Light as Medium: The Use of Natural and Artificial Light in Modern and Contemporary Art Since 1960

Background Notes

Barry Venning — 18 November 2026



Olafur Eliasson (b. 1967). ***The Weather Project.*** 2003-2004. Tate Modern, Turbine Hall.

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Since 1960, light has emerged as one of the most radical and transformative media in modern and contemporary art. No longer confined to its traditional role as a tool for illumination or representation, light itself has been foregrounded as material, subject, and experience. Artists working in the postwar period have explored both natural and artificial light to challenge the boundaries of sculpture, painting, architecture, and performance, redefining what constitutes an artwork and how it is perceived. The use of light as a medium reflects broader shifts in artistic practice after 1960, including the dematerialization of the art object, technological innovation, and expanded notions of spectatorship. The seminar will examine how artists have employed natural and artificial light since 1960, tracing its conceptual, aesthetic, and experiential significance within modern and contemporary art.

Postwar Context and the Dematerialization of Art

The aftermath of World War II marked a turning point in artistic production. The trauma of the war, combined with rapid technological development and changing social conditions, prompted many artists to reject traditional object-based art forms. By the 1960s, movements such as Minimalism, Conceptual Art, and Land Art emphasized process, perception, and environment over permanent material objects. Light, inherently immaterial and transient, became an ideal medium through which artists could question the art object's status and explore perception itself.

Artistic theory during this period increasingly drew on phenomenology, particularly the ideas of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, which emphasized embodied perception and the viewer's lived experience. Light-based art aligned naturally with this focus, as it requires the viewer's physical presence and sensory engagement. Rather than representing something in the visible world, light artworks often function by shaping the conditions under which seeing occurs.

Artificial Light and Minimalist Interventions

One of the most influential figures in the use of artificial light is Dan Flavin (1933-96), whose work from the early 1960s onward such as his *Diagonal of May 25, 1963 (to Constantin Brancusi),* **(1)** utilized commercially available fluorescent tubes. Flavin's installations rejected illusionism and personal

expression, aligning with Minimalist principles of industrial materials and serial repetition. By arranging fluorescent lights directly in gallery spaces, Flavin transformed architecture into part of the artwork, bathing walls and corners in coloured light.



(1) Dan Flavin (1933-1996) ***The diagonal of May 25, 1963 (to Constantin Brancusi)*****,** 1963. Yellow fluorescent light. 244 cm long on the diagonal. © Stephen Flavin/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Flavin's work challenged traditional distinctions between sculpture and environment. The physical fixture was secondary to the light it emitted, which altered spatial perception and atmosphere. Importantly, the light could not be separated from the space it inhabited, making the viewer's movement and position central to the experience. Artificial light here functioned not as representation but as presence, emphasizing immediacy and temporality.

Artists such as Bruce Nauman (b.1941), who has a background in mathematics and philosophy as well as art, used light to explore psychological effects and the workings of language. Nauman's neon works such as *Run From Fear; Fun from Rear* (1972) **(2)**, which drew on the burgeoning semiotic theory of the 1960s, combined text, light, and architectural placement to create an environment that was at once

seductive, amusing and thought-provoking. Artificial light became a tool not only for visual transformation and conceptual provocation, as in Nauman's case, but also confessional and emotional purposes in the light works of Tracey Emin (b.1963) such as her *The More of You, the More I Love You*, (2016). Emin's works copy her own handwriting and her use of neon is inspired by her childhood memories of the illuminations in Margate where she grew up.



(2) Bruce Nauman: ***Run from Fear, Fun from Rear***, Tate. 1967. Neon lighting, window or wall sign. Part a: 20.3 x 116.8 x 5.7 cm Part b: 18.4 x 113 x 5.7 cm Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art, Gerald S. Elliott Collection

The Light and Space Movement

In Southern California during the 1960s and 1970s, the Light and Space movement placed light at the very centre of artistic inquiry. Artists such as James Turrell (b. 1943), Robert Irwin (b. 1928), and Doug Wheeler (b. 1939) sought to create immersive environments that heightened perceptual awareness. Their works often minimized visible objects altogether, using light, colour, and subtle architectural modifications to destabilize the viewer's sense of depth, scale, and orientation.

James Turrell's practice is particularly emblematic. His installations use carefully controlled artificial light to create fields of colour that appear almost tangible. Turrell's colossal, ongoing, long-term project *Roden Crater* (begun 1977) **(3)** further incorporates natural light, using the sun, moon, and

stars as compositional elements within a volcanic crater in Arizona. Here, environment, plus natural and artificial light converge in a sustained exploration of perception, time, and cosmology.



