Cultures of light: contemporary trends in museum exhibition

Katzberg, L.M.

Publication date
2009
CHAPTER ONE
LIGHT AS MEDIUM: REVEALING MESSAGES OF CONTEMPORARY LIGHT ART

My material is light, and it is responsive to your seeing. (43)
James Turrell, Occluded Front

Every perception is hallucinatory because perception has no object. (93)
Gilles Deleuze, The Fold

_Blue Light for György Kepes_ (2002) (fig. 1.1) is the spectacular laser light artwork by Seth Riskin (1963-) that was created and performed for the first time at the Centre for Advanced Visual Studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Cambridge Massachusetts in 2002. The work is dedicated to Hungarian-born painter, educator and art theorist György Kepes (1906-2001) who founded the centre at MIT in 1947. The artist created this artwork as an homage to Kepes because his books on design were highly influential. But it is his lightwork that reflects on one of the key ideas of Kepes, namely his quest for new scientific imagery. Kepes’ book, _Language of Vision_, predated three other influential texts on the same subject, especially Rudolph Arnheim’s _Art and Visual Perception_. He was also a protégé and collaborator of Bauhaus artist László Moholy-Nagy (1895-1946), who, as I shall point out, can be credited as one of the primary driving forces behind the creation of the Light and Space Art movement.

Riskin’s lightwork is created by the interaction of the artist’s body with the light of a blue laser. Pictured below, we see a human figure inscribed within a circle which itself is inscribed within a square; an image eerily reminiscent of Leonardo da Vinci’s (1452-1519) _Vitruvian Man_ (c. 1485). Alternatively, the image could be seen as an eye with its pupil outlined by the laser light. It can be understood as a transposition from a bodily “dance” to the boundaries of the room in which it is performed. In silent, space-defining performance, light effects extend from the artist’s body with the aid of sophisticated electronic equipment. According to the artist’s statement, he wanted to “become space” and “wanted to bring viewers inside the movement experience, into contact with the numerous dimensions of space”. Light allowed him to realize this artistic vision.¹

By including the viewers in the experience of illuminated movement, and, at the same time, enabling them to be affected and “feel” the dimensions of the space, Riskin was able to fulfil his artistic goal of “sculpting” space. He once said that “[l]ight projected from my body, revealing architecture through expressive body movements, enables me to ‘sculpt’ the spatial perceptions of viewers”.2 Here, Riskin uses the medium of light to sculpt spatial perception. With reference to this work I contend that light does not merely illuminate, but actually performs a mediating function between the artist, the viewer and the architectural space. This makes light a medium. The artist is using what Marshall McLuhan calls a medium as “an extension of ourselves”, to bridge the spatial gap between viewer and artist with light (7). This artist has completely abandoned traditional sculptural media such as wood and stone in favour of a newer and more expressive medium – the medium of light. Light originating from an unseen source enables the artist to extend his body in a visual expression of his artistic motivations and thought processes to, as he calls it, “sculpt” the perception of viewers. Light as a primary medium enabled Riskin to fill the space between the artist and viewer in a new and awe-inspiring way.

Light deployed in this manner is not inert and without invested motivations. Rather, it is quite active and political in nature. I suggest that light – as a medium – acts or performs a process of mediation between viewer, artwork and exhibition space that is, somehow, coded. By utilizing various properties and spectral effects of light, contemporary artists have found new ways to not only express their aesthetic but also to engage the viewer in an immersive viewing experience with an implicitly communicative function.

Light is not a singular medium, nor is it groundbreaking to state that it is a medium. Obviously, it exists in various forms, emanating from neon, fluorescent, laser and exotic rare-earth sources, to name but a few. Almost from the moment the electric light became commercially available, artists have employed the different mediums of light. An historical map of artists using elements of light would begin recording events around 1915 with the Clavalux, the coloured light organ of Thomas Wilfred (1889-1968). In 1930, Hungarian artist László Moholy-Nagy, a collaborator of György Kepes, incorporated the medium of light into his sculptural work. In the 1940s and 1950s neon light was used widely in advertising but was still infrequently used by artists.3 This would change in the 1960s when artists such as Bruce Nauman (1941-) and Joseph Kosuth (1945-) would begin to use it extensively.

2 Weibel and Jansen. *Light Art from Artificial Light*, 165.
3 Elements of neon advertising signs originally made during this period are now being recycled and used to create new works of neon art by artist Jeffry Chipless (1952).
Figure 1.1. Seth Riskin. *Blue Light for György Kepes*, 2002.
Light and Space Art, a movement originating in California in the 1960s, defined its art by light’s very experiential existence and physical interaction with the viewer. The landscape of this movement reveals concentrations of artists working with light on the two coasts of the United States and continental Europe, particularly in Germany and the Netherlands, where there is much interest, and many museums including the Zentrum für Internationale Lichtkunst in Unna, the Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie (ZKM) in Karlsruhe and the Centrum Kunstlicht in de Kunst in Eindhoven, whose collections include proportionately large numbers of art objects employing light. In the 1970s and 80s artists such as Larry Bell (1939-) and Robert Irwin (1928-) were also experimenting with the mediating effects of light. Contemporary artists using light are as diverse as are the countries from where they practice their crafty art. Since the 1990s, in Berlin, Iceland-born Danish artist Olafur Eliasson (1967-) has been creating synaesthetic environments and installation pieces which use light in relation to natural phenomena, such as the famous Weather Project. This 2004 blockbuster exhibit, which filled the cavernous Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern museum in London, used mono-frequency yellow light in conjunction with theatrical fog and a mirrored ceiling to affect viewers’ perceptions of the space and to question the uses of such spaces in general. At the same time, in Darmstad, Helga Griffiths (1949-) deployed ultra-violet light and chemo-luminescent liquids in test-tubes and Petri-dishes to expose the nano-world of the artist’s unique genetic code. These diverse lightworks share the deployment of light as a medium. Whether it comes in the form of fluorescent tubes as in the work of New Yorker Dan Flavin (1933-96), or in neon tubes as in the work of Bruce Nauman and Joseph Kosuth, light is a heterogeneous and multi-functional medium. More specifically, it is a constellation of mediums comprised of different sources of light that illuminate our world in new and thought-provoking ways. From daylight to incandescent light to laser light, from light transmitted, refracted and reflected, artists of today are probing the boundaries of an age-old medium with fresh bravado.

In this chapter I will proceed to argue along two lines. The first stems from a desire to understand light as a mediating force. The second flows from a desire to comprehend the way the force of light affects its viewers, that is, its implication of the viewer by an affective force. In this regard, I pursue what Bal has called in her article “Affect as Medium” the “effect of affect”.

---

4 Eindhoven is a city whose prosperity and world-wide renown can be attributed to the Koninklijke Philips Electronics Corporation and its industrial manufacture of products contributing to the advancement of light and lighting technology.
I first consider light as a medium and the way in which it transmits its artistic message. I take McLuhan’s seminal work *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* as a point of departure for my discussion of the formal qualities of light as a medium. I will analyse how since the rise of the minimalist aesthetic in the 1960s deployed by artists like James Turrell (1943-), Dan Flavin, and Bruce Nauman, contemporary artists have used light as their primary medium to convey artistic messages and to affect the perception of the viewer. From the 1960s onwards, artists, instead of representing light, space, texture and so on, as in previous traditional paintings, now present these elements by using light as a medium in order to create a heightened sensory awareness.

Secondly, from a poststructuralist perspective, I consider the way light activates and decentres the viewer. By focusing on the viewers’ experience through what in *Installation Art: A Critical History* Claire Bishop calls “a particular repertoire of concerns”, I intend to illuminate the ways in which light as a medium affects the perceptions of the viewer (8). Through a discussion of several works of twenty-first-century artists including Olafur Eliasson, Carsten Höller (1961-), Ann Veronica Janssens (1956-), Mischa Kuball (1951-) and Yayoi Kusama (1929-), I will argue that light is indeed a medium that affects its viewers when it makes its presence known through the presence of other mediums such as vaporized mist, liquids, translucent fabrics and of course the enclosing walls of the exhibition space within which they are installed. I will put Bishop’s categories of installation art to use in organizing my discussion around what she has called the four “concerns”: the dream scene, heightened perception, mimetic engulfment and activated spectatorship. Specifically, I will articulate in detail the role and function of light in these categories and discuss more fully the ways in which light is in fact coded. What Bishop does not do, however, is specifically focus on light. In my study, I do just that. Hence, rather than retracing her footsteps, I try to achieve something new regarding light by employing her categories.

**Expanding Sculpture**

In “Sculpture in the Expanded Field”, Rosalind Krauss redefines the theoretical boundaries of artistic sculpture. In 1979, she writes in the journal *Artforum* that a “historical rupture” has occurred and that during the previous ten years “rather surprising things have come to be called sculpture” (30). In this article she sets out her argument for the change or “rupture” in the category of sculpture which she claims can be made to become “almost infinitely malleable” (30). This malleability allows viewers to consider such objects as “narrow corridors with TV monitors at the ends;
large photographs documenting country hikes; [and] mirrors placed at strange angles in ordinary rooms‖ as works of sculpture in an expanded sense. That is, she suggests, the category of sculpture can now be said to include not only traditional forms of sculpture but also large-scale works such as Robert Smithson’s (1938–73) *Spiral Jetty* (1970), Alice Aycock’s (1946–) *Maze* (1972), and Carl Andre’s (1935–) *Cuts* (1967). Illustrating her article, these three works indicate the increased possibilities of sculpture.

In the early 1960s, Krauss explains, “sculpture had entered a categorical no-man’s-land: it was what was on or in front of a building that was not the building, or what was in the landscape that was not the landscape” (36). Robert Morris’ *(untitled)* *Mirrored Cubes* (fig. 1.2) illustrates the point that sculpture was now loose in the landscape, so to say. The mirrored cubes set in the landscape not only reflected the landscape itself in an oddly structured way, but they also reflected the daylight coming from above. Seen from further afield, I perceive the cubes to recall traditional landscape paintings by virtue of their realist depiction and the way light and colour is reflected back at the viewer. Sculpture was no longer confined to existing primarily
inside a building. “Sculpture, it could be said, had ceased being a positivity, and was now the category that resulted from the addition of the not-landscape to the not-architecture,” writes Krauss (37).

