

ILLUMINATIONS

(AFTER ARTHUR RIMBAUD)



LEILA TAGHINIA-MILANI HELLER (LTMH) GALLERY

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CURATED BY ASHOK ADICÉAM / SEPTEMBER 15 - OCTOBER 15, 2010

THE FIRE THIEVES

(A REVERSE SHOT)

BY ASHOK ADICÉAM

In Greek mythology, the Titan Prometheus steals the secret of fire from the gods in Olympus to give it to mankind. Sharing light and knowledge with men was deemed a crime for which Zeus, the god of gods, would punish Prometheus by chaining him to a rock.

We come across this figure of man's ally, his half-divine scout, the fallen angel or the ascending bearer of solar light from which he emerges, in many narratives, myths, legends and most religions. A bearer of light who, like a rainbow, links earth to heaven, in a constantly renewed alliance.

Light, whether it is carried, depicted or suspended in the sky, is indeed a force that, more than any other, links men to God, or to that, which transcends them. Beyond the protection against night or cold, light is that distinctive sign of humanity, with which man has mastered nature and distinguished himself, sometimes by defying them, from other species living beyond his visible sky.

But in the pride it confers on man, light bears the paradox and the ambivalence of its own creator.

"Lightning governs everything!" By this exclamation, Heraclitus, the 6th century B.C. Greek philosopher, underscores the perpetual movement of creation and destruction, of light and of shadow, at the heart of man's history. The mastery of fire certainly holds the highest stakes for humanity, just as much as water and earth. It is the means and ends of war. A factor of power and domination by fear and by the fascination it exerts. Let there be light! It is the beginning and the end of creation.

It is thus that light is one of the favoured materials of theologians, thinkers, writers and artists, who, like poets, lighten the unfathomable soul of the world and "the silence unspeakable."

It is obviously the axial material of painting, from the Paleolithic riverbed site frescoes lit by torches to the masterpieces of Jackson Pollock. But is it the painter who paints light? Or is it light that makes the painting? For example, when it is received on the canvas of the Renaissance masters, is it not light that lends harmony to a Veronese, initiates the visions of an almost-blind Titian, resists the darkness of Tintoretto? Is it not light that guides redemption into the tortured soul of Caravaggio and provokes the hallucinated lightning of El Greco?

The fact remains that it is in the quest for this 'natural' light that visual artists have begun, since the dawn of time and in any civilization. In the Muslim aesthetics, particularly during the Mamelouk period (1250-1517), which started in Egypt, the use of light is source of all visions and forms. As thought in the tradition of Muslim Sufism, "it is by the light that appears what was sealed in the darkness of the nothingness. Without light, there would be no difference between a shadow and the form which is throwing it."¹ From visible worlds to invisible ones, it is through light itself that the artist negotiates his journey through both sides of the real. Just as much as the spirituality of the creative action (to portray the real is to seek to unveil its spirit, its immateriality), it is also the efficacy of art that can be witnessed in the use of light to shine on any given reality, feeling or viewpoint in order to make us subscribe to the work of art. We do find this policy of seduction by light, a powerful vector of persuasion, conviction and even of conversion.

It is this legacy from those who preceded them, which will benefit contemporary artists in the invention and development of electric light.

The electric bulb triggered off a second revolution of light controlled by man. The fall of Icarus (the mythological character who flew too close to the sun) is revenged! Thanks to Einstein's equation, the duality of the wave particle is revealed a hundred years ago in the wake of the invention of the electric bulb in Europe and its development in the United States by Thomas Edison (1879). To exorcise Icarus's failure, man had created his own domestic sun and conquered night by inventing an unending, artificial day, connected to the electromagnetic waves all around and up to the celestial bodies of the universe.

The bulb became a neon light that lit for the first time a street in Paris in 1912, twenty-five years before Raoul Dufy painted it – in the ode to electric light, *The Fairy Electricity*, 1937 -- on the walls that would later become the Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris.

This painting – naively apologetic about progress – announces the Revolution prompted by artificial light in public space and in interiors all over the planet, not leaving any one sphere untouched. Towns are defined by the number of street lamps and public and private lighting devices. Cities are outlined by the pencil of light formed by its waves. Headlights of vehicles amplify even more the density and quantity of expended watts. The entire world becomes an electric transformer.

Obviously, within this context art transforms itself in its quest and in the use of light. The cinematography of the Lumière brothers (their name means light in French!) was like a second seismic tremor created by the electric bulb, kicking off an endless motion picture. But, over and above art, it was life itself that was transformed -- every perception and vision.

Before the overabundance of artificial light, symbols, signs, and words, faced with the excessive multiplication of slogans and neon signs on the facades of shops and even above office buildings and apartments, artists resist and find a unique, appropriate use of light, which some have turned into their favoured medium.

