

# THE BROOKLYN RAIL

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### PETER HALLEY WITH TOM MCGLYNN

by Tom McGlynn



Peter Halley, *New York, New York*, 2018, Lever House exterior. Photo by Peter Halley studio. Courtesy the artist and Greene Naftali, New York.

Since the early 1980s the influence of Peter Halley's writings, paintings, and installations has been widespread. He makes what he terms "diagrammatic images," which delineate the hyperreal circulatory feedback loop of contemporary social and political culture. On the day after the opening of his new installation project, *New York, New York* at Lever House in Midtown Manhattan, I spoke with Halley in his Chelsea studio.

Tom McGlynn (Rail): I recall the first time I ever encountered an image of one of your paintings. It was printed on a press release for an early show—circa 1985—at International with Monument, which was located on East 7th Street. In the midst of the foment of Neo-Expressionist figuration that dominated both the Soho and East Village art scenes, I was struck by the pared down, classical geometry of the painting—but perhaps even more so by how the image resonated on an emotional and psychological level as substantially insubstantial. There were not a whole lot of other painters painting that way then. Even now your body of work constitutes a fairly idiosyncratic thread in the tradition of abstraction. What was the development of your work prior to that time?

Halley: There's no doubt that I have a predisposition to paint flat paintings that emphasize color. By the time I was in graduate school in New Orleans, the emphasis was already on geometry. My earlier work from the late seventies embraced a romantic approach to world culture that was current in the art world at the time. In the wake of the radicalism of the sixties, there was a widespread attitude that Western culture was hopelessly corrupt and irrelevant. A number of artists were looking for sources of meaning outside the modern West. I myself was mostly looking at Native American art, Islamic art, and African art. In all those traditions, I saw geometry used to describe the essential codes of the natural world. The formal language I was developing was surprisingly similar to what I do now, but the meaning I was giving to geometric form was diametrically different. When I moved back to New York in 1980—it was a bit like Buddha leaving the palace. I was suddenly confronted with this Post-Structuralist critical wave engulfing intellectual life in the US. I soon discovered the work of Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, Paul Virilio, and others. From Foucault, I gained the insight that any attempt to borrow from a culture outside one's own is impossi-

ble. Your interpretation will always be filtered through your own cultural lens. The only way to have any claim to critical rigor is to focus on your own culture. Landing in downtown New York, I suddenly understood that my obsession with geometry was coming from this complex built environment, from the way the spaces around me were organized.

Rail: I recall the so-called Pattern and Decoration movement in the late seventies, championed by the dealer Holly Solomon. Artists such as Valerie Jaudon and Kim MacConnel represented that trend. Was that what you were referring to earlier?

Halley: Yes, among other things—like first generation feminism practiced by artists like Miriam Schapiro.

Rail: I remember writers and critics dealt with the mixed bag aspect of the seventies by labeling it a “pluralist” period. I can recall a sense of cultural drift and uncertainty that the theoretical center of the art world was not then holding. Would you agree?

Halley: Oh, yes. The seventies seemed adrift. I sometimes think that the untimely death of Robert Smithson was a big factor. The ideas that had led to Minimalism, Conceptualism, and installation art were losing steam. By 1980, a younger generation was definitely asking, where should we go with this?

Rail: Then the Neo-Expressionist wave broke with painters like Julian Schnabel and Enzo Cucchi. It was lauded as, finally, a new direction. It was as if a long period of cultural deferment had ended. The fact that this concurred with the onset of the Reagan regime of the 1980s seemed significant.

Halley: Well yes, except the other thing that was occurring at the same time was the emergence of the Pictures Generation with artists such as Cindy Sherman and Richard Prince. I think that the early eighties were very much a struggle for dominance between the Pictures artists and the Neo-Expressionists. It’s always been my point of view that the rise of Neo-Expressionism was tied not only to individualistic Reagan-esque values but to the serious economic recession in the early eighties as well. It was only after the economy improved in the mid-eighties that the Pictures artists began to gain wide acceptance.

Rail: You know I once told Ron Clark at the Whitney Independent Study Program that I learned more from the Reagan election about simulation than I ever did from Baudrillard. I can recall the sickening weirdness of that period too. It’s just so relevant with the onset of Trump; these periods seem like bookends or something.

Halley: Yes.

