

NATHANIEL RACKOWE & DOUGLAS WHITE

26.09.08–30.10.08

PRIVATE VIEW 24.09.08 / 6.30–9PM

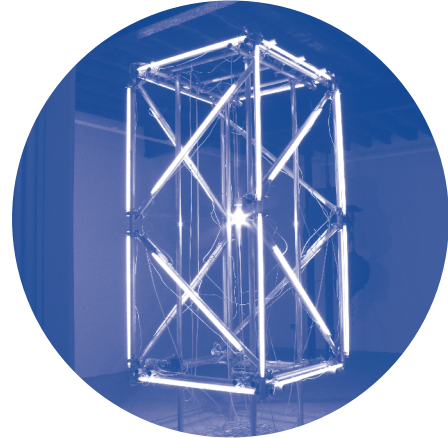
To the casual onlooker, the temporary rendezvous of Nathaniel Rackowe and Douglas White at Art Vandelay might suggest an experiment into departures rather than meetings. Given Rackowe's employment of the hard-edged language of construction materials and White's figurative qualities of organic material scavenged from sub-rural hinterlands such reading can be easily forgiven. When brought together under these circumstances however, it becomes apparent how their independent approaches to their sculptural fields reveal similar characteristics that combine to make a subtle topology of semiotic components.

Espousing a socio-psychology of place by incorporating the structural characteristics of signage and urban signifiers with exotic iconography, the pair work together to take one into a world of foreboding urban dystopia and over to exotic lands by rearranging material found in common woodland or ordered from building material catalogues.

Rackowe's work transports us to the anonymous and unquantifiable areas of real estate that spread out to the edges of the city. Curiosity leads us beyond pre-furnished skeletal frames through to ominous areas of indeterminable function. LP12,(2008), an indeterminable structure with a scant suggestion of a lift shaft lays grounded in the gallery. The lack of any residue on the polished scaffolding and wires denies a history of place, as if it has appeared from an unclassifiable time zone. Lulled into a false sense of security on one hand with the quotidian materials, we then have to adjust to its other worldly presence on the other. Proposing machinery powered by an internal alien logic, Rackowe's presents one with a self-sustaining sculpture that is both defunct and operational.

Photographic images taken by Rackowe of empty advertising light-boxes – the type built into bus-stops - reflect the stark qualities of fluorescent light to mark absence. Behind these

blank advertisements lie an anatomy of wires and vertical tube lights which, encountered at night, radiate their emptiness, contrasting the favoured air-brushings of the city's consumerist backdrop. Floating between the 'sign' and the 'signified' his sculpture might be read as a massive advert-to-nowhere matching the mechanics of defunct signage with building development - paving the way for an austere blank future.



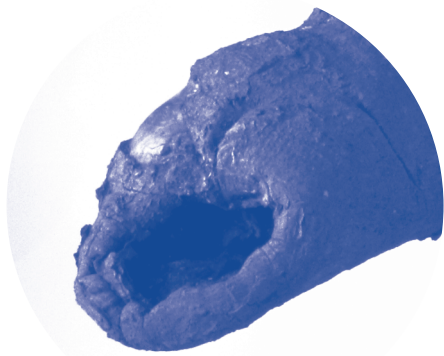
Beyond the city's lights amongst the orbiting motorways and the A-roads of the south of England lie the woodland and sub-rural patches that provided the starting point for Douglas White assemblage series – Elephant Totem,(2008). A dead beech tree is selected for its anthropomorphic, elephantine qualities- qualities that have been an attraction for White since a childhood trip to India led to the discovery of a rotting elephant carcass whose tough gnarly dead skin left a vivid impression upon the artist. While White's mutilated tree might be considered 'dead wood', it was found teaming with organic life including wasp-nests, toadstools and home to hundreds of tiny insects.



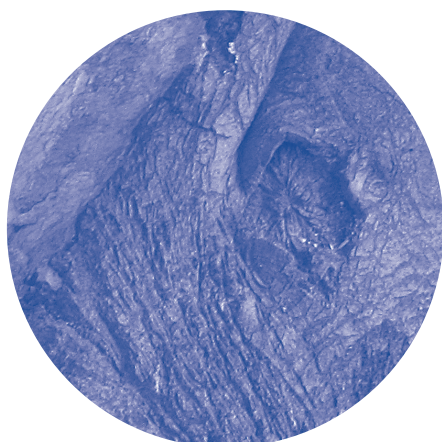
Still supporting life in the form of various fungal and floral manifestations, White's tree sets the artist a daily challenge to work with materials that might one day be malleable, the next brittle. Over the course of installing Elephant Totem it manifested a spread of bacteria over areas of the bark like a rare dermatological condition or allergic rash.

