



The works are electrified. Please do not touch them and please hold children's hands.

Neon. Who's afraid of red, yellow and blue?

Curator : David Rosenberg

The first sign to use a new type of light, developed by the French inventor and physicist Georges Claude, appeared in a Parisian street in 1912. The principle of this brilliant invention rests on the luminous properties of neon, a rare colourless gas which, when enclosed in a glass tube with an electric current passed through it, gives off a red glow. Other gases, which produce other colours, can be used (helium gives yellow, argon violet, or blue when mixed with mercury vapour, etc.). "Neon" became the generic term for this type of light, and includes both those made by artist-craftsmen and the industrially-produced fluorescent tubes that came later. Within a few years, neon lighting trans-

formed the urban landscape, first in France, then in the United States in the 1920s when Georges Claude exported his patent.

Quick to turn the inventions of their time to other uses, a handful of artists began to work with neon in the 1930's. Neon lights protruded from the fibreglass busts made by Czech artist Zdeněk Pešánek (a few of these works still exist but unfortunately we are unable to show them here). Gyula Kosice and Lucio Fontana explored the medium in the late 1940s and early 1950s. However, it was in the 1960s that neon took off as a medium in art, particularly in conceptualism and minimalism in America, in *arte povera* in Italy, and in France with artists such as François Morellet, Martial Raysse and Piotr Kowalski. While making no claims to be a retrospective, this exhibition does feature significant examples from each of these landmark periods. Considered outmoded in the 1990s, neon has in the last ten years or so become popular in contemporary art, seen in abundance at art fairs, biennials and in art schools. The idea behind *Neon* is to set this recent proliferation within a lineage by presenting the trailblazers who were first to use neon in art... rarely a subject of exhibitions or publications until now. Hence the humorous subtitle chosen by curator David Rosenberg and inspired by Barnett Newman's famous series of paintings *Who's afraid of red, yellow and blue? Is neon frightening?* It can certainly command respect : presenting such a combination of glass, rare gases and high-voltage electricity is a delicate operation. Neon is often disparaged, as its origins in advertising have labelled it gaudy or cheap. More broadly, *Neon* focuses on a medium which of necessity brings together works with very diverse aims, and which must be respected in their difference. Neon remains a captivating and sensual medium to which la maison rouge wishes to pay tribute in its centenary year.

Near the entrance hangs a work by **Giancarlo Zen**. An Italian artist close to the kinetic and geometric abstract movements of the 1960s, and with a keen interest in theories of perception and the psychology of forms, he combines coloured neon lights with various media. This piece, which uses neon light and an incandescent lamp, alludes to the various techniques of lighting, which we will see again later in the work of another artist, Mathieu Mercier.

The works in the first gallery show the range of possible approaches to neon: recycling and détournement, drawing, text and assemblage. With **Franck Scurti**, neon takes a humorous trip back to its origins. The artist is interested in instantly recognisable graphic forms such as adverts and shop signs. In *Les Reflets*, he takes the signs we encounter every day in our towns and cities - lottery symbols, signs outside chemist's or tobacconist's - and represents them as though reflected in a pool of water. Despite the inverted reading of the sign and the wobbly contours, we easily identify the original.

On the other wall, *Essence* by **Saâdane Afif** is a copy of a Paris petrol station sign. Moved to an arts venue, it takes on a more philosophical meaning.

Alain Séchas is one of the few artists in the exhibition to have actually produced a drawing in neon. In his portrait of *Maryline*, the flickering neon changes the drawing to create a miniature narrative. As with Bruce Nauman, shown later in the exhibition, these movements are both touching and grotesque.

Jean-Michel Alberola's neons, in the cabinets, are both text and image. They work as calligrams: hope ("espérance") hangs by a thread, while "rien" (nothing) inhabits a skull. The artist develops a metaphysical contemplation of the human condition and the vanity of all things. Opposite, the paradoxical work of **Su-Mei Tsei** plays on the dissociation between meaning and object, between signified and signifier: The subject of the piece is everything ("tout") except what you see (the colour red). An infinity of possibilities is contained within this simple statement.

Sarkis is often critical of museums which reify objects steeped in their own history (especially ritual objects) and empty them of their meaning. Here, he restores an aura to a hair jacket used for secret ceremonies in Cameroon, by showing it in the coloured halo of fluorescent lights.