(3) James Turrell (b. 1943). ***Roden Crater, East Portal.*** Begun 1977.

Robert Irwin, meanwhile, described his work as being "about perception itself." His interventions were often so subtle that viewers were initially unsure whether they were encountering an artwork at all. This ambiguity underscored light's capacity to operate at the threshold of visibility, reinforcing the idea that perception is an active, interpretive process.

Natural Light and Site-Specific Practices

While artificial light allowed for precision and control, many artists since 1960 have turned to natural light to emphasize temporality, contingency, and site-specificity. Natural light changes throughout the day and across seasons, introducing unpredictability and duration into the artwork. This quality aligned closely with Land Art and environmental art practices of the late 1960s and 1970s.

Artists such as Nancy Holt (1938-2014) used natural light as a sculptural material. Her work *Sun Tunnels* (1973–76) **(4)** consists of large concrete cylinders aligned with the sunrise and sunset during solstices. Light becomes a marker of cosmic time, connecting human experience to astronomical cycles. In such works, light is inseparable from landscape, geography, and ecological awareness.



(4) Nancy Holt (1938-2014). ***Sun Tunnels.*** 1973-76. Great Basin Desert, Utah. Concrete, steel, earth.

More recently, artists like Olafur Eliasson (b. 1967) have combined natural and artificial light to explore perception, climate, and collective experience. Eliasson's installations often simulate natural phenomena—sunlight, fog, rainbows—within institutional spaces. In *The Weather Project* **(front cover)** (2003), a massive artificial sun filled Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, prompting viewers to lie on the floor and contemplate both the spectacle and their shared presence. The work blurred boundaries between natural and artificial, authentic and constructed, highlighting how light mediates our understanding of nature itself

Light, Technology, and Contemporary Practice

Advances in technology since the late twentieth century have significantly expanded the possibilities of light-based art. LEDs, digital programming, and projection technologies have enabled artists to work with light dynamically, interactively, and at architectural scale. Contemporary artists frequently integrate light with sound, video, and data, creating immersive environments that respond to viewers or external conditions.

The "solid light" installations of Anthony McCall (b.1946) **(5)** exemplify this shift. The first of these works, *Line Describing a Cone* (1973) projects through a fine mist to create a volumetric form that slowly evolves in three-dimensional space. McCall creates volumetric forms that viewers can physically enter and move through. Light takes on sculptural presence while remaining immaterial, reinforcing its paradoxical nature. The viewer's body

becomes an active component of the work, disrupting the traditional passive role of spectatorship.



(5) Anthony McCall (b. 1946) ***Line describing a cone.*** 1973. Projected light and mist. Tate Modern installation, 2025

Artists such as Yayoi Kusama have also employed artificial light to powerful psychological effect. Her *Infinity Mirror Rooms* use mirrored surfaces and small points of light to create the illusion of infinite space, evoking themes of self-obliteration, repetition, and cosmic vastness. These works underscore light's capacity to alter spatial perception and emotional experience, often blurring the line between art and spectacle.

Conceptual and Political Dimensions of Light

Beyond aesthetics and perception, light has also been used conceptually and politically. Neon and LED signage, for example, carry associations with advertising, urban space, and power. Artists such as Jenny Holzer have appropriated these forms to critique consumer culture, language, and authority. Light's visibility makes it a potent tool for public art and protest, while its immateriality resists commodification. Neon and LED signage may be costly to instal, and they require advanced planning, but projections such as those of Krzysztof Wodiczko (b. 1943) can have an impromptu, 'pop-up' quality: they can be set up quite flexibly, they can target specific buildings and then be removed immediately if the authorities begin to take an interest.

Conclusion

Since 1960, the use of natural and artificial light as a medium has profoundly reshaped modern and contemporary art, and continues to do so. Contemporary concerns around sustainability and energy consumption have renewed interest in natural light and environmentally responsive installations. Artists such as Adela Andea (b.1976) increasingly consider the ecological implications of light use, using LEDs and recycled materials in works such as her *Eukaryotic Cell 3*, while other artists integrate solar power or they follow James Turrell or Robert Irwin by working with daylight to minimize environmental impact. As both a physical phenomenon and a conceptual tool, light continues to offer artists a uniquely versatile medium through which to explore how we see, experience, and understand the world.

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