



Catie Newell, *Curfew*, 2014, 1.5m x 1m x 4.5m
All images by Catie Newell and AltroSpazi.

Cover the Flame

Catie Newell

Curfew: From Old French, *cuvrir* + *feu*, hence *cuevrefeu*, and Middle English, *curfew*, the requirement to extinguish fires at a specified time of the evening.¹

Only the most observant visitors to the gallery would notice the slow disappearance. At first glance, the deep black lines of the work drew more attention for their agitated character and aggressive piercing of the threshold than for the subtlety of their construction. The sharp ends and attenuated tectonics—imperfect, jagged, and variant lines—hovered in violent contrast to the formal gallery around them.² Housed in a threshold between spaces, the work suffocated the passage that visitors walked through, reaching down from the high ceiling to the visitors' level, threatening to snag them as they passed by. Its formwork suggested a domestic roofline and another doorway; its lines summoned a larger architectural space, which hid in the gallery while the ragged city sprawled just outside the window.³

Lit from above with an even and bright artificial light, the work looked for the darkness that provoked its existence. *Curfew* emerged from dark geographies, entangled in law, architecture, fear, and the fall of night.

A curfew alters a city with a simple rule: it is forbidden to be in public spaces, in the open, exposed to the darkness of night. Violators of curfew are presumed to be guilty of the mischief the ordinance seeks to curtail. The origins of curfew, however, were not tied directly to such threats. The concept began as a law to prevent the spread of fire. Residents were asked to *couvre feu*—to cover the flame—by a specific time, to prevent the spread of fire across properties.⁴

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The two meanings of curfew are united by the fears stirred up in the night. When light is limited to artificial sources, and darkness expands in space, geometries are exaggerated or masked, material distinctions are muted, the air appears to have weight, the unpredictable seems imminent. The transition is not only optical, but embedded deep in the psyche. As night consumes what the daytime city had been, the inexplicable mutation of space evokes fear of the darkness. Perception in the dark slashes comprehension of our environment, and of how to move and act within it. In the dark, we lose trust in our surrounding space and all those who occupy it. “The great insomniac passeggiata of the modern city,” Alfred Alvarez writes, “is a walking validation of our instinctive belief that night is the time when things go wrong and lurch out of proportion, the time when values get turned around and daylight rules no longer apply.”⁵ Nighttime gives everyone license. Nighttime makes anyone suspect. To be caught in the darkness, to be snagged by it, becomes its own threat.

As the city slips back and forth between lit and unlit, it also moves between clarity and uncertainty, dissolving spatial boundaries. The host spaces of darkness are not the clear spaces of day. By extinguishing light, the original curfew brought a darkness that spread between public and private spaces. Present-day curfews seek to cut the darkness spatially, by dividing interior and exterior. But darkness is never only outside; the dark is, irresistibly, invited in.

To walk outside at night is to be a wanderer, to be at large, seeking to touch or capture the hidden cityscape. The walker, the seeker, and the mischief-maker are kept away from private lives within the buildings.

Brought inside by curfew, crossing the threshold from public to private, fears and threats that walked abroad are replaced with private anxieties. The interior, the personalized architectural substrate, protected within the walls of our private spaces, can still be invaded by darkness; the stable surroundings that have become one's own are lost. The familiar spaces of the house come alive with a darkness that both settles and disquiets. Reveling in the interior, darkness becomes an enveloping and disorienting host.

Curfew was a material fiction of the dark's radiant play. It arrested the moment when darkened space comes alive; it lingered on the city's dissolution into fragments, when partially illuminated elements are suspended, and the adjoining darkened spaces lack clarity and definition. It invited visitors into its threat; it was itself threatened.

Lit, and then extinguished, the darkened stiff lines of candlewick and wax contrasted with the whimsical trailing smoke, as Curfew was gradually destroyed by fire. It was repeatedly set aflame just long enough to burn away the line work little by little, with the candlewicks hot enough to smoke for several minutes at a time. A light grey-white, billowing and rising in the air, a buoyant and ephemeral set of lines: light enshrouded the dark. Curfew slowly returned, again and again, to the darkness that extinguishing provided. In this subtler embedding, it became a sense of loss. Curfew offered a chance to be caught in darkness, to hesitate in the play of threat. And then it disappeared in the dark.

NOTES

1 Adapted from the Oxford English Dictionary online, entry at <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/46020>; accessed October 6, 2016.

2 On 30 January 2014, the exhibition Concrete Ghosts opened in the main exhibition hall of the McKim, Mead and White building of the American Academy in Rome. The curator, Christian Caliandro, interested in that which embeds our current world, sought works that responded to underlying pressures and strains on the built environment. The exhibition closed 2 March 2014. At that time, the candlewicks embedded in Curfew were entirely burned away.

3 This work was created within a larger body of research, Involving Darkness, conducted by Catie Newell at the American Academy in Rome. The work, and its derivatives, seek to emphasize that nightfall formulates a new city.

4 Bailey's Dictionary, fifth edition 1731. The original meaning of 'curfew' refers to a law created by William the Conqueror that required all fires be extinguished at the ringing of a bell at eight o'clock at night to prevent fires from destructively spreading across timber buildings.

5 Alfred Alvarez, Night (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995), 37.