With this “rupture” and with sculpture seen in an “expanded” sense, artists were now free to use light as a primary and sculptural medium that would stand the test of prolonged critical scrutiny. Concerning Krauss’ conception of sculpture and Riskin’s statement that he “sculpts” with light, I would like to suggest that light needs to be further reviewed in order to understand how it expands the sculptural field by introducing an evanescent statue that remains a medium.

The 2005-06 exhibition Light Art from Artificial Light was the largest exhibition to showcase light in almost 40 years since the watershed Kunst Licht Kunst exhibition at the Stedelijk Van Abbeumuseum in Eindhoven during 1966.5 In both exhibitions light itself was exhibited and understood by the viewers as a medium: that is, it was shown and seen as a substance at the disposal of the artist. But what exactly does it mean for light to be considered a medium? Can light be both a medium and an art object simultaneously? Approximately sixty years earlier, at the opening of the twentieth century, technical advancements were sufficient to enable the nineteenth-century dream of synaesthesia.6 These sense interactions created congruencies between the organs of the eye and ear, and between seemingly dissonant arts such as music and painting. Of particular importance was the transformation of musical tones into colours. At this time, abstract films and colour organs were created that urged music and painting closer together. “Aesthetic correspondences” (27) existed between visual and aural forms, write Weibel and Jansen, especially in the films of James (1921-82) and John (1917-95) Whitney, Hans Richter (1888-1976), Oskar Fischinger (1900-67) and Viking Eggeling (1880-1925). For example, in 1921 Walter Ruttmann (1887-1941) created Lichtspiel Opus 1 which combined abstract visual forms, colours and music.

As Weibel and Jansen have it, the forerunners of Light Art in the twenty-first century are avant-garde films of the 1920s and material painting. At about 1915 with Cubism in France and Constructivism in Russia new materials began to be used in conjunction with paint, such as wood, rubber and paper products. Shortly thereafter, mirror, steel and glass became elements of panel paintings. Thus, as Weibel and Jansen point out, “a genre of material painting emerged that already produced light reflections” (27). Parallel to these trends artists began to create art objects that incorporated real moving parts, which gave rise to Kinetic Art around 1930. During

---

6 Weibel and Jansen Light Art from Artificial Art, 27.
the light experiments of the 1920s and 30s a transformation from physical boxes to light boxes, and from physical reliefs to light reliefs occurred. Therefore, the works of Moholy-Nagy, for example his piece *Light Prop for an Electric Stage* (*Light-Space-Modulator*) (1930) (fig. 1.3), and those of Zdeněk Pešánek (1896-1965) are considered the actual basis for the use of light in artworks (27). Art of this genre and period did what contemporary artists such as Eliasson do, namely it “makes space a coordinate of movement, compels perception to realize its dynamic nature, theatrically stages this realization by means of machinery, and activates the viewer’s participation beyond the mere act of looking” (Bal, 2007a, 166). These “fundamental tenets” are still fundamental building blocks of Light Art at the advent of the twenty-first century. By engaging with new technologies, materials and media such as film and photography – artistic forms of light – practitioners developed “real movement […] and real light” into what is known today as Light Art. The movement of Light Art began with an interest in light as a medium.7

The noun “medium” literally means in the middle. In his book *Keywords*, Raymond Williams defines the term in three ways. Firstly, medium can be understood in “(i) the old general sense of an intervening or intermediate agency or substance. […]” (169). Artistically speaking, this intervening substance, a medium, is a force which acts on objects and subjects at a distance through which impressions are conveyed to the senses. Furthermore, a medium can also be any liquid substance (such as oil, water, albumen) with which pigment is mixed for use in, for instance, painting. In this sense light as a medium “paints” surfaces. That is, it is “applied” to objects in its immediate vicinity. It can also be understood in “(ii) the conscious technical sense, as in the distinction between print and sound and vision as media” (169). In this sense the medium of light comes in the form of radiant energy emitted from a visible light source. Williams’ third definition relates to “(iii) the specialized capitalist sense, in which a newspaper or broadcasting service – something that already exists or can be planned – is seen as a medium for something else, such as advertising” (169). These definitions reveal the polysemic possibilities of the word and concept, regarding the production of artwork. I would like to suggest that in the context of my study, a medium is any raw material, substance or mode of expression used in an artistic or creative activity. My definition relates to Williams’ first definition by equating light with an intermediate substance which intervenes between a viewer and object. In the case of neon signs for instance, light can be used for advertising purposes. Light is a

---

7 The label Light and Space Art, in circulation during the 1960s and 1970s, was reduced to the term Light Art, which is the movement’s common label today (Weibel and Jansen 2007: 27).
medium for something else, namely the advertising message, when it is shaped into letters and used in the construction of a sign. Williams’ three semantic fields can be embedded in McLuhan’s more general view.

Figure 1.3. László Moholy-Nagy. *Light Prop for an Electric Stage (Light-Space-Modulator)*. 1930.
We have seen that Marshall McLuhan famously defines medium as “any extension of ourselves [...]”. He adds that personal consequences “result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves or by any new technology” (7). In other words, artists employ a medium like paint to extend their creative thought processes and represent them pictorially on canvas, wood or any other sort of ground. This results in a transformation of scale: for example, in landscape painting painters transfer their artistic vision of landmasses to the much smaller picture plane, or surface of the canvas. McLuhan’s theory is that a medium affects the society in which it plays a role not by the content delivered through the medium, but by the characteristics of the medium itself. He points to the light bulb as a clear demonstration of this concept.

A light bulb does not have content the way paintings contain pictures or newspapers contain stories. “The electric light is pure information. It is a medium without a message […]” (8). The medium of light can be seen as a raw undeveloped substance that is given a message by the artist. What colour, type of source, or how it should appear in the visual field of the viewer are all matters of content. The creative processes of the artist make decisions about the “content” of the medium. For Joseph Wright of Derby (1734-97), for example, light illuminates the figural content of his painted scene dramatically; it is a conduit through which the artist sends a message to the viewer about what is important to look at and contemplate. By creating a sharp contrast between the dimly lit peripheral area and the brightly lit centre of his paintings, Wright allows light itself to convey information about the scene to the viewer.

Commenting on McLuhan’s view in this regard, Bal writes that “a medium is a neutral substance” and is “semantically empty”. That is, it carries no semantic message. McLuhan notes that “[t]his fact, characteristic of all media, means that the ‘content’ of any medium is always another medium. The content of writing is speech, just as the written word is the content of print […]” (8). Therefore, through the medium of neon tubes, light can be formed yet again into another medium, the written word, which carries the content of the message. This is particularly evident in advertising billboards employing neon, beginning in the 1950s. On these large-scale roadway and building signs, the medium of light is used to convey a message written with words constructed from formed tubes of light.

In the work of Joseph Kosuth, light as a “neutral substance” is given a semantic message by forming it into language units. As one of the early artists using...
Light, he created textual installations written with the medium of neon light. The tension between the literal and the figural is essential for this work. Literally, Kosuth forms words and sentences and even whole poems from singular elements (letters) of light. Figuratively, he is sending the content of the words and poems (their meaning) to the viewer through the medium of light. In *Neon Electrical Light* (1966) (fig. 1.4) he deploys the medium of light whose “content” according to McLuhan is another medium – the printed word. It is not “neutral” because it has colour and intensity. Therefore, before it is formed into letters, it already carries semantic content.

Figure 1.4. Joseph Kosuth. *Neon Electrical Light*. 1966.

*Neon Electrical Light* makes McLuhan’s dictum, “the medium is the message” explicit but at the same time critiques McLuhan’s dictum by demonstrating that light is not neutral. Here, coloured light is shaped into textural symbols (the content). “For it is not till the electric light is used to spell out some brand name that it is noticed as a medium” (9). Now, it is not the electric light but the “content” (the words and colours) that are noticed.

In his neon work Kosuth uses the medium of light to radicalize the medium of print. The words spelled out in neon light activate the viewer to engage the text of the artwork with a heightened awareness of political concerns. In this case Kosuth is highlighting some of the formal qualities of the artwork. The text of the artwork, which resembles an advertising billboard, consists of twenty-four words spelled-out on three lines, or registers. Each line is in a different colour: green, blue and red. Each line repeats the same words in the same order with the exception of the word that
designates the colour, which is different on each line and corresponds to the colour of the neon tube.

With the first word “neon”, Kosuth explicitly states that his medium is neon, or rather phosphors in a vacuum tube which, when excited, fluoresces a particular hue. With the second word “electrical” he states that the artwork is not inert, but rather quite electrifying in nature. In traditional painting, light is absorbed or reflected by the medium of paint, but in Kosuth’s work light is actually emitted and received as such by the viewer. I suggest it thus creates a more active reception of the artwork. This is so because of the active nature of the phenomenon of light and its interaction with the rods and cones of the human eye. The word “light” in the third position reminds the viewer of the materiality of the piece. It is as if the artist is saying “this is not a painting”, in the same way René Magritte said “this is not a pipe” in his work The Treachery of Images (1928–29), which merely depicts a pipe. Neon Electrical Light is a variation of what in This is Not a Pipe Michel Foucault calls a calligram, which is an object that brings “text and shape as close together as possible” and is “composed of lines delimiting the form of an object while also arranging the sequence of letters” (21). More importantly, “[i]t lodges statements in the space of a shape, and makes the text say what the drawing [or artwork] represents” and “it distributes writing in a space no longer possessing neutrality, openness […]” (21; emphasis in text). In the case of Neon Electrical Light, the message is that the artwork is not a painting or sculpture in the traditional sense but rather sculpture in an “expanded” sense. This is a sculptural work in three dimensions whose primary medium is artificial electric light.