Rail: Let’s talk about how you began to inscribe this period in your writing. In your 1981 essay in Arts Magazine, “Beat, Minimalism, New Wave and Robert Smithson,” you explained that the Post-Minimalists evinced “a fixation on phenomenological philosophy and private reality.” In the same essay, you cite Robert Smithson’s advocacy for interdependent principles of consciousness, reality, and dialogue as a means to escape what he called cultural confinement. It seems that for some of the artists emerging in the eighties, the emphasis on consciousness devolved into a hyper self-consciousness. I’m thinking of artists such as Sherrie Levine and later Christopher Williams as examples. Some would say that this in itself is a voluntary form of cultural confinement. You embrace a more ludic, satiric form of cultural critique. Might that be your way out of such overweening self-seriousness?

Halley: A way out of self-seriousness—that’s for sure. The art I like, and the art that I aspire to make, is about mixing it up and crossing genres. It’s what English-speaking critics call intertextuality and the Italians call contamination. Artists read books, listen to music, and watch movies. All those things can and do mix together in works of art. I’ve never really been turned on by works that deal only with narrow cultural or institutional critique. And I’m wary of criticism that claims that artists are solely influenced by other art or by art history. Artists are

influenced by lots of things.

Rail: With the Beats, Punks and even Smithson, their own critical self-consciousness often took the form of dialectical mumblety-peg—a back-lot game of light-handedly avoiding the obvious blade of cultural signification in order to get at a deeper signification and avoid replicating a more normative and pedantic project of cultural critique. Your own approach seems closer to this. What then, is the role of humor and satire in your work?

Halley: I think, at heart, my work has a parodic element. Using Roll-A-Tex, for example, was a parody of painterly texture, and the prison had a parodic relationship to the modernist square. Recently I read Umberto Eco's *In the Name of the Rose*. It's the story of the hunt for a forbidden manuscript in the library of a medieval monastery. At the end of the book, as the monastery burns to the ground in ruins, the protagonist finally discovers the text—it's Aristotle's *Second Poetics*, which speaks of the virtue of laughter. As it turns out, humor is the forbidden principle in this monastery. I have to say, in today's art world, as over-blown and pretentious and troubled as it is, it would be good to see more art that embodies a sense of self-parody, or humor of any sort.

Rail: I can recall reading your early essays in *Arts Magazine* and thinking, while there was something refreshing in your transparency, there was also this too-close relationship to critical theory, almost as if the writings were the alibi for the paintings and vice versa. You've said elsewhere that your early writing and work was didactic in nature. Of course, Robert Smithson could also be accused of certain didacticism that helped to unclog, in his words, "a sedimentation of mind."

Halley: I am not so sure that didactic writing is such a bad thing. At the time, there were ideas for which I wanted to advocate. I want to mention that I had read Smithson in the early seventies. So, for me, when I encountered the French Post-Structuralists—particularly Baudrillard—in the eighties, there was definitely a sense of *déjà vu*.

Rail: Do you think you intentionally deployed the didactic as a way to reflect and perhaps satirize the imperatives of what Smithson referred to as cultural confinement?

Halley: Well, it was actually much more naïve than that. Looking back, I've kind of concluded that those essays were more akin to book reports than critical treatises. I was making these paintings and reading this critical theory stuff, and it was all making sense to me. I wanted to tell people about it and how it related to contemporary art. I was saying, Baudrillard or Foucault has this to say, and if we look at so-and-so's sculpture or painting, it really explains what's going on in the work. It really was naïve. I had a small audience. My work hadn't been shown when I wrote most of the essays, so I didn't feel I was protecting any kind of cultural turf.

Rail: I think that's an important point.

Halley: Half of them were written before I ever had a gallery show. They really reflect my excitement about the audacity of Post-Structuralist thinking. It overthrew the whole range of humanist pedagogy that I had grown up with in the sixties and seventies. And it seemed to address precisely the ideas that had been developed in the work of artists like Andy Warhol, or John Baldessari, or Cindy Sherman.

Rail: There's a pedestrian definition of irony, which means "a lack of sincerity." Critics have often accused artists who employ irony as lacking critical sincerity. It's a typical critique of Andy Warhol: that his work lacks a certain normative amount of sincerity. I suppose what I'm asking is—what's the role of ironic critique when the "death of irony" is celebrated as a rebirth of sincerity?