The stakes: avoiding blindness due to overexposure to light and to the media frenzy. Continuing to see, "to be a seer" as Arthur Rimbaud commanded to his peers in the 19th century². The method? Fully attending to the real and its own objects and materials, like light bulbs and neon, to apply an idea, a statement, an inquiry. The shift is from the reception of light in an artwork to an artwork emitting light, sending a real energy composed of electrons and photons. In 1951, in Milano, Lucio Fontana extends, in his adopted homeland of Italy, the idea and the light of Argentina in a neon sculpture embodying his "White Manifesto" in his first *Concetto Spaziale*. Almost for the first time, spatial poetry is displayed in the use of neon. Neon? This incandescent material made of mercury and other inert gases concentrated in a tube standardized by trade for industrial and domestic use, in public and private arenas. Neon (from the Greek, neos, which means new) furrows a new space, digs a parallel optical paradise. Artworks in neon offer a release from the weight of the real, a complementary light dimension, an inverted way of sculpting modern shadows, as did the ancient theatres of Chinese marionettes.

It is interesting to note that, from the 1960s onwards, at the appearance of a consumerist society, light truly became an independent object in the guise of sculpture or painting. Following Fontana, Martial Raysse, Chryssa, and Dan Flavin were among the first to use light as an iconic material transformed by a contemplative poetry that was expressive, just as in painting, color and movement. Space and even landscapes were created by artificial light (James Turrell and Olafur Eliasson are among the emblematic artists working with the medium in the recent decade). In the 1970s, full-fledged artistic movements have invested thought and

action around light, from the French group GRAV (Group for Research in Visual Arts) with François Morellet, to the Italians of Arte Povera with Mario Merz. As abstract, conceptual or minimalistic as they seem, these works found in the use of artificial light, a way of developing an increased participation of the viewers who gaze at the piece of art and extend the abstraction, or think of it in a new virtuality that cries to be explored.

But in the development of modernity, which the art critic Paul Ardenne locates around the 1980s³, it is no longer reason or ideas that are at the heart of the creative act but emotions. They are the private sensations that the artist expresses in his most personal pieces, focussed primarily on himself. This passage towards the postmodern age consecrated the end of the cult of emancipation and progress, the death of the desire for a fulfilment of history. It is the ordination of the extreme concern for the self in a society where the individual is the king. This is the passage we behold also in the sculptures and writings in neon: we move from the abstract and founding *Manifestation Not Description* of Joseph Kosuth to *Only God Knows I'm Good* by Tracey Emin, a private declaration in an exhibitionist mode composed of traces borrowed from the everyday lives of people. For all that, critical perspectives are just as present among today's artists such as Claude Levêque with his words and his sculptures in neon (often acerbic commentaries on today's showbiz society) in which he seeks inspiration just as much in Arthur Rimbaud's works as in Bruce Nauman's works.

With *My Name As Though It Were Written on the Surface of the Moon* (1968), Nauman propounds both a critical commentary on language and an aesthetic demonstration on the creation of a new space. Closer to Ed Ruscha than to Kosuth or Nauman, Jack Pierson transforms with a Dada attitude the meaning of words in the form of outdoor sign lettering to reinforce emotional meaning, intimate narrative, and humor. *Rooms* (1997) is one of many works made of outdoor light, the signage of daily life, which once graced a façade of a small hotel renting rooms: a contemporary oxymoron made of togetherness and solitude.

Alongside this, crisis periods always mark the comeback of man and a renewed focus on values pertaining to human dignity and, sometimes, solidarity. This is often also the time for a return to a form of transcendence and of romanticism – two aspirations that were rejected in the modern period in a West that separated reason and passion, unlike Eastern civilizations that know how to reconcile ideas and emotions harmoniously.

The “technocreations” of an Anselm Reyle or the recent works of Keith Sonnier (who, along with Dan Flavin, is a pioneer of the form) and the elements they have drawn from referential works, afford the opportunity for an update. That is also the case with the inputs *Noccident* (non-occident, non-western) has absorbed inspiration from the works of a Zaha Hadid (the Anglo-Iranian architect born in Bagdad) to open new perspectives in the history of artificial light in art.

It is in this tradition that we must situate the works of the French-Algerian Zoulikha Bouabdellah and the Iranian Leila Pazooki who both revisit, in their own individual ways, the concept of Orientalism and, with force and forms, transcend the cultural barriers imposed by society.

“It is a flying carpet! Well, at least the form is a flying carpet made of Kevlar and resin, just hovering above ground with fiber optic lights underneath it making it look like a drag race car from Miami!” This is how Turkish artist, Osman Akan, describes his most recent piece, which characterizes this appropriation in non-Western art of systems of fiber optics that are at the heart of communications technology in today's world.

Communicating with transcendence, connecting people with their diverse belief systems by the intervention of artificial light, audaciously defying the clash of civilizations: it is with this radiance and this aim that one of the 99 names of the Almighty shines in the works of Vahap Avsar (Allah written in neon) and the English-Pakistani Shezad Dawood (the Originator, written in Arabic).