“English” is the fourth word and denotes the language of the piece. In the fifth place is the word “glass”, which indicates a physical attribute of the artwork and adds a sense of fragility and transparency to the piece. The neon tubes are fabricated from cylinders of glass that have been heated and formed into “letters”; the sixth word from the left. This brings to the attention of the viewer that the words, which comprise the work as a whole, are actually composed of individual semantic elements.

The seventh place is a somewhat special case. Here is where the regularity of the registers is diverted in the direction of specificity. Each line uses a specific colour of light, which is reflected in the form of the textural elements. On the top (green) line the word “green” is used in the seventh place; on the blue or middle line the word “blue” appears, and finally on the third line “red” occupies the seventh place. The use of the three different words in the same position of each line prompts the viewer to notice that each line corresponds to the colour of the written word. In the final or eighth position, the word “eight” appears on every line. Upon comprehending the meaning of the word I am cajoled into counting the words in each line to confirm that
there are actually eight words per line. Kosuth’s use of light as medium exposes the mediums of text and language. When seen as an assemblage of illuminated registers, the work engages viewers in such a way that we begin to look more deeply at the meanings of words in relation to the medium in which they are presented. This is how the medium of light affects us and causes us to transform our ideas about art and the messages it carries. It is now clear that light as a medium has not only expanded the field of sculpture, but it also has implications for painting, and as I will show, for other artistic forms of expression such as installation art.

**ILLUMINATING AFFECT**

Two other American artists who became active in the 1960s and are emblematic of the Light and Space Art movement of the period are James Turrell and Dan Flavin. These artists made vastly differing works. While Turrell was exploring the perceptual implications of the medium of light in Los Angeles, Flavin was creating bluntly constructed objects employing light in New York. Turrell created illuminated atmospheres in spaces with the aid of geometry and perceptual psychology. His pieces have been described as “objectless” because there are no material objects per se, only atmospheric coloured light. His early installations were created in empty spaces – galleries, museums and even a dilapidated hotel – whose white surfaces had been meticulously smoothed and finished to almost absolute perfection. Bishop describes his installations – “with their unbounded and embracing opacity” – in terms of spirituality or a sense of the absolute (87). Turrell’s coloured spaces take some time to penetrate and engulf the viewer, allowing them to perceive their boundless engulfment in colour. But I first turn to the work of Flavin to gain a better understanding of the uses of light as a formal medium.

Flavin became famous for creating sculptural objects and installations from lighting fixtures of the type most commonly found in institutional settings such as office buildings and factory spaces. Flavin’s “lights”, as they are known, utilize commercially available fluorescent tubes that come in a standardized range of ten colours and five sizes. In the 1960s, all five sizes were only available in red, pink, blue, green, yellow, ultraviolet and four shades of white (cool white, daylight, warm white and soft white). Fluorescent light is not created by applying electricity across a filament, as is the case with incandescent light sources. Instead, it is created by the excitation of phosphors in a vacuum, similar to neon. Michael Govan explains that:

Fluorescent light is so named for the phosphors that fluoresce in the presence of other light or radiation. Fluorescent lamps, which came into general use in
the 1930s, consist of a sealed glass tube filled with a mixture of mercury vapour and argon gases, which, when electrified, emit an ultraviolet radiation that causes the phosphors that coat the inside of the glass tube to glow and produce visible light. (59)

Flavin’s work is typical of the convergence of minimalist principles with Installation Art: from making fluorescent lamp-adorned minimalist geometric “icons” (inspired by eighth-century religious icons employing reflective gold paint) he moved to installing his later fluorescent works within specific exhibition spaces. Flavin constructs art objects that he does not consider sculpture, but as Krauss has argued, are actually sculptures in an “expanded field”. In an interview with Phyllis Tuchman conducted in 1972, but not published until 2004, Flavin admits that he does not care for the term sculpture. “I don’t like the term sculpture applied to what I do. On occasion I think it is simply too incidental to carry such a heavily formal name, identity, recognition” (Govin, 2004b, 194). So what do we call them? Flavin prefers the term “image-object”. In *Artforum*, he states that: “The composite term ‘image-object’ best describes my use of the medium”.

In my estimation, this hyphenated term reveals that the artist feels his lights have a material structure and, at the same time, they are immaterial, or more precisely, they emit an immaterial essence in the form of light. The term denotes his desire to create art that is not only an object, a piece of sculpture, but also an artwork that entices the viewer to see it set in its surroundings – an image which includes an object but cannot be reduced to it.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary’s fourth definition of the word, “medium” is: “An intermediate agency, instrument, or channel; a means; esp. a means or channel of communication or expression”. In Flavin’s work, light is used as a raw material containing the semantic content of commemoration. He uses the medium of light to commemorate others, as a message. The titles of his works make all the difference and help the viewer interpret the artist’s message. A problematic aspect of his work is that he needs words to illuminate the meaning of his lightworks. One way he transmits his message is through the use of coloured light. For example, in a work dedicated to another artist, Henri Matisse (1869-1954), a painter known for his use of colour, Flavin uses specific colours to celebrate Matisse’s work. In 1964, Flavin created *untitled (to Henri Matisse)* (fig. 1.5) which utilizes Flavin’s own “primary colours”: pink, yellow, blue and green (Govan, 2004a, 59). The colour of a fluorescent lamp is determined by the chemical nature of the phosphor used. Flavin chose these

---


10 Entry extracted from the March 2008 Draft Revision of the *Oxford English Dictionary Online*. 

24
four colours to commemorate Matisse because of the painter’s remarkable use of colour. This work presents bright pastel colours that combine to create “an overall white light made by the four colours blending nearly into a full spectrum” (59). Given the title of the work, this could be seen as ironic, because Matisse was known as a colourist and in Flavin’s piece the colours combine to create an impression of white light, or the absence of colour. I contend Flavin is trying to convey his admiration for the painter’s skilful use of distinct colours that nevertheless blend in a longer view of the paintings. He uses the medium of light with another medium, colour, as its content in order to pay tribute to a master colourist who, precisely, did not blend colours to achieve his desired effect.

Figure 1.5. Dan Flavin. untitled (to Henri Matisse). 1964.
At the other end of the electro-magnetic spectrum Flavin’s use of colour transmits a different message; a series of pieces he completed that refer visually to Ad Reinhardt, the Abstract Expressionist painter, writer and pioneer of Conceptual and Minimal Art. In this appropriately titled series, *untitled (for Ad Reinhardt)* (1990) (fig. 1.6), Flavin explores the effects of ultraviolet light. Because of its association with the vernacular term “black light”, ultraviolet light carries the message of “blackness” which is precisely why Flavin dedicated the series to Reinhardt and by implication to his “black paintings”. Which appear at first glance to be simply canvases painted monochromatically black, but are in actuality composed of black and nearly black shades. Flavin’s use of ultraviolet light in this way not only emphasizes the unique differences between paint and light (Govan, 2004a, 62), but also pays homage to an artist who was at the forefront of the movement that Flavin now inhabits. Flavin has indeed expressed his artistic intention, albeit sometimes ironically, through the mediums of light and colour.

![Figure 1.6. Dan Flavin. *untitled (for Ad Reinhardt)* 2a-d. 1990.](image)

---


12 For an exploration of ultraviolet light see Chapter 3 of the present study.
Another way Flavin engages with the medium of light as a means of commemorative expression is through his use of form and line. In Williams' second sense of medium “the conscious technical sense” (169) media are “material forms and sign systems” (170; emphasis in text). In other words, light as a medium has various forms and hence, Flavin chooses to deploy light with specific and measured forms. For instance, in a monumental series continuing over the span of several decades, Flavin assembled lights that echoed the rectilinear forms of such artists as Kasimir Malevich (1878-1935), Alexander Rodchenko (1891-1956) and Vladimir Tatlin (1885-1953). To emphasize the Constructivists interest in form, in his “monument” for V. Tatlin series (begun 1964), Flavin restricted his use of colour to white exclusively. His message here is clearly a response to the traditional view of Constructivism of art history. It is a self-reflexive message because Flavin himself constructed, in the tradition of the Constructivists, works of art that were reliant on limited uses of colour and form. He used a reductivist scale of white light extensively, which included the four hues of cool white, warm white, daylight and soft white. He even went as far as titling his 1965 autobiographical statement “... in daylight or cool white” as a testament to the colour(s) of white.13

Flavin not only uses light in a mediating sense but his pieces also physically affect us. Bal explains that “affect” is “the dynamic process of intensity circulating between work and viewer”.14 I understand the concept of affect in a Deleuzian sense. That is, according to Brian Massumi, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s translator, affect is an “intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body’s capacity to act” (Deleuze and Guattari, xvi). It is an audible, visual, or tactile transformation produced in reaction to a certain situation. In other words, we as viewers are affected by something that causes a transformation within ourselves. Affect is a knowable product of an encounter and, as Bal has it in “Affect as Medium”, “[a]ffect is a temporarily congealed relationship between perception and the action that coincides with subjectivity”.15 It is a process or agency brought about by an affective force.

13 The full title of which is: “... in daylight or cool white,” an autobiographical sketch (to Frank Lloyd Wright who once advised Boston’s “city fathers” to try a dozen good funerals as urban renewal). Artnforum, December 1965.

In Flavin’s work viewers are affected by the medium of light. Light emanating from his pieces has a physical and psychological effect on us. For instance, in his piece untitled (to the citizens of the Republic of France on the 200th anniversary of their revolution) (1989) (fig. 1.7), the work does not affect us all equally. The French citizens are addressed explicitly by the title and are drawn into a situation wherein they as viewers remember and commemorate the French Republic and the revolution which formed it as well as where we now stand in relation to it. “Forming bands of colour recalling the French flag, three rows of 2-foot [...] fixtures were aligned horizontally along the wall from floor to ceiling” (Govin 2004b: 370). The image is reminiscent of the French flag turned at a forty-five degree angle. In this piece, Flavin creates a situation that influences the viewers by transforming the visual image of coloured fluorescent light into an image of commemoration, made explicit by its title in the mind of the viewer with the assistance of the circulating process of affect. It is worth noting here that Flavin almost always includes a dedication in his titles, such as “to...” which implies an addressee. The image-object constructed from nearly pure light transforms from a physical object into a temporal object, which performs a commemoration of the French state.