Halley: You know, Tom, I think this negative association with irony goes all the way back to the eighties and the *October* magazine crowd. The artists of my generation weren't making

work that conformed to their very specific Frankfurt-School neo-Marxist way of thinking. This was the context in which our work was labeled ironic, and irony was defined as insincerity or as cynicism. Personally, I've always equated irony with skepticism. But I'm now looking up the definition on my laptop, and it says that irony is "the expression of one's meaning by using language that normally signifies the opposite, typically for humorous or emphatic effect." But even that's not enough. The other day, I was reading Irving Sandler's book, *A Sweeper-Up After Artists*. He recounts that in 1958, Rothko said that irony was an indispensable part of his work, that irony is "a modern ingredient—the self-effacement necessary for an instant to go on to something else." I don't think anybody would call Rothko insincere—at least not nowadays. I also think about Andy Warhol in this regard. I equate what you're describing as "ironic critique" as "queering" a subject. So, if Andy Warhol paints the electric chair, or Marilyn, or Mao, is that ironic critique? Or is it expressing his queering of those icons? I hope this "return to sincerity" doesn't mean we will lose our appreciation of queer strategies of social critique. I think it's one of the only meaningful techniques we have left.

Rail: That's a useful recapitulation.

Halley: Behind this debate is the crisis that was brewing at the beginning of the eighties. Many of the radical artists of the sixties and early seventies really believed that their work represented the vanguard of a revolution that would lead to the end of capitalist alienation. They rejected the saleable art object made by means of "alienated labor" in favor of site-specific installations and conceptual gestures that could be experienced in real time. By 1980, I think it was apparent to many young people that this revolution wasn't coming. Cultural experience was rapidly becoming more mediated rather than more authentic. Looking back on it, it seems to me that this radical art heralded the emergence of the new information-based experience economy rather than the overthrow of capitalism. To me, the critical writing that appeared in places like *October* magazine was simply out of touch with this new socio-political reality. I certainly believed that new strategies were required. The Pictures artists, as well as the people I'm associated with, were urgently trying to figure out this new totalized and totalizing capitalism — which was reinforced by the digital revolution — that was coming on very fast.

Rail: I wanted to go over this territory because we seem to be in an environment these days that lacks strong criticality. For instance, a lot of current work takes on a generically abstract form that correlates to the fluidity of international markets. This art embraces what I'd term "libertarian internationalism." Its indeterminacy is a form of cynical bad faith in relation to the idealist origins of abstract painting. An early example is Damien Hirst's endless dot paintings, which were assembled in 2011 in simultaneous openings at the Gagosian galleries worldwide. What is the point at which ironic critique lapses into cynical capitalist pragmatism?

Halley: Well, I don't think your concern is limited to just abstract painting. Up until the 1960s, capitalism demanded conformity to certain behavioral and moral strictures. Modern art took on the role of challenging those normalizing demands. But we now live in an era in which totalized capitalism can absorb and neutralize any form of cultural expression. Cultural gestures that used to be called transgressive are absorbed as readily as the most market-driven production. The angst-ridden work of Bruce Nauman or Louise Bourgeois gets the same financial validation as those cynical Damien Hirst dot paintings. Since the 1980s, contemporary art has been completely embraced by the global capitalist elite. It's become the ultimate globalist status symbol. We live in a very challenging time for those of us who believe that art can be culturally meaningful. For a long time, I've believed in the possibilities of employing viral strategies in this situation—of introducing works into the system whose meaning can somehow morph through their validation. That's where my prisons came from. And, just like Umberto Eco, I believe that the most liberating idea is laughter.

Rail: I wanted to touch on this because you're working in a mode of abstraction. So, I'm talking about the word abstraction—how it can sometimes be multivalent—and in Marxist critique, it's a critique of the lost phenomenological world.

Halley: I just don't think the power of abstraction is going away. Our whole cultural universe is built on abstraction, beginning with the abstraction that is money. But in the twentieth century, abstraction came to dominate our systems of knowledge as well. For example, DNA and sub-atomic particles are all abstract constructs to explain the behavior of the physical world. In the same way, the social sciences divide people into abstract categories to describe their social identity and psychological makeup. Keep in mind that I don't refer to my paintings as abstract. I call them diagrammatic. From the beginning, I've tried to diagram the predetermined pathways along which we travel to isolated compartmentalized spaces—though this system is also the result of systematic abstraction.

Rail: In a recent review, your work was referred to as “post-modern baroque.” I see your work, and your aesthetic in general, as a laterally oriented baroque in its syntactical bundling and distribution of line and mass. In this sense, its baroque becomes representative of the circularity of meaning in hyper-realized modernity rather than, say in a three-dimensionally articulated, figuratively-oriented “music of the spheres.” Would you say that this baroque in your project represents a type of capitalist realism?