Sylvie Fleury's statement in the patio echoes a form of "neo-feminism" that does away with guilt and embraces make-up and high heels at the same time as the desire for power and emancipation. Since the early 1990s, the artist has made neon works in vivid colours, displaying the kind of glib instructions and superficial phrases found in women's magazines. *High Heels on the Moon* could be one of these slogans advocating ultra-femininity in all circumstances (even on the moon). Hidden behind one of the pillars, *Une pomme* by **Pierre Malphettes** is one of nature's rare incursions into the exhibition. The artist seeks to give shape to natural phenomena (cloud, fog) in manufactured materials. Here, a neon line gives form to the trajectory of a falling apple and serves as its own caption. **Nathalie Brevet** and **Hugues Rochette**, in the opposite corner, point to the limitations of neon by pursuing the impossible task of creating a perfect form (a spiral) from this artisanal material.

Maurizio Nannucci produced his first works in neon in 1967, combining his interest in linguistic statements with the intangible and poetic qualities of coloured light. In *Who's afraid of red, blue and yellow?* he transforms the title of a series of late works by Barnett Newman into a tautological sign: the words are written in the colour they name. The work takes us back both to American abstract painting, as a material object, and to intangible colours. Nannucci places himself in a line of descent with Newman: he paints, but by other means. In the 1990s, his works became more abstract. In *ART*, the signs, both semantic tools and physical data, become difficult to decipher.

Light speaks

Neon is, by virtue of its technology, a linear art (the tube) which adapts particularly well to the handwritten or typographic form. In an advertising context, neon demands to be seen as much as to be read. Light makes the message stand out, while its movement holds the attention. This made neon an attractive medium for conceptual artists, but also for all those who manipulate language, in a sculptural, poetic or political way.

Joseph Kosuth is a major exponent of conceptual art and one of the first to use neon lettering. In the mid-1960s, based on an understanding of the "linguistic nature of all art propositions," he decided to substitute art objects with self-referential statements, i.e. statements that describe their own materiality and their own nature. Thus *Neon*, whose technique and form correspond exactly to the semantically legible information, or further on *Words are deeds*. **Eric Michel's** tautological statement *La lumière parle* uses the same logic, while in *À contre-courant* **Clairet and Jugnet** shape the letters as though they were constrained by the (electric or artistic?) current to which they refer.

The circular piece by **Cerith Wyn Evans**, which is hung from the ceiling like a chandelier, spells out a palindrome (a phrase that reads the same both forwards and backwards) in Latin, which the situationist Guy Debord used as the title of a 1978 film on "consumer society and capitalist alienation." The phrase, which translates as "We turn in the night, consumed by fire," is a comment on the state of society at the same time as a poetic description of the piece itself.

Jean-Michel Alberola's work refers to a verse in German by Friedrich Hölderlin ("for us everything is concentrated upon the spiritual, we have become poor in order to become rich") but is made illegible as the words are heaped into a pile. Martin Heidegger chose this verse as the basis for his meditation in the text *Die Armut* (poverty), from which the work takes its title. Quite

apart from the meaning of the verse and its posterity, Alberola has retained the brilliance of the phrase restored into light.

The writer and poet **Ian Hamilton Finlay** turned to concrete poetry in the 1960s, taking words off the page and into new media such as sculptures, gardens and architecture. *Wave Ave* is almost a haiku, an extremely short poem based on the evocative power of the juxtaposition of two words, *wave* and the Roman greeting *ave*, and the echoing repetition of this last syllable.

By quoting Gabriel García Márquez's novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, **Alfredo Jaar** evokes the dark years of his native land, Chile, and its isolation under the dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet. Yet the subtitle ("not really") urges us not to rely on what is written, an allusion to the unofficial support of the United States for Pinochet's military regime.

Jean-Pierre Bertrand is first and foremost a painter who works the materials of his pictures in a very sensitive way, in monochromes and following a precise creative procedure. *Pale Incision* is one of a series of neon works which accompany his "plasmic paintings." Illuminated words are intended to help the viewer see the surfaces of the paintings. Displayed alone, the neon takes the place of the pictorial medium and creates the mental image of the absent painting.

The work of **Sarkis** is always about his personal experience. *C.R.I.*, in the middle of the gallery, uses materials (magnetic tapes, African idols) that have recurred in his work since the 1970s; objects from different provenances and eras which together form a sort of rebus. They are associated with the word "cri" which suggests a cry of despair as well as making reference to Edvard Munch's painting *The Scream* (*Le Cri* in French), which prompted Sarkis' decision to become an artist when he first saw it at the age of sixteen.

