutions – or outside, depending directly on the natural phenomenon of the light's appearance or disappearance – "Spin" in Lima (Peru), "Platonic Spin" in Torun (Poland), "Black Shed Expanded" in Paris or Aarhus (Denmark).

Using a language related to contemporary artists – more soft than Pedro Cabrita Reis' modules, less hazy than Anne Veronica Janssens' chromatic spaces, more sparse than Keith Sonnier's Eccentric Abstraction's coloured neon lights –, Nathaniel Rackowe's work accurately transcribes the intimacy of the artificial iridescence of light, or its nearly solar radiance, reflecting the observation of the city and its space, of the light and its effects.

In the frenzy created by advertising and shop window's pressure, of the neon sign's dazzle, of the buildings' dizziness and the constant city flows, Nathaniel Rackowe disseminates the visual excitements of our daily life and gives them the appearance of special events. His works expand time to encourage amazement. An aesthetic and sensory experiment that suggests a new mode of appropriation of space, in a personal and meandering manner. Because if "the city is a space", it is "also a trajectory, defined by the routes we take through it"<sup>5</sup>. The wanderer's daydream which, far from being alone, reconnects with humanity.

"This is what I would call the exploitation's path,  
all these meanderings of a building, a city a garden,  
all these detours which end up only to meet like melodic lines, and  
which only ensure we communicate with ourselves;  
the lines of our possession and our habits."

Paul Claudel, *The Eye Listens*, 1946

Raphaëlle Romain  
Art Critic and Historian

<sup>3</sup> Nathaniel Rackowe, interview in ODDA Magazine, issue #12, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Nathaniel Rackowe, cit. in the presentation text of the exhibition Edge Lands,

Galerie Jérôme Pauchant, Paris, Dec. 18, 2014 – Feb. 14, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Excerpt from a conversation with Nathaniel Rackowe, February 2017.