Halley: There are several ways I can go with that question. First of all, current globalism has led to a massive increase and concentration of wealth in the hands of a tiny elite that very much echoes what happened in Europe in the seventeenth century. I think the parallels relate to the culture of that era as well—then as now, baroque wealth creates baroque culture. In my own work, since 1990 I've consistently used more color, more types of paint, and there's been a proliferation of conduits and connections that can certainly be described as baroque. I think that's reflected the baroque proliferation of paths of communication that have sprung up since the rise of the World Wide Web. At the same time, I've always been attracted to flamboyant works of art, be it the work of Leigh Bowery or Ettore Sottsass. I came of age in the seventies when flamboyance and excess were still seen as liberating impulses. I'm flashing back to the delight I experienced when I first saw architect Charles Moore's Piazza d'Italia in New Orleans, which appeared in 1978 when I was still living there. It's a completely over-the-top parody of a Roman forum executed in chrome, neon and all kinds of contrasting marble patterns. At the age of twenty-five, I thought it was the greatest thing I'd ever seen. [Laughter]

Rail: Do you ever think of your work in terms of a fugue? A fugal structure of repetition, reiteration, and echo?

Halley: In the seventies, I was also very interested Philip Glass. I heard him perform at the Yale Art Gallery in 1974, I think. Believe it or not, there were only about twenty people in the audience. I was interested in the power of repetition and rhythm in his work. It was music without any traditional narrative structure.

Rail: Well, he'd be a great example of somebody who took a fugue form and ran with it. Let's talk about your recently opened installation at Lever House, entitled New York, New York. Lever House was built in 1952, just a year before you were born, by a multinational corporation that made a host of household consumables from laundry soap to peanut butter. It's a post-World War II International Style update on the idea of “the cathedral of commerce,” which was what the neo-gothic styled Woolworth Building, one of Manhattan's first skyscrapers, was called. You've installed yellow film and yellow lighting in the building's lobby and on the building's second floor, imparting a jaundiced tone to both the building's façade and to lobby interior. Is it literally a “piss-take” on the utopian aspirations of this Modernist icon?

Halley: [Laughter.] Not exactly. But I do think of this yellow light as toxic or irradiated. I've used it in a number of installations in recent years to impart the feeling of a dystopian science fiction landscape. That's how I see Midtown Manhattan. I grew up five blocks away, on Third Avenue and 48th Street in an increasingly run-down rent-controlled 1940s apartment building. As I was growing up, the low-rise neighborhood around it disappeared, and all these glass skyscrapers, beginning with Lever House, were springing up. As a kid, I walked

these streets every day and rode my bicycle on the sidewalks around these buildings. It was my reality. By the time I was a teenager, I viewed the whole place as a futuristic nightmare. I found the massive scale of the buildings, the traffic noise, the anonymous crowds on the streets going to and from work overwhelming and assaultive. Yet I also experienced the extremes of scale and constant circulation as somehow seductive. I imagined it as a science fiction movie. When I saw Godard's film, *Alphaville*, in which he used contemporary Paris as the setting for a future science fiction dystopia, it helped me understand what I was experiencing.

Rail: That's a wonderful autobiographical note.

Halley: For me, the invitation to do this exhibit was one of these uncanny examples of circularity in life. I was asked to make an intervention in this environment that I found so intensely controlled and controlling as a child, that made me feel so disempowered when I was young. At the same time, I was addressing Lever House itself, which really is a very delicate, beautifully detailed building that attempted to create an alternative vision for commercial architecture, in which a tall office building could share its site with a covered, garden-like setting where people could take their ease. It still imparts a feeling of harmony despite the surrounding environment.

Rail: Right, it's got those serene Noguchi benches in the plaza.

Halley: ...and the square opening in the second-floor slab that allows sunlight into the plaza.

Rail: It's classically modern.

Halley: I think many of my best installations have been interventions in modernist architectural settings.

Rail: The paintings in New York, New York are installed around a solid structure that leads the viewer into a mazelike inner sanctum. It feels like a combination of a tourist waiting room and a cheap Las Vegas lounge.

Halley: Thank you. I had a great time. If you're going to have a show of paintings in the Lever House lobby, the first thing you have to deal with is that it's a Miesian glass cube—without any walls. So, for each artist, the first job is to figure out what you're going to build. In my case, the size of the structure was determined by how much open space was needed to allow people to walk around it.

Rail: ...the necessary pedestrian traffic.

Halley: Exactly, and then I realized that the structure was big enough to allow me to design interior rooms. I made a corridor that turns back on itself leading to two chambers at the end. I was thinking of how an Egyptian tomb is laid out, especially the tomb of Nefertari with its beautifully preserved wall paintings. For many years, I've done installations in which I've covered the walls with mural-size digital prints. And I now had the opportunity to present these images in a controlled setting in which I could establish a narrative sequence.