This work affects us by transforming a physical object into a mental construct though affect as a medium. This is so, at least if we are to believe McLuhan’s position that a medium is always another medium. It seems that mediums are, in a sense, fluid.

---

Figure 1.7. Dan Flavin. untitled (to the citizens of the Republic of France on the 200th anniversary of their revolution) 1-3. 1989.
and capable of changing form. One minute it can be an object, and in the next instant, it can be immaterial and a mental object. Light, as a mental object, is a medium because it transfers perceptual information from the senses and provides the brain with information. The product of our encounter with this work is the feeling of commemoration, a sensation that is imbued with references to reverence and respect for the soldiers who have fallen during the long and sometime bloody history of the Republic since the revolution. The sensations are invoked by the lightwork’s overall apparent similarity with the French flag, often carried in battle, and by the prominence of the colour red which is associated historically with blood.

McLuhan’s argument that a medium is always another medium needs to be extended here. I would argue that what light in fact does is affect the viewer by a sort of “touching” and therefore is not neutral. This is a touch that seems to invade the body, one that has a psychological and physical affect on the viewer. Light is able to enter the body when it is transformed into another medium such as heat and is felt by the skin.

Light’s capacity to significantly alter our perception allows us to visualize apparently solid objects, when in actuality, the only object that exists is the mental object created by the medium. Many artists have taken this capacity of light as their starting point in making artworks that, to a certain extent, deceive our senses. This is most evident in (the U.S. West-coast Light and Space artist) James Turrell’s artworks. These contain very little in the way of material objects; they are composed of coloured light and meticulously prepared planar or spherical surfaces; one could say they are primed with a fetishist fervour, because he spent many weeks preparing the surfaces in his exhibition/experimental workspace known as the Mendota Hotel in Ocean Park, California. Rather than exhibiting objects as in traditional sculpture, his artwork brings to the fore the space within which the viewer is situated. His art illuminates space in such a way that viewers have an embodied experience. That is, they “feel” the light through bodily sensory perception. In some works the dimensions of the room are not what they appear to be; in others, seemingly three-dimensional coloured geometric structures appear to be suspended across the corner of the exhibition space. In yet other pieces, Turrell experiments with almost total bodily immersion techniques, such as in Gasworks (1993) (fig. 1.9) and Call Waiting (1997) (fig. 1.10), where the viewer, similar to the workings of a drawer or telephone booth, is slid into or walks into a 360° spherical chamber whose interior surface is bathed in a gaseous colour field.
Turrell’s work consists of many series based on theme variations. His “projection pieces”, beginning in 1966 and continuing to the present, contain two sub-variants: “cross corner projections” and “single wall projections”.¹⁷ His first work in the “cross corner” series was afrum-proto (1966) (fig. 1.8), and was formed by the projection of light from a slightly modified quartz halogen projector across a corner abutting two walls. Turrell describes this piece as being essentially a rectangle projected across a corner in such a way that from a distance there appeared to be a cube floating off the floor, yet in some manner attached to the corner of the space. From a distance this shape had solidity, but appeared to be literally composed of light. (Noever 59)

He projects light in such a way that it appears to create a solid object attached to the wall, a luminous volume with symmetrical boundaries. As Turrell has it “the cube seemed to reveal itself in perspective [...]” and “[t]he space generated was analogous to a painting in two dimensions alluding to three dimensions, but in this case three-dimensional space was being used illusionistically” (59). We as viewers see a logical

¹⁷ The controlled nomenclature for Turrell’s works, which appears in quotation marks, is taken from Adcock (1990), who wrote his book with the assistance of the artist.
Light as Medium

figure where none actually exists. There is no object per se, but our perception of space is altered just the same and viewers are affected by it. A viewer standing at a distance “feels” the presence of what he or she perceives as a cube. Our body senses the cube through ocular input, but our eyes also tell us that the cube is composed of only immaterial light and therefore no cube exists. Hence, I would suggest, through the effects of light the cube is coded in such a way that it transmits two paradoxical messages simultaneously: that the cube is solid, and at the same time that the cube is not solid.

In Decker (1967), one of his “single wall projections”, Turrell projects the medium of light onto a single wall surface so that viewers perceive a luminous rectangle, which seems to hover over or recede into the surface of the wall. Turrell writes that in some instances, this rectangle of light “was seen as a non-dimensionally thin sheet of light that existed several inches in front of the of the wall surface, in other cases the image appeared as if you were looking into an indeterminate space that went through the wall” (64). Works in this series create a hypothetical or imaginary space within the exhibition space. When seen as receding figure, viewers perceive another space of indeterminate size “behind” the work. When viewed as a protruding figure, a thin space can be perceived between the geometrical figure composed of light and the wall surface. In both cases, viewers are affected by the change in the apparent spatial configurations. In these pieces light mediates between the artwork and viewer by creating the conditions for an imagined space; a space that can only be entered virtually by the viewer. In yet another series of Turrell’s work, viewers physically enter into a space where they are affected by the light field.

In Turrell’s “perceptual cell” series (figs. 1.9-1.10) viewers are almost completely enveloped by the colour field known as a Ganzfeld experience. From the German language, meaning “entire field” a Ganzfeld experience is a sensory attenuation technique that uses homogenous and un-patterned sensory stimulation to produce an effect similar to sensory deprivation. Turrell uses variously-tinted coloured light to stimulate the viewer’s retina to achieve such an effect. Turrell remarks:

The works in which the viewer stands in the space that is completely filled with homogeneous light are called the Ganzfeld Pieces. In these pieces, the room you are in has [a] surface which is as completely homogeneous as possible in its light quality. Depending on the depth of the physical space, the hue and saturation of the color, and the scale of the light intensity, the air in the space seems physically charged with colored light and to come right up against your eyes. (123)
Cultures of Light

Figure 1.9. James Turrell. *Gasworks*, 1993.

Figure 1.10. James Turrell. *Call Waiting*, 1997.
Viewer experiences in Ganzfeld spaces can be an intensely embodied affair; so much so that people can lose their equilibrium and sense of balance. Thus, these works demonstrate the bodily affect Deleuze describes. In a related work entitled *City of Arhirit* (1976), a succession of four connected gallery spaces, first installed at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and then at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, Turrell created an intense disequilibrium among many viewers who, as a result “got down on their hands and knees” (124). In each of the connected objectless rooms Turrell filtered the incoming daylight down to a particular colour, but viewers could also see the colour emanating from the next space ahead. Turrell writes of the experience viewers had during their encounter with the Ganzfeld:

> You went through one space and then it seemed to dim because you can’t hold color without form. So as you left the first room that was pale green your eyes developed a pink afterimage. The next room you entered was red, and you came into it with this pink, and it was just startling. So I used a progression of spaces to mix the afterimage color with the color you were about to see, also knowing that the color, after you were in it for a while would begin to dim. (Noever 124)

Viewers to this exhibition felt as if someone was turning the lights up and down on them during their visit, when in actuality, the intensity levels remained constant. Even after a suggested path was marked on the floor and dots were applied to the walls to create a false horizon line, someone actually fell.

Light in a Ganzfeld space mediates between viewer and space by bridging a gaseous gap. It affects viewers to such an extent that they can no longer stand upright. The air-space within the field contained by the enclosing gallery or “cell” walls, is made visible and tangible, however fleetingly, by the medium of light. Turrell once remarked that “I like to use light as material […] but my medium is really perception. I want you to sense yourself sensing. To see yourself seeing. To be aware about how you are forming the reality you see” (Trachtman 90). How light affects and facilitates seeing oneself is a key point in my argumentation. Turrell switches his emphasis from the work of art as an object to its reception by the viewer. Thus, the medium is not light but perception. The message of the medium applied in this way is to urge the viewer to question what they see in front of their eyes, even when there is no object per se to see. With Turrell’s application of the medium of light, altered perception is, in Bal’s words, an “effect of affect”. In the next section I will discuss the way the medium of light activates and decentres the viewer.
Cultures of Light

Installing Light

In the previous section I showed that light phenomena fulfil many defining prerequisites to be considered a medium, in the sense that light is a tool that can be used and manipulated by artists and which affects the viewer. In this section I intend to demonstrate the role and function of light in installation art. I maintain that in installation art, light affects the viewer by creating situations in which the embodied subject is decentred and activated. Claire Bishop’s book on installation art articulates four different installation situations. According to these situations I will probe the role of light. In each section I will first discuss the contextual framework of the situation and then refer to a master example that is rich in meaning. In addition, I have chosen several installation pieces from the oeuvre of artist Ann Veronica Janssens (1956-) in order to further elucidate the role and function of light in installation art.

In her book Installation Art: A Critical History, Bishop asks “What is Installation Art?” and defines installation as a type of art in which “the viewer physically enters, and which is often described as ‘theatrical’, ‘immersive’ or ‘experiential’” and that “presupposes an embodied viewer whose senses of touch, smell and sound are as heightened as their sense of vision” (6). The term first came into circulation in the 1960s when art magazines began to use the phrase to describe the way an exhibition was assembled. For instance, in 1968 Dan Flavin created an exhibition entitled cool white etc. from Dan Flavin for the Dwan Gallery in New York where he installed his “image-objects” in the office of the gallery’s director instead of in the traditional gallery space. Furthermore, he chose to suspend one of his “lights” over the work surface of the director’s desk – in a similar position to a task light which his industrial objects simulates – along with hanging other pieces on the wall in non-traditional placements. In another important early exhibition, Flavin placed his works in corners of the room, diagonally on a wall and even horizontally on the floor.18

Since the 1960s, the difference between an installation of works of art and installation art has become progressively blurred. Flavin’s treatment of objects is one example that gave rise to the use of the phrase installation art for works that used the whole space. The word installation foregrounds how objects are positioned within a space and the ensemble of elements that comprise an exhibition. In his book On the “Total” Installation, Russian artist Ilya Kabakov (1933-) describes a sort of “installation which can be called a ‘total installation’ since it is constructed in such a way that the viewer […] finds himself inside of it, engrossed in it” (243). Heightening viewer awareness about how objects are installed within a space makes the viewing

---


34
experience more personal, because viewers must navigate the space in a more active way than, for instance, by looking at a painting.