À luta continua (the struggle continues) was the rallying cry of the FRELIMO movement during Mozambique's war for independence from Portugal. Having become the title of a popular song in South Africa, the country where

Thomas Mulcaire was born, transformed into a sign the slogan takes on an universality, and becomes a permanent incitement to resistance and rebellion.

The May 1968 slogan cited by **Miri Segal** has lost all immediate legibility: it can only be made out as a reflection, i.e. a phenomenon with no tangible reality. Has the desire for change that sparked the riots of 1968 been reduced to an evanescent mental image?

Sigalit Landau's work belongs to a series of diptychs of small domestic heaters whose coils have been replaced by expressions in neon using the word "home". Home, the place where you feel at home: your house, your native land, the hearth... Yet there is nothing comforting about this message to "go... home" – only intolerance and rejection.

Whether in paint or neon, the words of the African-American artist **Glenn Ligon** address questions of racial, sexual and social representation. As its title indicates, *Excerpt* is a quotation: the work repeats two fragments of an installation in neon by Bruce Nauman (*One Hundred Live and Die*), in which the American artist pairs the imperatives "live" and "die" with other words. Out of context, the two phrases in black take on a political meaning. Ligon shows that these are the only words in Nauman's work which are not illuminated (the tubes are covered in black paint) and raises a question as to the reasons for their invisibility.

The size and shape of *Lager* recall the adverts for beer that hang in the windows of bars in Germany. As she often does, **Claire Fontaine** draws our attention both to the ambiguity and ambivalence that are at play in the smallest terms of daily life. Because "Lager" also means "camp" in German. By covering the glass tube entirely with black, allowing only a faint light to filter from the electrodes, Claire Fontaine evokes the memory of Holocaust survivors, and the idea that they are the fragile guardians of a tragic history that is gradually being extinguished by time and forgetting.

The apparently chaotic installation by the American artist **Jason Rhoades** in fact corresponds to a precise ritual. The artist hosted Black Pussy Soirée Cabaret Macramé evenings in his Los Angeles studio, a wild performance during which guests from different cultural and social backgrounds were asked to provide names for the female genitals. These could be poetic, slang, scientific, vernacular, etc. These 1,724 words, recorded in the book displayed on the table, were then transposed in neon and integrated into a series of installations between 2003 and 2006, when Rhoades died. The jumble of wires and transformers reproduces the cacophony and exuberance of these evenings, of which this work is the trace.

Compared with this linguistic approach to the female body, **Tracey Emin's** message to *Just Love Me* can seem rather sentimental. Emin, who is known for using the intimate details of her personal life as a starting point for her work, illuminates a romantic request which betrays a sense of vulnerability. Hard to tell whether the work describes a genuine emotion or a parody of emotion.

Parody is also at work with the American artist **David Kramer**. He appropriates adverts from the 1970s and the idyllic image of the American Dream that they convey. The artificial colours of the neon lights that illuminate the painting accentuate the kitsch sunset and the hollow, stereotyped statement that goes with it.

Crisis

Red is the original colour of neon, since this is the colour that neon gas produces when an electric current is passed through it. It also signals danger and threat, which some of the works in this room evoke.

True to his practice of appropriating existing forms (security tapes, barbed wire), **Kendell Geers** loads neon signs with an ambiguous meaning. Depending on whether the first letter is lit or not, the word **TERROR** or **ERROR** is dis-

played. This work is part of a group of three (B/ORDER and D/ANGER) whose meanings reflect essential themes in Geers' work - violence, danger, oppression - in a direct aesthetic.

An exponent of what became known as "eccentric abstraction" in the 1960s, **Keith Sonnier** takes inspiration from minimalist forms, to which he adds evocative references and elements from his own personal legend. *Elliptical Shield*, a recent work, seems inspired by a primitive work of art which has been transposed into modern materials.

Historical avant-garde movements (constructivism, Bauhaus) and modern utopias are recurrent themes in the work of **Mai-Thu Perret**, which she mixes with fictional narratives, often linked to the objects she produces. A pure geometric form, the spiral, has been explored by avant-garde movements. Man Ray's *Lampshade*, Oskar Schlemmer's costumes for the *Ballet Triadique*, or Vladimir Tatline's *Monument to the Third International* are all possible references here.