From an array of pulley systems and armatures, chunks of beech tree dangle like slabs of meat hacked from an unsuspecting beast that has been caught roaming too close to human habitation. In some of the works from the series,

certain knots in the perverse dangling trophies are crudely hinged together to connect rotting tissue to equally rotting tissue. Made from hinges perhaps taken from small rural gate-locks they bridge mankind with the beasts to unsettling degrees. Introducing utensils that mimic the mechanism of animal joints, White proposes a zygotic collaboration between animal and vegetation producing a dismembered carcass that crosses natural biological constraints.



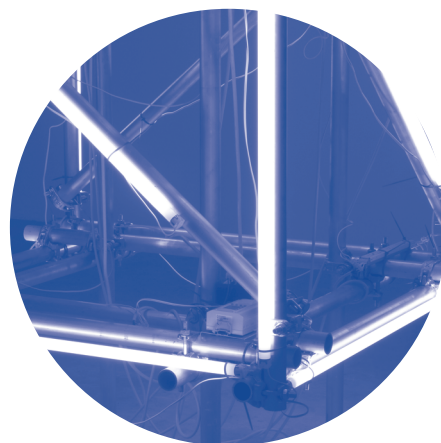
Peering further into the abundance of knots and crannies scattered about the works from his series Elephant Totem one begins to become aware of one's imagination working in dreamy overdrive. The experience is not an unpleasant one. In another work from the series, a pig's head, perhaps, dangles from a chain that has been attached as brutally as a butcher's hook. Its dumb eyes sealed over forever, never to witness its new surroundings. Amusingly, White left a wisp of ivy which acts as small wreath adding black comedy to the carnage. Like a pagan bacchanal, there is evidence of animal crossbreeds offered for sacrifice on totemic structures. Elsewhere in the exhibition, chunks of gnarly old elephant trunk leer near one with huge dried up nostrils covered in pockmarked skin that clings to awkward, cumbersome flesh. Too much time with Whites beasts and disorientation sets in. Scale becomes less distinct as mouths and eyes give way to monumental creature hybrids. I become giddy and snap myself out of it.



Like Rackowe, Douglas White still has one foot firmly in the ground. Simply by presenting accidents of nature without much editing, he encourages the metamorphosis to take place solely in the imagination of the viewer. However, as much as these forms might seduce one to wander into exotic

reverie the relationship with such terrain is owed in part to artist's own upbringing in rural England. Even if this woodland-metamorphosis might lead one to Golding-esque exoticism it does so without having to leave the familiar scenery of contemporary Britain. Like many teenagers do, White would spend many hours in the woodlands surrounding his home - areas that provide a sanctuary for adolescents escaping from the tyranny of parental control. The amorphous quality of knotted roots to morph into ugly boils and nooks and crannies that develop into orifices reminds one of the exaggerated perils one perceives as an adolescent to the changes developing within the body. As well as a haven for visceral discovery the woods also provide cover for experimentation with psychotropic transmutations encouraged by natural narcotics.

Rackowe's LP12 - a carcass built from usable but functionless construction materials - wryly puts a subversive spin on the aesthetics of industrial development. As a 1:1 model that is neither real nor fake it is also both a facsimile and authentic. The artist's 'undead' materials will never be allowed to rust nor let entropy take its course. Instead they face a lifetime of drifting from zone to zone to be assembled, exhibited and disassembled ad infinitum. Rackowe's structure might also mimic the formal concerns of familiar minimalist artists such as Dan Flavin and Donald Judd but they do so with an awareness that their over exposure into the contemporary landscape might have diluted some of the critical punch they might have once had. The emphasis lies somewhere between redundancy and pertinence just as Judd and Flavin have been assimilated they are still inseparable names associated with modular formalism reflected through the use of such materials.



When plugged in, the electrical current acts as lifeblood to the sculpture which comes eerily into being through the subtle anthropomorphic suggestion of breathing with slowly contracting and dilating light. As the lights cladding its shell dim, lowering visibility of the surrounding space, the central inverted phallus (consisting of an unsettlingly disproportionate domestic light bulb) brightens the interior of the structure. The play-off of light forces the viewer into a phenomenological penumbra as exterior space disappears sucking one into the solipsistic light emanating from its internal organs.

