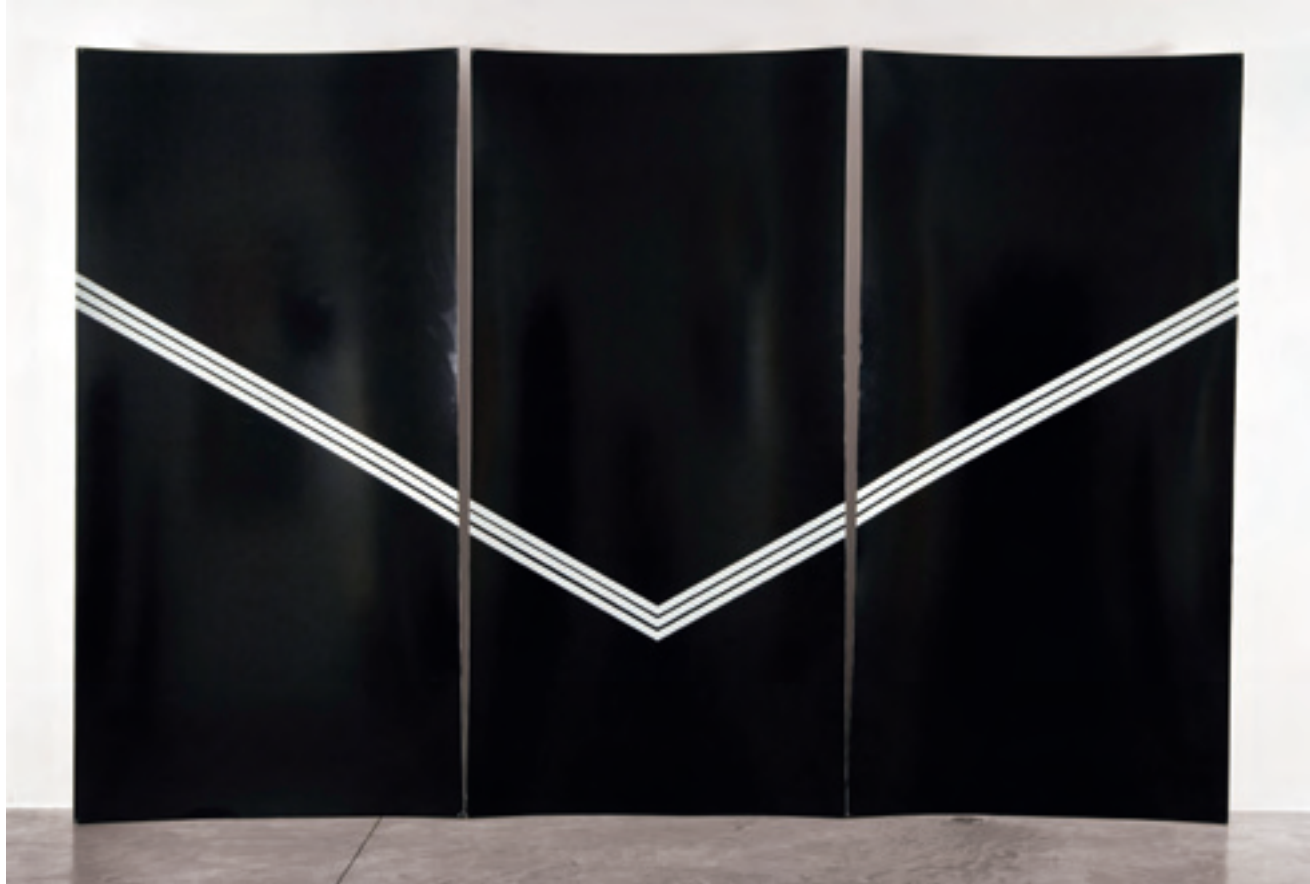


Billboards Are Almost All Right *on the work of* **Davis Rhodes**



Davis Rhodes, **Untitled**, 2008, spray paint on foam board 243,8x121,9 cm

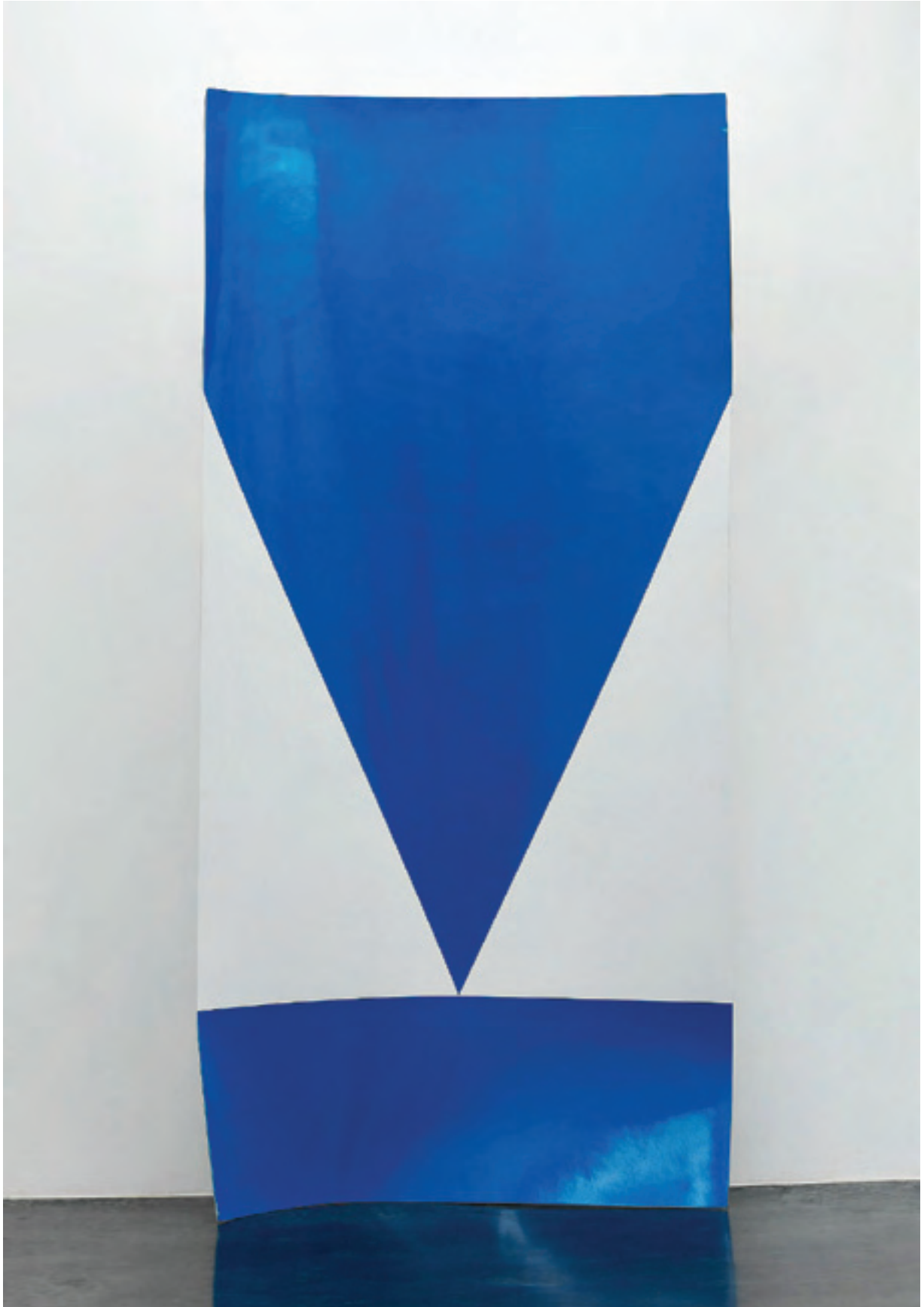
“The graphic sign in space has become the architecture of this landscape”, wrote Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour about the aspect of the common city commercial strip in their pioneeristic volume *Learning from Las Vegas*. “If you take the sign away, there is no place.” The signs of visual communication have deprived the urbanized areas of their historical identities: Las Vegas is the most accredited archetype of the city, a jumble of symbols that devour shapes, sticking to a chaos of meanings that together result in an inconsistent communication. Most of those symbols lack a real “affirmativeness”, while boasting its strength in having acquired universal recognition: they are widely known but not “shared” in their message. “Billboards are almost all right”, Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour went on: that “almost” tells how, in the era of their uncontrolled proliferation, the signs of visual communication act less and less as proven symbols - in fact acquiring an indexicality that inevitably binds the action to the context. >

text **Michele D’Aurizio**

All images courtesy the artist, Office Baroque Gallery and Team Gallery



*Davis Rhodes, **Untitled**, 2007, latex on foam board, (3x) 243x121 cm (triptych)*