Jill Magid's work consistently addresses her interest in surveillance systems, invisible and secret devices and organisations, and how they relate to individuals. In 2005, she received a commission for the headquarters of the Dutch secret services, and decided to draft the portrait of individuals who worked there. Having infiltrated the organisation, she conducted interviews which she wrote down in notebooks and recreated in various forms. For secret agents, "I can burn your face" is a threat to reveal their identity. Recreating the artist's handwriting in a colour that echoes the violence of the threat, the work delivers a message in the agents' almost poetic doublespeak: "The man in the band playing trumpet is the spider in the web."

Piotr Kowalski was both artist and academic - a sculptor, mathematician and architect who tirelessly compared the vocabularies of art and science. From the late 1950s, he turned his attention to optical and luminous phenomena, as well as magnetic fields and later digital images. The

neon anamorphosis he has enclosed in a Plexiglas cube asks an enigmatic question which can only be deciphered from a single point of view: *Pour qui?* (For whom?).

Circles and squares

An allusion to the 1930s review focusing on the constructivists, this section includes works whose simple forms (circles, squares, lines) relate to nothing outside themselves. The properties of neon permit clear, incisive lines which lend themselves particularly well to the aims of geometric abstraction and its developments.

The neon works that **Stephen Antonakos** has created since the 1960s seek to escape any representation or symbolic function. By their luminous intensity, the geometric forms nevertheless take on a solemn, meditative feel.

Californian artist **Laddie John Dill's** light sentences have nothing to say. He plays with opacity and transparency, variations in colour and light, and differences in gas to create fragile, coloured totems which are animated by a subtle hypnotic vibration.

Alongside these formalist approaches of the 1970s, a younger generation is proposing a rereading that is distanced from geometric abstraction, whose forms it fills with new content. Recycling is an essential aspect of the work of **Pierre Bismuth**, who explores the shifts in meaning and value produced by what he does to objects. With *Redeemed*, he "redeems" from destruction the scraps of glass tubes discarded by manufacturers, and gives them new artistic and aesthetic value. The scattered fragments of tubes of different colours and diameters are reassembled into new units whose aesthetic suggests minimal art but in "pop art" colours.

In **Daniel Firman's** *Tubless*, two fundamental geometric forms, the circle (an inner tube) and the line of the neon, seem to put each other in danger.

Alongside Zdeněk Pešánek, Hungarian artist **Gyula Kosice** was one of the

first to incorporate neon tubes into his work. Having settled in Argentina, in 1946 he founded the MADI (Movement, Abstraction, Dimension, Invention) group to put forward a new form of concrete art, rejecting extreme orthogonality and seeking to go beyond the frame of the painting through combinations of materials such as wood, metal, and above all neon and Plexiglas. *Madi Neon No. 3* is emblematic of his early explorations.

Despite their formal similarities, **Chryssa's** neon works are two decades away. This Greek artist, who moved to New York in 1957, was fascinated by the neons of Times Square, and in 1962 began to integrate this material into his sculptures, becoming its pioneer in the United States. His sculptures and bas-reliefs in neon originate in a repertoire of stylised geometric signs which combine the ancient culture of the Cyclades with modern technology.

Because it is a modern, cold, neutral and dynamic material whose implementation excludes the artist's hand, neon corresponds in every respect to the artistic project of **François Morellet** who, since the 1950s, has worked on a geometric abstraction devoid of all sensibility. From 1963, he seized upon this material which had not yet been "polluted" by traditional art to produce rigorous constructions. These soon left the surface of the canvas to play on the relationship between the actual object and the surrounding space. The three rectangles of *Neon in Space* are lit in sequence to create an impression of dematerialised forms. The flashes of light leave a residual image on the eye of the dazzled viewer which superimposes itself on the next image, sowing doubt as to the reality of what we really see.

Dazzle

At an extreme degree of intensity and luminosity, white light dazzles the eye and renders invisible what it is supposed to reveal.

Conceptual artist **John Armleder** examines the formal dialogues between artworks and objects, and how to bring them together, even create equiva-

lences between these forms in the context of the exhibition spaces. As always, Armleder totally disappears from his work. *Voltes V* is a wall of white neons which light up one after the other in a wave, a dynamic process used in large neon signs, such as on the front of Las Vegas casinos. Here, the white light is literally blinding, almost impossible to look at.