Figure 1.11. Ann Veronica Janssens. Red, Yellow and Blue, 2001.
There is a diverse body of work being produced today that can be considered installation art. Installation art stems from different influences and engages different senses of the viewer. Rather than there being one history of installation art, there seem to be several parallel histories whose influences have been as diverse as “architecture, cinema, performance art, sculpture, theatre, set design, curating, Land art and painting”, with each one bringing about “a particular repertoire of concerns” (Bishop 8). Importantly, light is a common component in all of them. Bishop touches on this when she writes:

Some installations plunge you into a fictional world – like a film or theatre set – while others offer little visual stimuli, a bare minimum of perceptual cues to be sensed. Some installations are geared towards heightening your awareness of particular senses (touch or smell) while others seem to steal your sense of self-presence, refracting your image into an infinity of mirror reflections or plunging you into darkness. Others discourage you from contemplation and insist that you act – write something down, have a drink, or talk to other people. (8)

I add to this view that light is of fundamental importance to the experiences evoked by installation art, to heighten one’s awareness, as Bishop indicates, or indeed through its absence, by plunging the viewer into darkness. More than playing a mere role, I argue that light is somehow coded by the artist, and then de-coded by the interpretation of the viewer. By way of a metaphor, light can be seen as an extension of the artist because he or she seems to be “writing” with light. That is, “saying” something to the viewer with the medium of light.

Art installations that require the viewer to physically walk around within them initiate an emphasis on sensory immediacy and physical participation. The heightened awareness of other visitors – who become part of the piece – activates the viewer, in contradistinction to art which requires only visual contemplation. By becoming decentred, the senses of the viewer are activated because a sensory disturbance is created. The “decentred subject” thus becomes part of the installation. In line with Erwin Panofsky, Bishop understands decentring in contrast with the traditional centred perspective:

Renaissance perspective placed the viewer at the centre of the hypothetical “world” depicted in painting; the line of perspective, with its vanishing point on the horizon of the picture, as connected to the eyes of the viewer who stood before it. A hierarchical relationship was understood to exist between the centred viewer and the “world” of the painting spread before him. (11)

Decentring is, then, a perturbation of the viewer away from a stable point. The decentred subject is “dislocated and divided, at odds with him or herself” (13). Bishop
sees this as a positive achievement. She argues that “the correct way in which to view our condition as human subjects is as fragmented, multiple and decentred – by unconscious desires and anxieties, by an interdependent and differential relationship to the world” (13). This is to say, there is no “right” way of knowing or experiencing the world; no privileged place from which to view it. The decentred viewer is free to view the work of art from a multiplicity of perspectives or points of view. I would like to stress here that the decentralization of the viewer is, in many cases, the result of the use of light. I will further explain the treatment of light by artists in constructed dream scenes, situations of heightened perception, mimetic engulfment and activated spectatorship.

**DREAM SCENE**

The “dream scene” is an encounter with a particular type or situation of installation art in which the assembled elements create an environment and experience viewers can find analogous to their dreams. As Bishop has it, this kind of dream scene installation is typified by the total immersion of the viewing subject within an environment. This led Kabakov to describe such scenes as a “total installation”. Kabakov discusses how such a total immersion takes place. “[T]he main motor of the total installation, what it lives by, [is] the cranking up of the wheel of associations, cultural or everyday analogies, personal memories” (317). This “wheel of associations” functions similarly to the way we “see” dreams in our sleep. For me it matters that the effects of light mediates these associations, analogies and personal memories by allowing viewers to comprehend particular installations as a physical manifestation of a dream, within a totally constructed and immersive artistic environment. For example, in Janssens’ *Red, Yellow and Blue* (2001) (fig. 1.11), the viewer enters a container with translucent sides filled with mist, placed in front of the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin. The mist, in conjunction with continually changing colours contingent upon the viewer’s proximity to the walls, imparts a dreamlike appearance to the work. As Vanessa Joan Müller has it, Janssens’ spaces are “full of emotions and intensities rather than objects” and “[v]isually dissolving spatial contours and a general lack of orientation” contribute to the dreamlike quality of much of her work (137, 141).

In *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899), Freud offers a psychoanalytic definition of dreams that is useful for understanding the necessary components of this variant of installation art. As Freud has it, experiencing and interpreting dreams requires three main characteristics. The first is that, although they can include auditory fragments,
Cultures of Light

dream scenes are primarily visual: “dreams think essentially in images” (1976: 113). Freud writes about the distinguishing characteristics of dreams:

Dreams construct a situation out of these images; they represent an event which is actually happening; as Spitta (1892: 145) puts it, they “dramatize” an idea. […] But this feature of dream-life can only be understood if we further recognize that in dreams – as a rule […] we appear not to think but experience, that is to say we attach complete belief to the hallucinations. (114-15, emphasis in text).19

In installations, situations are created where viewers can move around and experience a form of activation. Light mediates the situational experience of the viewer. It changes or creates specific viewing conditions by sending a coded message to the viewer. That is, the lighting of the installation effects viewers’ interpretations, thus performing a narrative function. In Janssens’ piece, getting lost (in the coloured mist) and having one’s vision restricted is part of the visual experience of what we recognize from dream scenes. Like the dream, installation art cannot be approached cognitively but has to be experienced and that a large part of this experience is formed by light.

The second characteristic of a dream scene installation also derived from Freud is that “it has a composite structure: if taken as a whole, it will seem to be nonsensical, and can only be interpreted when broken down into its constitutive elements […]” (Bishop 16). For instance, in Kabakov’s The Man Who Flew into Space from his Apartment (1985) (fig. 1.12), a narrative scene is staged within an exhibition gallery of the Centre Georges Pompidou. Upon entering a narrow, sparsely decorated hallway, the viewer notices coats and a hat hung on one wall and a number of framed documents resting atop a shelf on an adjacent wall. The documents describe three accounts of a man who was apparently catapulted into outer space from within his apartment. These reports were allegedly dictated to the authorities by the individuals who shared the residence with the escapee. By looking around the installation the viewer notices a doorway which has been incompletely boarded-up and allows a view, through the cracks, into a small cluttered bedroom, with posters hung on the walls and bric-a-brac broken and strewn about. In one corner of the room, a maquette of the neighbourhood is displayed with a thin silver wire soaring out of one of the rooftops. In the centre of the room is a home-made catapult which has, ostensibly, slingshot the former occupant through the hole in the ceiling.

The Man Who Flew into Space from his Apartment was created through a composition of elements: the hall, the reports, the bedroom, the catapult and the wire


38
leading out of the hole. If taken as a whole, without reading the reports, for instance, viewers would find the situation incomprehensible. However, by breaking down and interpreting the various elements independently, the scene becomes comprehensible to the viewer. Furthermore, like the use of sound and reading matter, the lighting of the installation serves a plot function, similar to “a well-structured dramatic play” wherein it “activates our recollections, flows of fantasies, associations” (Kabakov 300-01). Light augments the plot by aiding the storyline, or sequence of events. In fact, the lighting elements can be seen as signposts of the narrative.

Figure 1.12. Ilya Kabakov. The Man Who Flew into Space from his Apartment. 1985.
We can also deduct from the photograph that light plays a particular part in making the scene slowly comprehensible by imparting a wholeness and sense of unity to the artificially lit scene. At the same time, a downwardly directed beam of light provides highlight and shading patterns on which viewers can focus which aids their interpretation of the depicted event. The fact that an indexical path of light streams in from above, evidenced by the cast shadow of the wooden plank on the floor, can be decoded and interpreted as an impetus that motivates the viewer to look up and “out” of the scene. Indeed, light plays a role in this artwork’s plot by leading viewers from one part of the installation space to the next or focusing our attention onto a particular aspect of the work. One example of this are the orienting reports, for instance, which are an indexical key and are emphasized by a localized brightness of illumination.

The third and most important characteristic of the dream scene installation is the activity of free association wherein each dream element can be replaced by an associative word. As Freud argues, “the dream is not meant to be ‘decoded’, but analysed through free association – in other words allowing meaning to arise through individual affective and verbal connections” (16). Viewers imaginatively project themselves into an immersive scene – created by the artist and mediated by light – that requires the viewer to freely associate on the elements, in order to articulate meaning and interpret the piece. To do this, Bishop suggests that viewers take the assemblaged elements, singularly, that is one by one, and read them symbolically; “as metonymic parts of a narrative” (16). My examples show however, that it is more of a back and forth from the whole to the parts (i.e. light as drawing together as well as distinguishing different aspects) than a question of taking elements one by one. In this sense, installation art elicits both unconscious and conscious associations from the viewer aided by the medium of light. Kabakov seems to concur, when he writes that:

Literally everything depends on it. The functions of light in the installation are unbelievably diverse. Primarily, light participates in the creation of the environment, a completely special, tense atmosphere: bright light, half-light, half-darkness, light consisting of spots illuminating only one object […] In general, it is difficult to overestimate the significance of light in the “total” installation as a means for creating a special atmosphere of recollections, imagination, especially when we are talking about semi-extinguished light. (248)
of light in the installation: Overall light, local light, and the light of the very source of light” and “together they create the unified light field” (299).

In Janssens’ *Red, Yellow and Blue*, viewers wander inside the coloured mist, influenced by the effects of the three sorts of light, as if they are wandering through their own dream-like “corridor of memory” (Kabakov 275). In this installation, overall light predominates and enters through the translucent enclosure, which again is in opposition to Bishop’s composite structure. As the daylight passes through the walls, it is coloured red, yellow and blue as the title of the work intimates. In the presence of the viewer, the overall light is transformed by the mist into what Kabakov calls “local light”. For Kabakov, “local light is [...] human light, it is located in his ‘horizon of attention’, close to him, one might even say, intimate” and “it invokes a sensation of meditation and concentration” (302). As the viewer approaches the walls of the enclosure, the illumination of the very source of light (the sun) becomes comprehensible. In conjunction with the mediums of mist and colour, light in Janssens’ installation creates the conditions for dreamlike meditation and concentration by first blurring the vision of the viewer and then slowly revealing other visitors wandering in a dreamlike state. Viewers find themselves in the middle of colour, one could even say, to the point that colour and light converge.