With his series *Lumières* from 2000 (an installation of photographs and colored light bulbs), Christian Boltanski undoubtedly assembled the best of these aspirations to an anthropological unity at the advent of a new century. The romantic visionary of a “hectic” and standardized globalization whose antidote would again be dispensed by “the fire thief” embodied by the poet Arthur Rimbaud and the artist/writer Henri Michaux who invites us to contemplate the ‘distant interior’⁴.

Ko Siu Lan, the young Chinese artist, known for her installations and her performances of resistance, greets visitors towards the end of the exhibition, through some sort of a national emergency exit light box in China, a final provocation to the ‘triumph of cupidity.’⁵

Contemporary art’s openness in the face of increasingly new media, of individual uniqueness expressing aspirations that are more and more personal, and the emergence of an increasingly visible non-Western creative approach lead to a real *poetic expansion* whose meaning is quite as mysterious as the march of the universe. It is by contamination, which can symbolize light in its speed and its means of propagation (it reproduces by contact with another material) that contemporary art as a whole can spread through the world. It is in this two-pronged approach, of the inclusion of various cultures on the one hand, and of the expansion of poetic forms of light in art on the other, that this exhibition is suggested by Leila Taghinia-Milani Heller. I would like to thank her and the whole team at LTMH Gallery for the confidence and the honor conferred on me.

In the space of a few weeks and with the constraint known to a highly active gallery, we have brought together roughly fifteen significant pieces works of light in contemporary art. The choice is inevitably personal and in no case did we consider an analytical presentation. Moreover, this short essay does not seek to be an explanatory commentary on the assembled works; instead, it proposes to be a *reverse shot*. However, one does find here the sum total of themes developed by the exhibited artists. But, even in this very personal research, there are works of art and people missing. That is why I consider this the first step in a subject that could be further developed – with greater depth – in a larger, more ambitious exhibition to come. “May the force be with us!”

Ashok Adicéam is an independent curator. Until last May, Adicéam was the head of development at the Palazzo Grassi/Punta della Dogana of the Francois Pinault Foundation in Venice, Italy. He is also the curator of the recent exhibition Hope! from Giacometti to Murakami at the Palais des Arts in Dinard, France.

¹ Emir Abdel Kader (1807-1883), *Spiritual Exercises* (Kitab al Mawaqif)

² Arthur Rimbaud, “Of the Visionary,” Letters to Paul Demeny, May 1871

³ Paul Ardenne – Art, At present, 2010

⁴ Henri Michaux, *A Barbarian in Asia*, 1933

⁵ Joseph Stiglitz, *Freefall: Free Markets and the Sinking of the Global Economy*, 2010

OSMAN AKAN
VAHAP AVSAR
CHRISTIAN BOLTANSKI
ZOULIKHA BOUABDELLAH
CHRYSSA
SHEZAD DAWOOD
TRACEY EMIN
DAN FLAVIN
KO SIU LAN
CLAUDE LÉVÊQUE
LEILA PAZOOKI
JACK PIERSON
MARTIAL RAYSSE
ANSELM REYLE
KEITH SONNIER
LEO VILLAREAL

ILLUMINATIONS

(AFTER ARTHUR RIMBAUD)