Rackowe's stark cinematic use of shadow promoting anxiety in the way science fiction movies utilise darkness to generate

hostile alien environments. The methodology is not just to encourage emotional disorientation but also provides formal ways of reaching perceptual expansion with the simplest of ways by turning the viewers' psyche towards a primitive fear of the dark. Both Rackowe and White employ (even reveal) in shadows to the extent that where perception fails, imagination takes over, interjecting subjective readings into cold, empirical sense data.



Like tall stories unfolding over the campfire, Rackowe's light cast shadows that act to obscure and magnify White's forms, encouraging fantastic tales of mythical beasts roaming the wildest of landscapes. Both installations enjoy a level of suspended sense of disbelief similar to the way one enjoys the stories told by friends during a night out in the woods - stories that however unbelievable are absorbed with a cosy sense of self delusion. This is of course the main principle that operates within the 'theatre goers' mind evident Rackowe's control of the viewers' participation. Within Rackowe's concept of theatricality, his reference to foreboding environments mix mystique with paranoia letting anxiety spiral out of control into a sort of neurotic psychological libido where violence, sexuality and intoxication come out of the shadows.

Rackowe's structures slowly pulsate with a light that spills into, onto and over into their periphery environments dissolving boundaries placed between the public and the private, the domestic and the industrial. The balancing act of containing intangible phenomena such as light inevitably results in some leakage suggesting an ebbing libido - attempting, and sometimes failing - to be restrained. The artistic libido - oscillating between the primal and the savage - is perhaps the imperative desire behind these works. We see it evident in the iconography of White's where transgressions (social or natural) are arrived at by the sophisticated collation, orchestration and presentation of found natural media. The viewer naturally has a role with this libido. The austere formalism of LP12 might prompt us into remembering stark encounters with blank bus stop signage but also encourages us into replacing missing imagery with dreamy images of foreign locations, alien lands and beyond...at least till the bus arrives.

Cameron Irving

Douglas White

Douglas was born in 1977 and studied at the Ruskin School of Art and the Royal College of Art. Solo shows include Hartrot, Gabriel Rolt (2008), Black Palm, Galerie Nuke, Paris (2007) Lilith, Paradise Row, London (2007). He was recently shortlisted for the Jerwood Sculpture Prize, Paul Hamlyn Award, Jerwood Drawing Prize and a recipient of the Deutsche Bank Pyramid Award, to name but a few.

Douglas White lives and works in London and is represented by Paradise Row (London) and Gabriel Rolt (Amsterdam)

Nathaniel Rackowe

Nathaniel Rackowe was born in 1975 and studied at Sheffield Hallam University and the Slade School of Fine Art. Solo shows include Pathfinding, Galerie Almine Rech, Paris (2008), preverberation, Siobhan Davies Studios, London (2008), Luminous Territories, BISCHOFF/WEISS, London (2007), Galerie Almine Rech, Paris (2007), Shift, BISCHOFF/WEISS, London (2005). Group shows include Lumiere, Galerie Jan Wentrup, Berlin (2008), All Tomorrows Pictures, ICA, London (2007) and Artificial Light, MoCA Goldman Warehouse, Miami (2006). Commissions include RP3, Economist Plaza with the Contemporary Arts Society, London (2007) and LP4, Victoria Station, London (2006)

Nathaniel Rackowe lives and works in London and is represented by BISCHOFF/WEISS.

Art Vandelay Gallery
The Russian Club Studios
340-344 Kingsland Road
London, E8 4DA
therussianclubstudios.com

For further details contact
info@therussianclubstudios.com

Catalogue Essay © Cameron Irving

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electrical, mechanical or otherwise, without first seeking the written permission of the copyright holders and of the publishers.

Special Thanks to Bischoff / Weiss, Paradise Row, Gabriel Rolt Gallery, Rana Begum, Jibril Rackowe, Paul Teigh, Hari Toyoda, Anthony & Jenny Newhouse, Big Jim, Dave Newman, Sarah Douglas, Rob Thuring, Natsue Ikeda, Cameron Irving.

Design by The Russian Club / *therussianclub.co.uk*
Photography by Jennie Hancock for The Russian Club
Exhibition Generously supported by Cusqueña Beer