*Davis Rhodes, **Untitled**, 2009, spray paint on foam board 243,8x121,9 cm*

“My work involves indexicality, more than quotations or appropriations of any stable historical contents”, wrote the New York artist Davis Rhodes, arguing his practice. His works – enamel paintings, mylar or foamboard monolithic panels, vinyl drapes on the walls – reproduce symbols derived from the visual milieu of the city: posters, banners, flyers, packaging undergo a “drying out” process that preserves their most basic, most immediately “economic” sign in its communicative potential. These symbols are residues, they are what remains after eroding the idioms of visual communication: ubiquitous, yet poorly anonymous, they are a publicly exposed naked body. “My intention is to collapse a rarefied, yet generalized, sign system into irreducibly particular existential territo-

graffiti, to the attempt at giving the issue of intimacy a subversive political scope in the works of Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Piled up in messy installations or elegantly arranged in series in the exhibition space, the works of Rhodes eschew any signifier approach, in the sign of a formal negligence which devalues the potential appeal of surface: enamel panels are often populated with cracks, tears, folds, droppings, as if they were remnants of a reality that lived before the painterly gesture. “The foamboards are an answer to the problem of how the work could be orientated to the outside – to a foreign or manufactured otherness”, wrote Rhodes about these works; “they are exits – fugitive and unstable, pointing elsewhere: they are not meant to mirror the subject

same movement to arrest a moment of alterity against the white wall of signification, classification, and dominant interpretation.” As a matter of fact, Rhodes’ artistic practice connects with the tradition of abstract painting review, carried out primarily by Blinky Palermo: as Palermo, Rhodes also explores the conflict between autonomy and heteronomy of the work and tries to update the mystical and utopian scope of the radical abstract painting of prewar avant-garde.

Rhodes thinks of his own works as deserters signs of a language of the majority, be it the ubiquitous code of visual communication or the most exclusive one of abstraction in art. His art works in the name of a “diverted” semiotic, where in the act of relativizing a shared language you refer

If you take the sign away, there is no place.

ries,” Rhodes went on. The act of demystification to which the artist subjects the alleged universality of advertising imagery denies the autonomy of the symbol: the immediacy of the sign is reflected in the relativity of the context and the community to which the sign refers. “This operation hinges on identification: with whom or in relation to what symbolic authority, or figure of authorship, we make our subjective coordinates.” Rhodes’ art is thus close to the strictly New York artistic tradition that established itself since the eighties and questioned those formal languages that are being historicized, by investigating the actual contribution to the definition of identity of the artist and his audience: from the effusion, in the public space, of the most genuine sexual desire in Keith Haring’s

in contemplative interiority, but to be opaque, manifesting forms of violence that give off distressed clues.” Rhodes’ pictorial gesture is manneristic because it is deliberately disenchanted, while the sublimation of the work is constantly denied by the “nakedness” of the reality from which it draws. The vinyl drapes, cut into shapes and symbols, seem to take shape only under their own weight but are entirely determined by the relationship with other items in the exhibition space. According to Rhodes, “these works have been an attempt to disrupt a relationship to any stable “medium”, or ground of interpretation: the cuttings are filled by a horizontal field of references that make exits from the frame of the exhibition space, turning inward and outward in the

the communication to the identification of the subject in the symbol; this process brings Rhodes near the symbolic systems mythologizing and desecration modes of sub- and countercultures. “It is a matter of opening the conditions of a majoritarian language to appropriation by the effects and necessities of different conditions, audiences, and social realities,” wrote Rhodes. “When this succeeds the majoritarian is destroyed or suspended, and the space of the work opens onto the forms of excess that we inhabit as subjects of language, desire and power.”

All quotes of Davis Rhodes are taken from a conversation with the author via e-mail – Aug. 2010.



*Davis Rhodes, **Untitled**, 2010, enamel on vinyl 243x121 cm*