ARTISTS



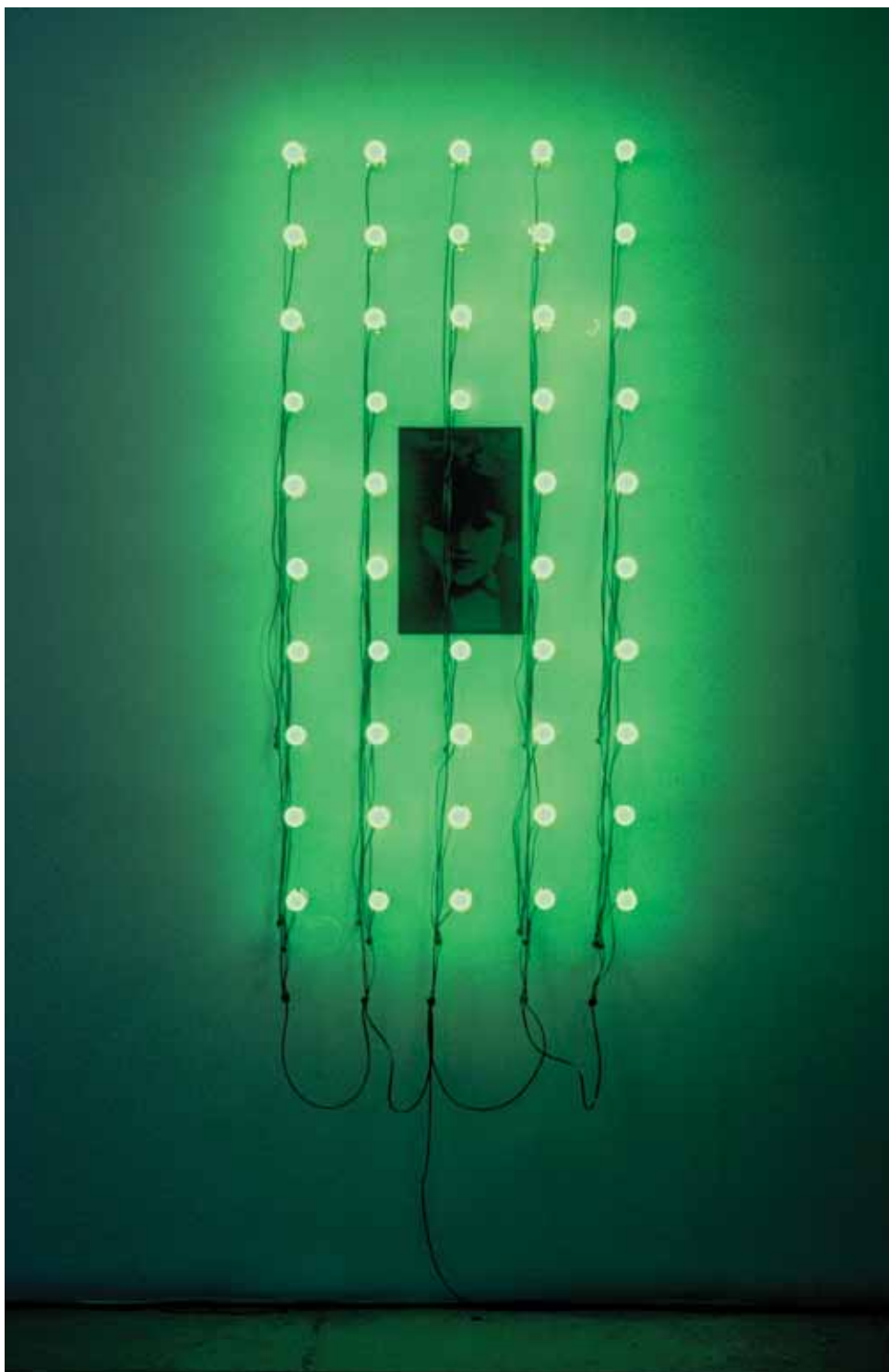
Harvest 2008
Fiber optic cable, plexiglass rods, metal halide illuminators
30 x 48 x 48 in (76.2 x 121.9 x 121.9 cm)
© 2008 by Osman Akan "All Rights Reserved"

*A different work by the artist is included in this exhibition



Supreme 2008
4.7 x 24 in (11.9 x 61 cm)
Neon Letters, Transformer
Courtesy of the artist

CHRISTIAN BOLTANSKI
b. 1944



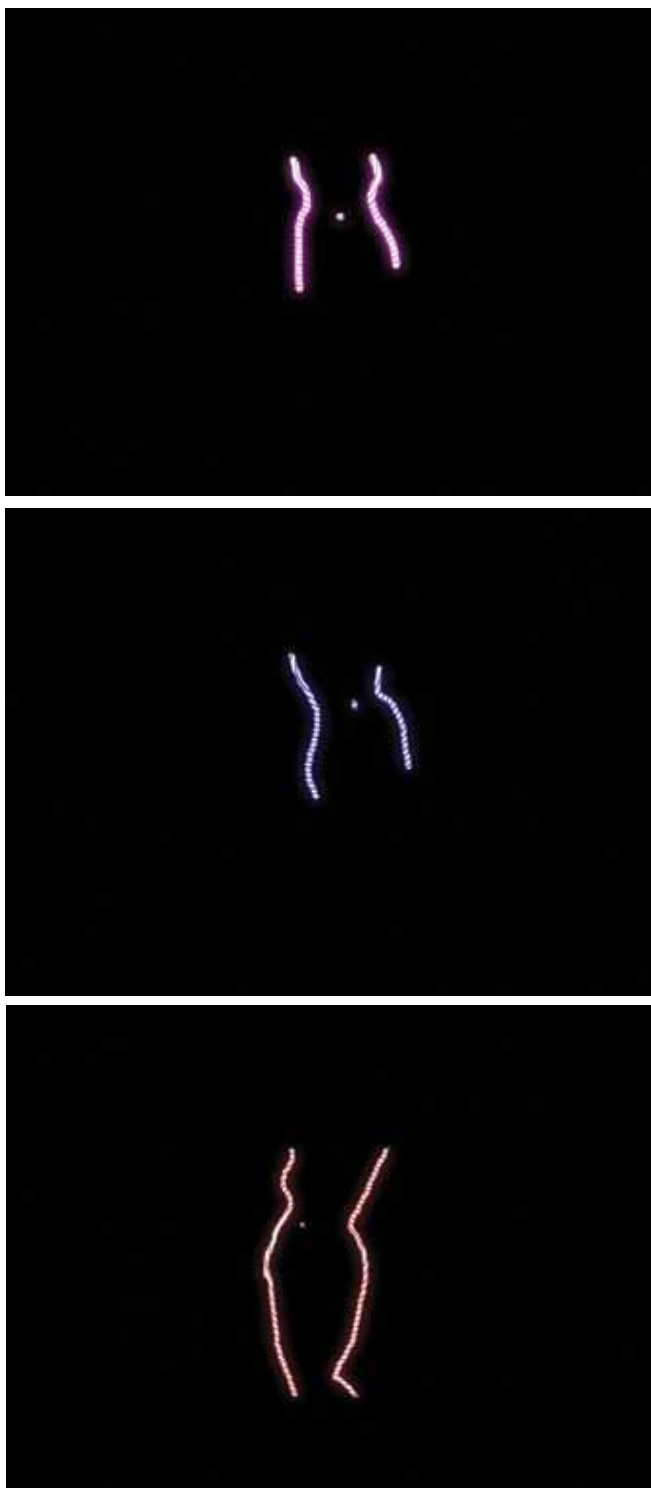
Lumieres (vertical green rectangle-Catherine) 2000