Janssens approaches light from a considerably different outlook than Kabakov. She deploys the materiality of light in order to highlight the viewer’s relationship to space and perception through sensory input. Bal argues that in Janssens’ work, light speaks to our bodies through our sense organs. She writes that “light becomes a primary material whose materiality – whose status as matter – has important consequences for our sense of being in space, as well as for our commonplace notions of possession and objecthood” (1999, 98). In much of Janssens’ work, the materiality of light touches the viewer by altering our perception of ourselves and the spaces we inhabit. “The materialization of light at stake here does something fundamental to our experience of touching and seeing [...]” (99). Janssens manipulates the material substance of light, as if it could be captured in a pitcher or thrown across a room. It has a materiality that viewers can somehow touch and feel through their bodily senses.

In dream scene installations, light plays a role by, firstly, aiding the creation of images in the mind of the viewer. Secondly, light intensifies both the composite structure and individual elements of dreams by directing our attention. And thirdly, light enables the free association of images by theatrically lighting the scenes in our mind, at the same time altering our perception and blurring the line between reality
Cultures of Light

and dreams. The light that touches us physically and psychologically leads the way to a sense of heightened perception.

**Heightened Perception**

The “heightened perception” situation of installation art is typified by attenuated sensory input, which can activate and decentralize the viewer to such an extent that its affectual force produces a disorienting environment with visual hallucinations of such intensity that the installation’s over-stimulus literally becomes unbearable for the viewer. I understand perception to be the process of using the bodily senses to attain information about the surrounding environment. Perception is therefore capable of changing as a result of sensory input received by various sensing organs in conjunction with one another. In “Light in Life’s Lab”, Bal describes Janssens’ work in relation to the perceiving body and to how light becomes a primary material. She writes that “[t]he duration of perception was also uneven in its rhythm, unstable in its linearity, dense and pervasive in its impact, and wavering in its location [....] (89). This comment brings to light, so to speak, that time, another medium, is an affective force that acts on the viewer and has the ability to hold him in what Bal calls “a temporality by dint of spatial stickiness” (100).

Whereas the medium of painting does not easily allow the perceiving subject to experience perception first-hand, installation art does encourage the viewing subject to have an embodied perceptual experience. The phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty was admired by many artists of the time, including Flavin and Turrell, for the role his work assigns to the body in perception. Merleau-Ponty was strongly influenced by Edmund Husserl (1859-1958) and closely associated with Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) and Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). He tended to focus on the corporeal foundations of perception. In *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), one of the primary arguments is that “the thing is inseparable from a person perceiving it, and can never be actually in itself because it stands at the other end of our gaze or at the terminus of a sensory exploration which invests it with humanity” (1998: 320).

The second key argument is that perception involves not only vision but the entire body. I suggest that the medium of light in installations like Janssens’ allows the entire body to receive the experience of what Bishop calls the “matrix of circumstances” (50) first-hand, like something being absorbed through the epidermis by osmosis. Light has inherent qualities that link the perceiving subject to the perceived object, through the senses of vision, touch and even hearing. Light can also produce heat, another medium, which is received by the whole body as a sensation of
warmth. The work of two other contemporary artists, Carsten Höller and Olafur Eliasson, exemplifies the situation of heightened perception, and I will briefly discuss their work here.

Of Belgian descent, Höller creates installations which not only engage the human senses to such an extreme extent that they induce hallucinogenic experiences, bodily euphoria and sensory overload, but he does this in ways that have been called “playful” and engage the perceiving body through various simultaneous sensory inputs.

In his innocuous-appearing Lichtwand (2000) (fig. 1.13), Höller deploys the medium of light in an effort to dislocate and disorient the viewer. 2000 incandescent light bulbs create a barrage of flashing intense light which bombards the retina with such a strong luminous input that viewers cannot remain in its presence for very long. Höller’s installations unhang the foundations of perception, in the sense that viewers
no longer look at objects in the usual way, but as if they were under the effect of drugs or the influence of a particular environmental situation. The light bulbs flash incessantly at 7.8 Hz, “a frequency that is synchronous to that of brain activity and thereby capable of inducing visual hallucinations in the viewer” (48). Viewers are forced to shut their eyes to protect themselves from the blinding light, but find that even in closing their eyes, they cannot escape the ceaseless onslaught on their senses. The viewers stand in an environment that disorients them by rendering their sense of vision useless and ineffectual.20

In addition to this radical intervention of light in vision, there is a side effect that affects the body of the viewer: heat. Lichtwand radiates a heat that attacks and infiltrates the body of the perceiving viewer, who is reciprocally entwined with the perceived object. We feel the heat first on our skin, shortly thereafter it invades the interior of our body, warming us to a point where we begin to sweat; a point of over-stimulation. The heat generated by Lichtwand penetrates and affects the body to such an extent that it causes perspiration thus informing the embodied viewer, in a somewhat coded way, that danger lurks nearby if we linger too long in this installed environment.

In contrast to Höller’s hallucinogenic over-stimulation, Eliasson presents works that seem modest and somewhat understated in their deceptive simplicity. His artistic use of elemental materials such as wind, water, heat and light affects viewers by “provoking experiences that cause a fundamental rift in the viewers usually smooth process of absorption”, as Madeleine Grynsztejn writes (14). In “(y)our entanglements: Olafur Eliasson, the museum, and consumer culture”, Grynsztejn writes that Eliasson’s work, “makes a case for the proactive subject, for the individual’s return to a heightened sense of him- or herself in the act of perceiving” (14). Eliasson’s work foregrounds the perceiving viewer with light by providing only glimpses and mediated views of visitors to the installation.

In his most famous project to date, The Weather Project (2004) (fig. 1.14), Eliasson deploys light in such a way that its affective force interacts with the viewer over a great distance. Light in this work indeed operates as a medium, an “intervening substance through which a force acts on objects at a distance or through which impressions are conveyed to the senses”.21 In this Herculean undertaking Eliasson employs affect through light and even “deceives” the embodied perception of the viewer. The viewer’s skin and vision not only feel sensations of heat and brightness,

---


but the bodyliness of the visual and tactile sensations prompts the viewer to respond to the installation as if it were a true sun.

In the nearly one hundred foot tall cavernous space of the Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern museum in London, Eliasson created what appears to be a gargantuan sun emitting an intense yellow light on one wall. After entering the space visitors can see that the architectural contours of the space have been disguised, or as Grynsztejn writes “made fluid and seemingly boundless” (11). Resembling a light London fog, artificial mist is introduced into the space through sixteen visible nozzles emanating from buzzing theatrical fog machines, which impart a hazy atmosphere to the space. At the far end of the exhibition space hangs a glowing yellow orb, similar in appearance to a winter sun hovering close to the horizon. Overhead, covering an area of nearly two thousand square feet, suspended from trusses, are three hundred mirrored ceiling panels.

Carol Diehl writes in “Northern Lights” that “Eliasson, when he is most successful, uses very evident means and creates situations that defy immediate comprehension” (113). What appears at first to be a round sun disc, on closer inspection is a semi-circular construction, fifty feet in diameter, composed of theatrical scrim material stretched across a frame of aluminium trusses. Behind this are two hundred monochromatic yellow lamps, of the type used for street lighting. Reflecting on the ceiling, the semicircular disc is transformed into an intensely glowing artificial sun by the medium of light. That is, monofrequency light, in a somewhat coded way affects visitors’ perception so much so that we feel that we have been transported into a fictitious outdoor environment where we can observe the sun at close range without getting burned; for Eliasson’s “sun” emits little heat. Because, as Merleau-Ponty has it, the interrelation between the viewer and the world is a matter of embodied perception, viewers of The Weather Project “feel” the heat of Eliasson’s “sun” through their eyes, although there is relatively little actual heat. Light as medium is transformed – through embodied perception – into another medium, the sensation of heat. Viewers feel this sensation so strongly that they begin to spontaneously sprawl out in various configurations as if they are lying down “catching rays on an industrial beachhead” and enjoying the warmth of the sun (Lee 36). Here, McLuhan’s notion that a “medium is always another medium” is underscored by the embodied reactions of viewers to Eliasson’s work. They are seeing a “sun” that they know is false but nevertheless they assemble and comport themselves as if they are actually at a beach. Through the perception of the viewer, in a McLuhanian sense, the medium of light

---

transforms into the sensation of another medium. The message of light, in this case, is heat.

Figure 1.15. Olafur Eliasson. *360° Room for All Colours*. 2002.
I can see myself seeing both as a reflected image on the ceiling and more importantly, by taking note of the negative presence of the other viewers who are silhouetted against the backdrop of the luminous orb. The light, mediated by another medium, the mist, creates an atmosphere where viewers can be seen as performing for themselves; light from the “sun” affects the viewer in such a way that they are enticed to perform for themselves.