Rail: I also noticed that the ceiling is low, like those drop ceilings that you see in office buildings. I thought that was an interesting detail.

Halley: I wanted to compress the space. Let me walk you through the interior. You first encounter the long corridor with yellow lighting. On the walls are digital reproductions of drawings from my sketchbooks from the early eighties organized as vertical columns. Many of them are studies for paintings that I actually made. Seen on the wall, the sketches show how I was experimenting with my iconography in those years—the cells and prisons are composed and connected in every imaginable way. This is the third time I've reproduced them on the wall, each time in a somewhat different configuration.

Rail: Generally notebooks, if they're displayed in a vitrine, tend to get fetishized, in a very user-unfriendly way.

Halley: Yes. I am interested in how the sketches become infinitely reproducible and scalable. Next you come to a room to the right in which the walls are covered with a grid of digitally distorted explosion images printed on metallic foil. I mounted five flashing colored lights on the ceiling, so that the reflective walls are constantly changing color. I'm really attracted to tacky, low-budget effects—for years I've been quoting Robert Smithson's praise of "low-budget mysticism." Then you enter the final chamber which is lit by black light. The walls are covered with a latticework composed from studies for my grid paintings.

Rail: This inner sanctum calls to my mind Michel Foucault's 1967 essay *Des Espace Autres*, specifically his interest in pre-modern spaces that he calls "crisis heterotopias," foundational sites in which coming-of-age rituals and marriage rites took place. He advocates for a society that encourages heterotopias, both heterotopias of illusion that "expose" every real space, and heterotopias of compensation that create real spaces that are "other."

Halley: Wow, that's brilliant. This concept of heterotopia could be applicable to all kinds of installations that are being done today. It's much more relevant than the idea of "immersive," which always makes me think of drowning. He also called them foundational sites? That's really great. I promised myself I wouldn't tell anyone—but people have already noticed—behind the white grid in the black light room, is a barely visible collage of photos of my parents. You can't get more foundational than that!

Rail: Coming back to the Las Vegas association, I'm reminded of how Bob Nickas described your last installation at Greene Naftali as akin to Elvis Presley's Las Vegas comeback in a gold lamé suit late in his career.

Halley: I don't see what Bob has against gold lamé. It seems to me he's being a little puritanical.

Rail: I mention the gold lamé suit because it seems like a ceremonial outfit to be donned at the site of an American ritual of rebirth. Does this idea of the ritual rebirth have anything to do with this installation? Or is it related to the idea of spectacle?

Halley: I don't think it's spectacle—it's too DIY and low-budget. And I'm not sure how it touches on ritual. But I'm interested in the questions you're raising. I've never done an installation like this before, so I don't yet know quite what I've done.

Rail: I'm interested in this question of ritual versus spectacle because I'm wondering where your work is going.

Halley: My emphasis at Lever House has been on narrative. I wanted to work in three scales: an urban intervention with the band of light on second floor, the lived experience of the street as you approach the lobby, and then this isolated or hidden space inside the lobby structure. I set out to make three kinds of spaces. I was also conscious of the idea that when you get to the inner sanctum, like in the Umberto Eco book, it turns out that the secret is laughter.

Rail: When you make your way in there, there's this hilarious tape loop of the song "New York, New York," which I believe is from *On the Town*. Playing incessantly, it's basically a chorus of sailors on shore leave in Manhattan for twenty-four hours, all in thrall to "a wonderful town."

Halley: The Bronx is up and...

Rail: ...the Battery's down! Do you ever feel like a tourist in your own town? In other words, is there a bemused objectivity you maintain to the sociological and architectural sites that

make up the city?

Halley: Not really. I just came from Midtown. When I think of Midtown Manhattan, it's like being in a tropical storm. Whether it's night or day or warm or cold, you're buffeted around—there's these unbelievable contrasts of scale and materiality. It's stomach-churning. As is the subway.

Rail: "New York, New York," that song, it sounds like something you would hear in a waiting room for a tour of the Empire State Building.

Halley: Thanks. There are two well-known songs called "New York, New York," I didn't use the one written for Liza Minnelli that Frank Sinatra made so famous. It's the earlier version from 1944—the young Leonard Bernstein wrote the music. And the lyrics by Betty Comden and Adolph Green are so simple and good: "The people ride in a hole in the ground."

Rail: And an appropriate paean to circulatory movement!