48 green light bulbs, 1 black/white photograph

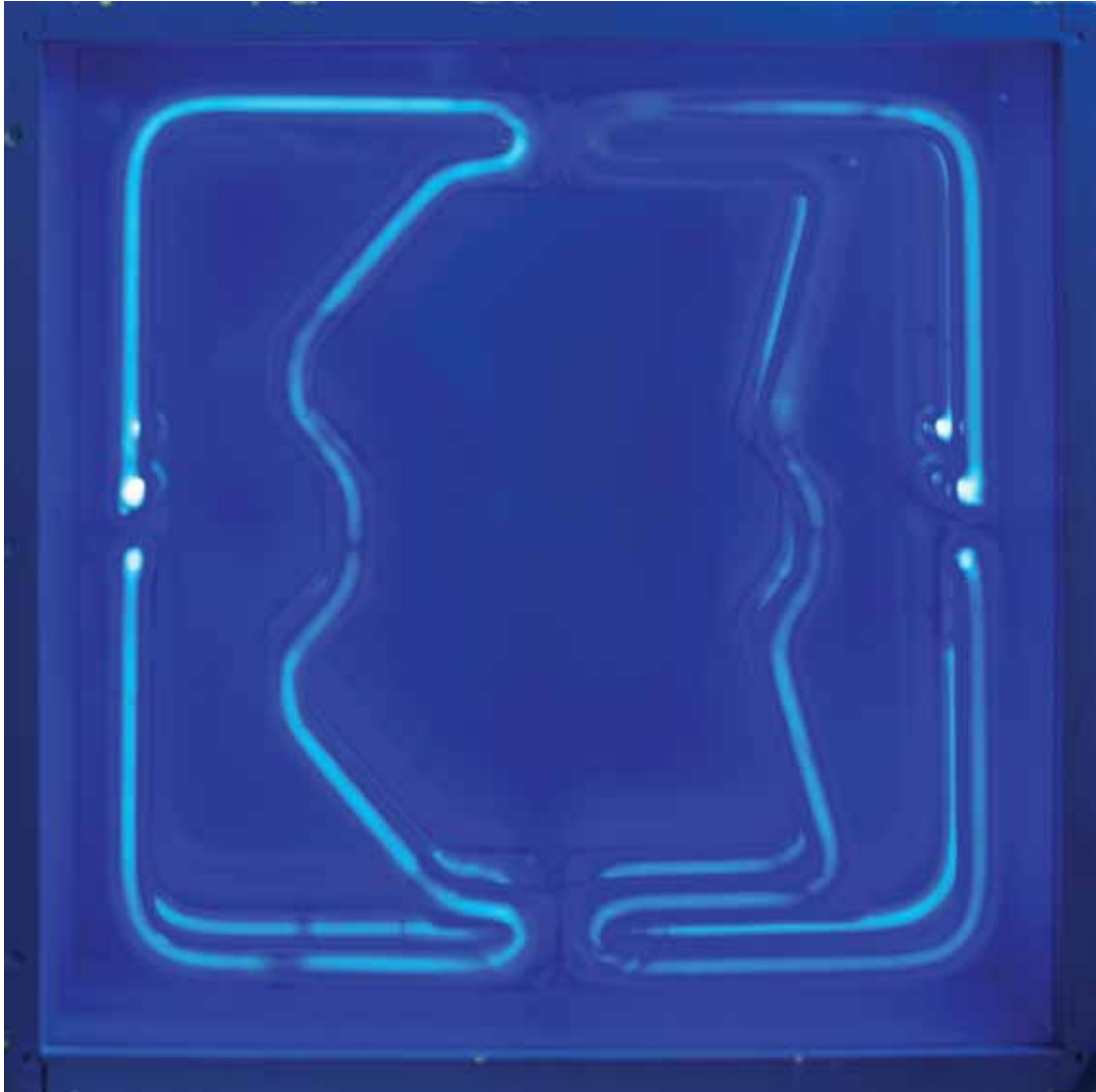
110 x 34 in (279.4 x 86.4 cm)

Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York

ZOULIKHA BOUABDELLAH
b. 1977



Noun 2010
Animation and Sound
3 minutes and 17 seconds Edition of 3
Music by PM Williamson, Text and Voice by Elise Pichelin
Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde



Untitled 1973-1975
Sculpture neon in plexiglass and painted wood box
18 x 18 x 9 in (45.72 x 45.72 x 22.86 cm)
Courtesy of the artist and Armand Bartos Fine Art

SHEZAD DAWOOD
b. 1974



Al Badi (The Originator) 2008
Acrylic, neon lights, tumbleweed
63 x 23.6 x 27.6 in (160.02 x 59.944 x 67.818 cm)
Courtesy of the artist and The Third Line, Dubai

TRACEY EMIN
b. 1963



Only God Knows I'm Good 2009

Snow white neon

25 x 136.5 in (63.5 x 346.71 cm)

Edition of 3

Courtesy of the artist and Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York

DAN FLAVIN
b. 1933 d. 1996



Untitled (fondly to Margo) 1986
Pink and yellow fluorescent light
96 x 96 in (243.84 x 243.84 cm)
Courtesy of Haunch of Venison, New York



Untitled (for S.D.) 1992
Yellow and filtered ultraviolet fluorescent light
96 x 24 x 8 in (243.84 x 60.96 x 20.32 cm)
Edition 3 of 5
Courtesy Edelman Arts Inc.



A\$AP 2010
Installation
LED Box (China Standard Safety Exit Sign)
Florescent Ink, Silk Screening
23.7 x 18.9 x 1.97 in (60 x 48 x 5 cm)
Edition of 10
Courtesy of the artist

CLAUDE LÉVÊQUE
b. 1953



The Passenger 2009

Néon blanc

Dessin Léo Carbonnier

78.7 x 57 in (200 x 145 cm)

Photo Léo Carbonnier

© ADAGP Claude Lévêque. Courtesy the artist and Kamel Mennour Gallery, Paris

LEILA PAZOOKI
b. 1977



Orientalism 2010
Blue neon tubes
23.6 x 55.1 in (59.9 x 139.9 cm)
Ed. of 4
Courtesy of the artist



Rooms 1997
Neon tubing
10 x 40 in (25.4 x 101.6 cm)
Ed. of 3
Courtesy Cheim & Read, New York