Another work, completed two years previous to The Weather Project but nevertheless just as perceptually spectacular, is 360° Room for All Colours (2002) (fig. 1.15). Eliasson uses continuously changing colours and intensities to heighten the perceptive senses of the viewer and to foster an engagement amongst viewers. Diehl usefully describes this installation thus:

Looking from the outside rather like a giant snare drum, it is a roofless circular enclosure 10 feet high and just over 26 feet in diameter. Its interior walls made up of a matrix of colored lights controlled by a computerized light board, which, covered by a seamless curved reflective projection panel, is programmed to emit a single color at a time. Lasting for a minute or so, the color evenly saturates the wall, lighting every aspect of the room and the people in it before gradually fading to the next color. (Diehl 111)

She argues that the light has a “glamourizing effect” when we turn our attention to other viewers, as if they were professionally lit and posing in front of a fashion photographer’s seamless backdrop (111). The viewer is immersed; when they are close to the wall they are unable to see anything but colour. Similar to Turrell’s work decades earlier, it seems in this installation that the light comes right up and “touches” your eyes. Viewer’s perceptions are heightened by the intensity and colour that is imparted to them by the artwork. The medium of light works here to affect us in such a way that our emotions are coloured by our own culturally specific psychological associations of colour. For instance, when we see the colour red, we may feel mad, angry or agitated. When the colours blue and green appear, emotions of calmness rise to the surface and we achieve a more serene state of mind. The colours “enter” the body and become part of the embodied subject.
Janssens’ programmed light projection *Donut* (2003) (fig. 1.16) also radically invades the body by producing a broad band of complimentary colour producing an afterimage in the visual array of the viewer “enriched by the extraordinary variety of colours produced by the brain”, writes Hans Theys.23 This occurs during the darkened intervals between the stroboscopic spiral-oriented coloured images projected on the gallery wall. *Donut* heightens our perception by subjecting the embodied viewer to a rapid-fire succession of coloured imagery that affects our sense of equilibrium and makes us feel like we are spiralling into the work and out of control. The regular sequence of changing colours and intervening darkness is intensified by the dilation and contraction of the viewer’s pupils.

I have demonstrated that installations which heighten our perception can penetrate the body and have unexpected consequences, such as a feeling that the viewer has been transported out of the museum and onto a warm sunlit beach. In

---

other instances, the intensity of such artworks, through the medium of light, can cause hallucinations and physically repel the viewer, by over-stimulating his senses. In the next section, I will address how the viewer is affected when she is being engulfed by an installation and its illumination.

**Mimetic Engulfment**

There is a further situation of installation art I want to explore in terms of light as a medium. Here, artists and viewers alike can become engulfed, and to a certain extent, obliterated by the artwork and its illumination. In “mimetic engulfment” installations, the viewers are decentred to such an extent that they may see themselves (“mimetic”) reflected as only a disintegrated (“engulfment”) fragment. By entering an installation of this type, the reflected image of the viewer may become completely obliterated or fragmented beyond recognition, mediated by light. In interaction with other mediums such as mirrored reflections, darkness and colour, light carries a coded message from the artist that creates an embodied experience. The kinds of experiences that such installations produce are opposed to brightly lit Minimalist environments. Rather than a heightening of our perceptions, Bishop argues, “these dark installations suggest our dissolution; they seem to dislodge or annihilate our sense of self – albeit it only temporally – by plunging us into darkness, saturated colour, or refracting our image into an infinity of mirror reflections” (82). Mimetic engulfment installations impair our ability to locate ourselves within the spatial confines of the installation. These spaces are intensely confusing, intangible, and obscure our view in one way or another. In the cases below I show how light as a medium affects the perceiving subject within this kind of installation space.

These ideas of dissolution and fragmentation also stem from a pre-WWII vision, in this case, from French psychiatrist Eugène Minkowski (1885-1972). This author explains in his book *Lived Time* (1925) how daylight is characterised by “distance, extension and fullness” (1970: 428). Darkness, instead, somehow infiltrates the body, rather than keeping it at a distance. German cultural historian Wolfgang Schivelbusch writes in *Disenchanted Night* that “[i]n the symbols and myths of most cultures, night is chaos, the realm of dreams [...])” and that “it holds both repose and terror” (81). Whereas light affects us by accentuating a sense of distance, darkness in contradistinction imparts such a strong sense of closeness that it engulfs us. Minkowski remarks that:

I no longer have the black night, complete obscurity, before me; instead it covers me completely, it penetrates my whole being, it touches me in a much more intimate way than the clarity of visual space (405). [Darkness] does not
spread out before me but touches me directly, envelops me, embraces me, even penetrates me completely, passes through me, so that one could almost say that while the ego is permeable by darkness it is not permeable by light. The ego does not affirm itself in relation to darkness but becomes confused with it, becomes one with it. (429)

For Minkowski, light allows us to see clearly, far into the distance and spreads space out before us. Darkness however, confuses the viewer and obscures the clarity of visual space, creating a sort of visual chaos. It is important to note here that some of the artworks I have discussed also show that an overabundance of light (or too much proximity between light and viewer) can make our vision less clear.

A few years later in 1935, another Frenchman, scientist Roger Caillois (1931-1978), took up Minkowski’s ideas in his article “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia” where he analysed the occurrence of insect camouflage and mimicry. In this essay Caillois observes that non-mimetic insects stand a greater chance of being eaten by predators than mimetic insects. He writes that the incidence of camouflage is in fact “a disturbance in the […] relations between personality and space” and describes insect mimicry as a “temptation by space” (28). We as viewers often have a desire to assimilate ourselves into our surroundings, as a sort of fusion between ourselves and the environment in which we stand. Bishop relies on Caillois’s famous essay when she argues that as with human experiences of darkness, “the mimetic insect is decentred: it no longer feels itself to be the origin of spatial co-ordinates, and its awareness of being an entity distinct from its external surroundings begins to disintegrate” (84). But is darkness really essential? My next example demonstrates that the mimicry effect is also disorienting in full light. When humans experience colour uniformity, we also become decentred, we begin to fuse with our environment by taking on its appearance and begin to disintegrate visually and psychologically. We see ourselves and others within the same environment in a way that is similar to the environment in which we stand. Caillois wrote that the insect “is similar, not similar to something, but just similar” (30). In this sense, viewers in this type of installation, aided by the affective force of colour uniformity, become anonymously depersonalised and similar in appearance or at least in self-perception to one another through a process that Caillois calls “depersonalisation by assimilation to space” (30).

Caillois’ argument is influenced by Freud’s complicated and controversial theory of the death drive, where he posits a theory that humans have a desire to return to an inanimate state. It had, in turn, a great influence on the Surrealists as well as on Jacques Lacan (1901-1981). The disintegrating work of the death drive “can be
experienced as both pleasurable and unpleasurable‖, and the key to the experience of mimetic engulfment is “the idea of instinctual renunciation” where the viewer renounces his or her individuality as a matter of instinct (Bishop 84). Because this experience can be pleasurable, many artists, including Turrell and Lucas Samaras (1936-), have taken up these ideas in their work, beginning in the 1960s. The life’s work of one particular Japanese artist exemplifies the mimetic engulfment installation and, moreover, she displays or foregrounds the medium of light.

Figure 1.17. Yayoi Kusama. Dots Obsession: New Century. 2000.

Enter the work of Yayoi Kusama. This artist began hearing voices, experiencing hallucinations and seeing the external world covered in patterns as early as the 1940s. She describes herself as an obsessive artist. Struggling with mental illness, she has voluntarily taken up long-term residence at the Matsumoto Psychiatric Hospital in Nagano prefecture, where she continues to work assisted by attendants in a nearby studio. Her works, which include painting, sculpture, collage, performance and installation pieces, display her obsession with repetitious pattern and
accumulation. Much of her artworks are also infused with sexual connotations and references to her personal psychological condition. One of these autobiographic psychological references is to her self-proclaimed desire for self-obliteration. She attempts to accomplish this through the aesthetic motif of polka dots. J. F. Rodenbeck observes in his article “Yayoi Kusama: surface · stitch · skin” that this “self-professed visionary madwoman” who is “fantastically dressed, distinctly eccentric and unconventional […] settled on the motif of the polka dot as surface element […] which now became ubiquitous, covering virtually every available surface, from fabric elements to living skin” (149; 152). Kusama has an embodied experience with the polka dot that affects her by allowing her to “return to an inanimate state”, as Caillois would have it. That is, she seeks to obliterate herself within her installation.

![Figure 1.18. Yayoi Kusama. Kusama's Pop Show or Endless Love, (1966; remade 1994).](image)

In my view, light’s affective force contributes to this by creating visual distance similar to daylight. In *Dots Obsession: New Century* (2000) (fig. 1.17), Kusama deploys natural sunlight augmented by artificial light to illuminate this installation of eleven balloons covered with vinyl polka dots. The quality of light is such that the space is uniformly lit with relatively low amounts of shadow. The space seems rather evenly illuminated and this diffusion of light adds to the obliteration effect of the installation by facilitating the visual assimilation of the balloons with the walls by
blurring their boundaries. Although both cast- and self-shadow can be observed, they are of insufficient intensity to undermine our visual conflation of the balloons and the walls.\textsuperscript{24} The walls and balloons fade into each other; they obliterate each other to such a point that we can hardly tell them apart. When Kusama enters the installation attired in the same colours and motif, she too visually and psychologically fades into the walls and balloons, completing her process of self-obliteration. The artist, as both viewer and performer in relation to this piece, is affected by the medium of light, which, in conjunction with her attire, enables her embodied obliteration by visually assimilating her into the installation.

In an earlier installation piece doubly titled \textit{Kusama’s Peep Show or Endless Love Show} (1966) (fig. 1.18), Kusama uses light to show the viewer, that is, present the viewer to him or herself, mediated by her artistic practice. In this installation Kusama offers what Bishop calls a “mimetic experience of fragmentation” to the viewer (90). Within this installation, our face is dispersed around the exhibit to an infinite point where we are “just similar”, as Caillois wrote, and where linear perspective is deformed. Rodenbeck explains:

The viewer approached the outside of an empty hexagonal room roughly nine feet in diameter lined with mirrors and illuminated by a concentric arrangement of sequenced red, blue, green and white light bulbs on the ceiling. A tape loop of Beatles music accompanied the clacking of the lights overhead, which flashed in increasingly vertiginous cycles. Two head-sized openings in the walls allowed viewers to look into the chamber, catching themselves and, perhaps, someone else – “ideally someone you’re in love with, judging from the title” – [...] infinitely reflected. (152)\textsuperscript{25}

Mirrors enable this infinite reflection effect but light, or more precisely, light bulbs of the sort found on Broadway and West 42nd Street peep show signs during the 1960s, affect the viewer by blending the reflected image of the viewer metonymically with the perceived experience of being a performer in one of these explicit peep shows. Kusama’s artistic message is conveyed through the use of a specific type of light, namely the signboard type. Light in this installation also performs extreme disorientation. Coupled with the reflected and fragmented mirror images, the clacking auditory input and flashing lights send viewers into a confused state of consciousness whereby they feel the embodied percept of being disoriented and fragmented by the firing lights which originally were supposed to spell out “love” and “sex”. Here,

\textsuperscript{24} Cast-shadow is a shadow that is thrown onto another surface by a shadow caster. Self-shadow is the self-occluded surface of an object. See also Chapter 4 of the present study which addresses shadows specifically.