MARTIAL RAYSSE
b. 1936

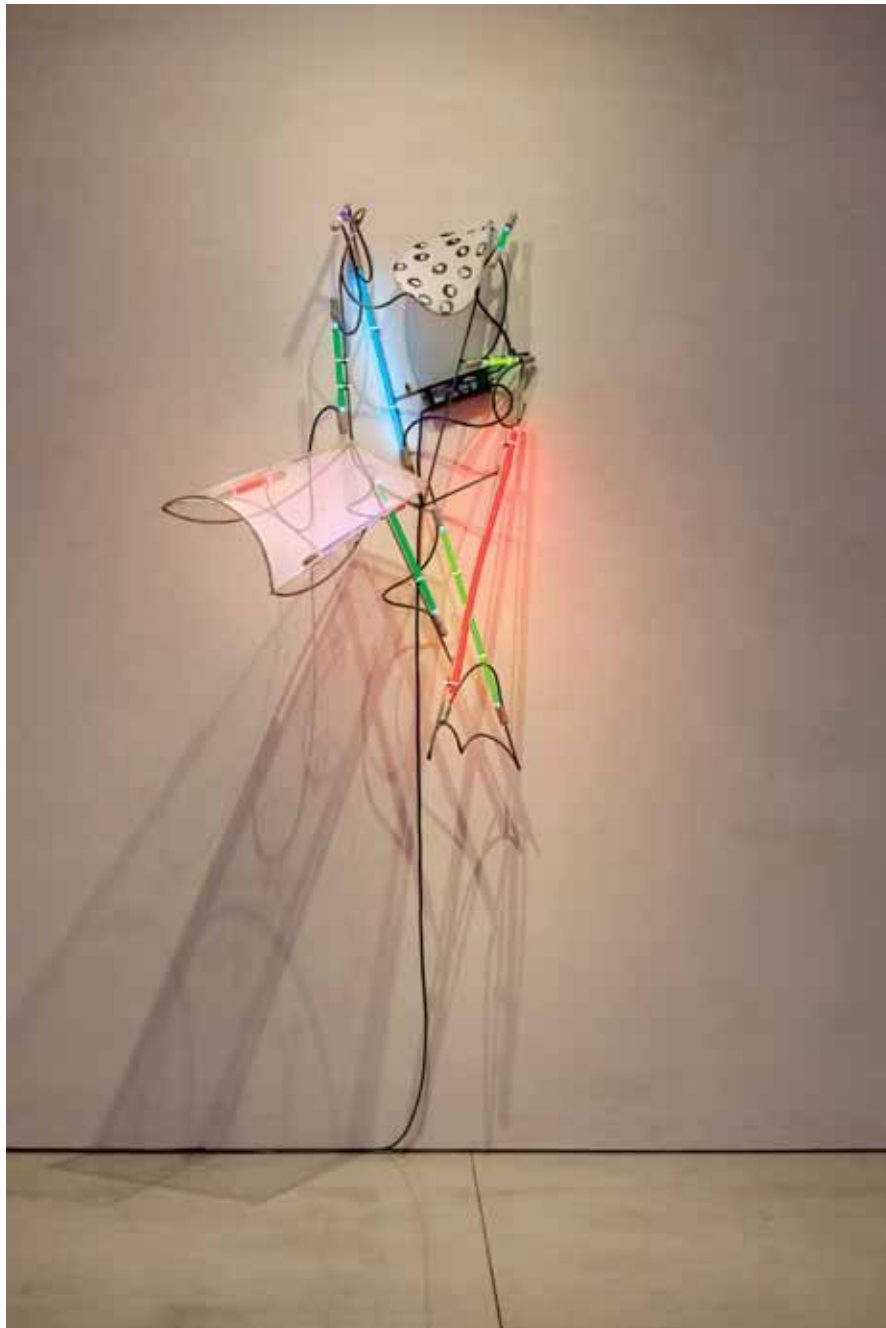


L'empire Laurent! 2003
Bronze, plastique, lampe
10 x 12.8 x 7.1 in (25.5 x 32.5 x 18.2 cm)
Photographie: Patrick Müller
Courtesy Galerie de France, Paris



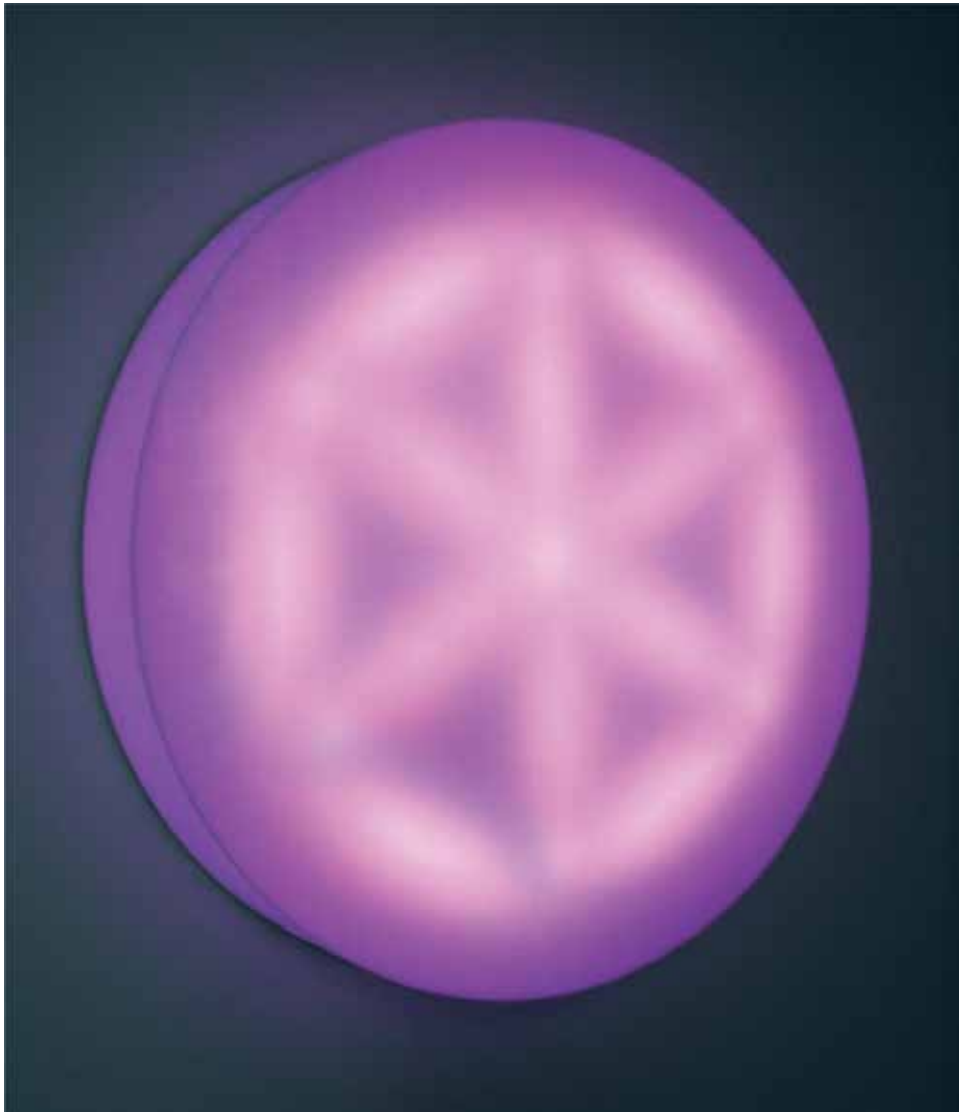
Untitled 2009
Neon, cables, chains
86.6 x 70.9 x 27.6 in (220 x 180 x 70 cm)
Courtesy of the artist and Gagosian Gallery

KEITH SONNIER
b. 1941



Kada 2009
OLDOWAN SERIES
Argon, steel, printed cotton, sequined mesh
56 x 36 x 30 in (142.2 x 91 x 76.2 cm)
Courtesy the artist

LEO VILLAREAL
b. 1967



Hexad 2002
60 x 60 x 9 in (152.4 x 152.4 x 22.9)
Plexiglas, LEDs, customs software, electrical hardware
Edition 3 of 3
Courtesy of the artist and Gering & López Gallery

LETTERS KNOWN AS “OF THE VISIONARY”

From Arthur Rimbaud To Paul Demeny

Charleville, 15 May 1871

(Translated by Wallace Fowlie)

Extracts

(...) For I is someone else. If brass wakes up a trumpet, it is not its fault. This is obvious to me: I am present at this birth of my thought: I watch it and listen to it: I draw a stroke of the bow: the symphony makes its stir in the depths, or comes on to the stage in a leap (...)

The first study of the man who wants to be a poet is the knowledge of himself, complete. He looks for his soul, inspects it, tests it, learns it. As soon as he knows it, he must cultivate it! It seems simple: in every mind a natural development takes place; so many egoists call themselves authors, there are many others who attribute their intellectual progress to themselves!

I say one must be a seer, make oneself a seer.

The Poet makes himself a seer by a long, gigantic and rational derangement of all the senses. All forms of love, suffering, and madness. He searches himself. He exhausts all poisons in himself and keeps only their quintessences. Unspeakable torture where he needs all his faith, all his super-human strength, where he becomes among all men the great patient, the great criminal, the one accursed--and the supreme Scholar!--Because he reaches the unknown! Since he cultivated his soul, rich already, more than any man! He reaches the unknown, and when, bewildered, he ends by losing the intelligence of his visions, he has seen them. Let him die as he leaps through unheard of and unnamable things: other horrible workers will come; they will begin from the horizons where the other collapsed! (...)

Therefore the poet is truly the thief of fire.

He is responsible for humanity, even for the animals; he will have to have his own inventions smelt, felt, and heard; if what he brings back from down there has form; if it is formless, he gives formlessness. A language must be found. Moreover, every word being an idea, the time of a universal language will come! One has to be an academician--deader than a fossil--to complete a dictionary in any language whatsoever. Weak people would begin to think about the first letter of the alphabet, and they would soon rush into madness!

This language will be of the soul for the soul, containing everything, smells, sounds, colors, thought holding on to thought and pulling. The poet would define the amount of the unknown awakening in his time the universal soul: he would give more--than the formulation of his thought, than the annotation of his march toward Progress! Enormity becoming normal, absorbed by all, he would really be a multiplier of progress!

This future will be materialistic, as you see. -- Always filled with Number and Harmony, these poems will be made to endure. -- Fundamentally, it would be Greek poetry again in a new way.

Eternal art would have its functions, since poets are citizens. Poetry will not lend its rhythm to action, it will be in advance.

These poets will exist. When the endless servitude of woman is broken, when she lives for and by herself, man--heretofore abominable--having given her her release, she too will be a poet!

Woman will find some of the unknown! Will her world of ideas differ from ours? -- She will find strange, unfathomable, repulsive, delicious things; we will take them, we will understand them.

Meanwhile, let us ask the poet for the new--ideas and forms.

All the clever ones will soon believe they have satisfied the demand--it is not so!

So, I work to make myself into a seer(...)

A. Rimbaud

THE SOUND OF SILENCE

By Simon & Garfunkel

"The Sound of Silence was written in February 1964 by Paul Simon in the aftermath of the November 22, 1963 assassination of U.S. President John F. Kennedy"

Hello, darkness my old friend
I've come to talk with you again
Because a vision softly creeping
Left its seeds while I was sleeping
And the vision that was planted in my brain
Still remains
Within the Sound Of Silence.

In restless dreams I walked alone
Narrow streets of cobblestone,
'Neath the halo of a street lamp
I turned my collar to the cold and damp
When my eyes were stabbed by the flash of a neon light
That split the night
And touched the Sound Of Silence.
And in the naked light I saw
Ten thousand people, maybe more
People talking without speaking
People hearing without listening
People writing songs that voices never share
And no one dared
Disturb the Sound Of Silence.

"Fools," said I, "You do not know
Silence like a cancer grows.
Hear my words that I might teach you,
Take my arms that I might reach you."

But my words like silent raindrops fell,
And echoed
In the wells of silence

And the people bowed and prayed
To the neon god they made
And the sign flashed out its warning,
In the words that it was forming.
And the signs said the words of the prophets
Are written on the subway walls
And tenement halls.
And whisper'd in the sounds of silence



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Speakers:

Mohammed Afkhami | Shirley Elghanian | Dina Nasser-Khadivi | Leila Taghinia-Milani Heller

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