\textsuperscript{25} Comment by Peter Schjeldahl in \textit{ArtNews} 65 (May 1966): 18.
Kusama uses light as medium in order to decentre the viewer by distorting his or her visual array and the hardware of the sex industry to facilitate the effect of obliteration into what remains an anonymous profession.

Janssens’ *Red, Yellow and Blue* is a quintessential example of this installation situation. It affects the viewer in such a way that we feel decentred by an effect of mimetic engulfment. Wandering through the mist of the installation an atmosphere envelopes the viewer that can be experienced as nearly pure colour. This is not to say that viewers experience a pure form of a particular hue, as in Eliasson’s piece discussed earlier, but we experience the sensation of walking through pure colour as if walking through air. Kabakov claims that colour and light create a unified atmosphere. In this way, the atmosphere of coloured light becomes one of the main perceptive vehicles of the “total” installation. “The arrangement of this atmosphere, this ‘air’ of the installation [...] must be breathed into, pumped into it [...]” (296). What Janssens “breaths” and “pumps” into *Red, Yellow and Blue* is perception itself. Light becomes perception by being coloured and transmitted to the body through both the eyes and skin while the coloured mist engulfs and “invades” our body through the sensations of the skin.

I have argued here that light as a medium in mimetic engulfment installations is capable of decentring viewers by delivering a coded message to the viewer that enters the body through the skin and eyes – infiltrating the body through its senses, not its conscious intellect. The boundaries between viewer and object may become so gelatinous that light, in conjunction with colour uniformity, can create a bodily experience that virtually obliterates the subject/object binary opposition.

**Activated Spectatorship**

If the previous sections focused on an analysis of how light decentres the viewer of installation art through a process of disintegration, then this section investigates the notion of activated spectatorship as a politicized aesthetic practice mediated by light. Within this situation, a relationship is implied between the activated spectatorship of the viewer and their active engagement with the wider social and political environment. Because viewers are autonomous subjects, beings in the world, they necessarily make connections between experiences within installations and their wider lived experiences. Here, the viewer’s presence is required to complete the work of art. The work discussed below beckons the viewer to walk around, engage with others and allow the workings of his or her mind to comprehend what Bishop calls “theoretical horizons” (116). For installations of this kind, a mediated space must exist wherein the subject actively participates in a reciprocal relationship, a political dialogue between

---

55
himself, the artwork and, as I will show, others who share the same space. In the widest possible sense, ‘politics’ refers to the government or public affairs of a country including the interrelationships between the people, groups, or organizations insofar as they involve power and influence. Peter Weibel writes in “The Politics of Light” that the work of the artist “makes it possible to see the social and political context of the medium of light” (269). That is, how the medium of light dialogues with the viewer by facilitating interaction, or sending a coded message that can be interpreted. Bal writes in “Light Politics” that “subjects must engage with their environments, neither detached nor immersed but active [...] (156-57). This activity and engagement within the installation allows viewers to not only engage with the constructed installation environment, which mediates their worldview, but also facilitates communal interaction and dialogue about that view with other viewers. In fact, for some artists, viewer participation is crucial and the work is not complete without them.

![Private Light/Public Light](image)

**Figure 1.19.** Mischa Kuball *Private Light/Public Light*. German contribution to the 24th São Paulo Biennale. Installation photo: Nelson Kon, São Paulo, 1998.
Relational art is formatted similarly to installation art but requires the presence of the viewer in order to fulfill its mission to prod the viewer into a mode of politically active spectatorship. It is user-reliant, so to speak. This can be seen in the work of German artist Mischa Kuball, who creates installations that induce activated spectatorship and send a coded message through the medium of light. In 1998, Kuball asked seventy-two families or individuals living in São Paulo, Brazil to contribute one light fixture from their home in exchange for one developed by Kuball. At the 24th São Paulo Biennale, the donated lamps were installed close together in the exhibition space and constituted the German contribution to the exhibition. *Private Light/Public Light* (1998) (fig. 1.19) represents the substitution of subject for object. That is, Kuball substituted light fixtures in place of the people who donated them. The variety of size and shape of the luminaries is analogous to the diversity of the human form.

In this installation viewers are neither immersed nor completely surrounded. However, they can walk around and between the accretions of glowing luminaires and become surrounded. Viewers are free to engage with one another and talk about not only their collective experiences but also their private thoughts that may be triggered by a resemblance of a luminaire to one in their own possession. This installation relates the private space of the home to the aesthetics of public exhibition and vice versa. By extension, the personal lights represent, metonymically, the subjective individual now relocated in the public sphere. *Private Light/Public Light* invites viewers to discuss aspects of their private lives with one another and to contrast them with their collective experiences and thoughts. This work exposes the social and political context of the viewer by displaying the personally chosen fixtures in a public context.
Another piece by Kuball can be considered a catalyst for participation wherein viewers are activated by projections of light. In the *Power of Codes* (1999) (fig. 1.20), Kuball activates the viewer by projecting constantly changing combinations of symbols onto the walls of a permanent exhibition space in the Tokyo National Museum. This created an ever-changing light situation inside one of the galleries. Viewers are activated by the enticing beams extending in space, in search of a new perspective from which to view the continuously shifting random text that has become a sort of searchlight. Six carousel-type slide projectors hurl white letters and graphic figures onto the walls of a gallery containing display cases holding ancient pottery and ceramics. Each projector, rotating horizontally by 360 degrees, emits a beam of white light formed into minimal, abstract elements (letters and symbols). Occasionally, an individual letter momentarily approaches another, which elicits the promise of meaning in the mind of the viewer. Here, the medium of light is transformed into individual elements of language that form the basis of human interaction and conversation.
In her article *Power of Codes—Space for Speech*, Yukiko Shikata writes:

The artist brought together contrasting elements – Far Eastern ceramics and pottery and the Roman alphabet, old media (ceramics and pottery) and contemporary media (projectors and monitors), material and non-material, permanent exhibition and temporary intervention, etc. – and arranged them to meet in the space in an unprecedented way. (327)

This installation combines meaning with non-meaning. The seemingly meaningless flying text acquires meaning when viewed in conjunction with the visually contiguous exhibit labels, and other textural and symbolic elements extant on the ethnographic artefacts. Kuball’s lightwork activates the spectator/viewer to notice and perhaps read the textural labels on the vitrines and at the same time creates political associations between the labels, the light letters and the artefacts. That is, the viewer generates his or her own meaning which is dependent on their individual physical experience in the gallery, and their perception of the interaction between the artefacts and the kinetic beams of light extending through the display cases. The beams are transmitted through, reflected, and refracted by the display case glass, which occasionally produces a kaleidoscopic rainbow effect. The viewers’ own memories combine in such a way with the flying textual elements that the viewer actively experiences the work by changing their position within the space, which according to Shikata “triggers the transformation of the codes and the generation of the meaning” within the viewer (330). She writes that the phenomenon of the multi-reflection of the minimal letters can be understood as a “communication network model” that creates “a multi-layered, parallel, generating, decentralized, distributed space for autonomous experience” (331). This installation, with the aid of the medium of light, creates a space where visitors to both the ceramics exhibit and Kuball’s exhibit can meet, talk and interact with one another which fosters an activated mode of spectatorship.

In terms of an activated mode of spectatorship, Janssens’ *Red, Yellow and Blue* creates a light-infused environment where viewers temporarily “float” around, inhabiting space, sometimes in interaction with others where imagining takes place. Bal writes in “Inside the Polis” that “[w]hen such affect-producing imagining touches others […] the field of the political is activated” (196). In Janssens’ work, for example, the act of inhabiting a space filled with coloured light and mist provokes contemplation and imagination in the mind of the viewer. These are certainly not passive activities of the mind, rather they are quite active and generally involve thoughts of the subject experiencing and interacting in the world. I consider this piece to be an example of an installation wherein an activated mode of spectatorship exists. This is so because Janssens takes “the whole of human relations and their social
context” as Nicolas Bourriaud expresses it, as her theoretical and practical point of departure (113). I argue that the transitive relationship that exists between the activated spectator and his or her engagement with the wider social and political arena is accomplished through and augmented by the medium of light. The combination of light, colour and mist creates the conditions in which viewers can actively contemplate their lived experiences in the world.

In my introduction to this chapter I ask how artists deploy light as a medium. On the basis of these analyses, I find in the first section, that the medium of light is an intermediary agent and material substance. It is deployed by artists to extend their thought processes and as a mode of expression apart from the written language (although it can include such lexical elements). Light as a medium is “pure information” and a “medium without a message” which acts as a conduit through which artists send a message that is somewhat coded to the viewer. In the second section, starting in 1915, I trace the historical lineage of this medium from the beginnings of its use with the Clavalux and Moholy-Nagy’s Light Prop for an Electric Stage to the advent of the Light and Space movement of the 1960s. In the next section, I analyse how artists such as Dan Flavin and James Turrell affect the perceptions of the viewer with the medium of light. I find that it is imbued with an affective force which engages the viewer through more than just our sense of vision. It affects viewer perceptions to a great extent and it has a history of such use since the beginning of the 20th century. In the final sections, I analyze installation situations where light has been deployed in pursuit of various goals such as viewer engulfment, political involvement, initiating a state of dream consciousness and a heightening of perception. This chapter was devoted to an exploration of how light as a medium may help us expand our field, if not our sculptural, then our theoretical scope of artistic activity and spectatorship. The following chapter analyses how the medium of light is being used as a narrative tool to punctuate the exhibitionary story.