In the 1960s, **François Morellet** and the other members of GRAV (Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel) were driven by the idea of doing away with easel painting. By having the tubes, an arrangement of four right angles joined by cables, spill beyond the canvas, Morellet points to the chromatic and formal emptiness of the canvas, and shows a way of going beyond traditional art.

Suspended from the ceiling, **Mathieu Mercier's** work of a fluorescent tube with arabesques of neon maintains a deliberate ambiguity between functional object, art and design. The neon light leaves the gallery wall to take its place and function as a ceiling light, yet still has its place in the history of art, combining Flavin and Fontana.

References to minimalism and the neon works of Dan Flavin are evident in *Pot*, an early work by **Jeff Koons**. As the title of the series (*Pre-New*) indicates, it also refers to consumer society's desire for novelty and brand-new products. Koons draws a link between the presentation of products for sale, bathed in fluorescent light, and the impersonal aesthetic of minimal art.

Colour has been at the core of **Carlos Cruz-Diez's** work since the 1950's. After working with industrial materials such as Plexiglas, he found in neon the means to experiment with colour without the support of form or object. His interest in the physiological, psychological and cultural aspects of colour perceptions prompted him to produce immersive devices such as his *Chromo-saturations*, in which the visitor becomes an active participant, in 1965. In this sensory environment, the entire space is coloured. Colour becomes a "changing situation in time and space."

Stéphane Dafflon claims multiple influences : Op art, American abstraction, but also industrial design, advertising and graphics. Combining neon and fluorescent acrylic paint, *PM037* (PM for "peinture murale" or wall painting) changes how we perceive the architectural environment and induces vibration and instability of forms.

Five Fives by **Joseph Kosuth** is dedicated to Donald Judd, a major exponent of minimal art. This enumeration of numbers from one to twenty-five continues to explore the principle of self-reference at the core of Kosuth's work, while the geometric figure it draws suggests the simple structures of minimalism. By writing the numbers in words rather than figures, the artist changes the position of the visitor, who goes from being a viewer to a reader. In doing so, he engages the viewer with the work for a longer time.

Known chiefly as a painter, **Lucio Fontana** was one of the first artists to use neon. Living in Argentina from 1940 to 1946, he was close to the MADI group and to Gyula Kosice. In 1951 he imagined a monumental swirling neon piece (*Ambiente Spaziale*) to hang above a staircase at the Ninth Triennale in Milan. It was the first artwork in Europe to be made entirely from neon. A further ten commissions for installations in neon followed. Fontana introduced neon into his pictorial projects, which he grouped under the single title of Spatial Concept: monochromes with holes punched in them or slits that opened the canvas to the space and light beneath. In *Concetto Spaziale (#65B6)*, fluorescent tubes behind the canvas produce a constellation of lights.

Three works have found their way into the decor at *Rose Bakery Culture*. **Thomas Lélou** explores signatures using urban graffiti tags. Working with the tagger Kongo, a well-known figure from Seine Saint-Denis, he transposes his graffiti into a series of neons. While tags and neon do indeed share street space, there is a certain irony in freezing the quick and illicit act of the tagger by means of a costly technical process.

With his strip-cartoon soap bubbles, **Hsia-Fei Chang** also explores the paradox between permanent and transient, whereas the neon piece by **Frédéric Dévelay** plays on the idea of non-sense: two versions that claim to be different but are in fact formally identical.

Pioneers

In the 1960s, the use of neon in art was developing simultaneously on both sides of the Atlantic. This gallery shows the work of these pioneering artists and invites comparison between their diverse approaches.

The choice of mixing neon with disparate elements is characteristic of the practitioners of *arte povera*. **Mario Merz** is the oldest of this group of Italian artists who decided, in the mid-1960s, to turn to non-traditional materials (wax, clothing, earth, glass, organic or conductive components). Merz first introduced neon into his work in 1968, usually as phrases superimposed onto sculptural forms (notably igloos). He includes numbers such as the Fibonacci sequence, a mathematical series showing a model of exponential growth that is found widely in nature (*Untitled*, over the door). Sometimes, a simple tube of neon, "a body of light crossing an opaque body," suggests symbolic and sensory associations, as in *Caro Caretto*.

Pier Paolo Calzolari is driven by a similar logic. He gives new meaning to materials such as lead, wax or tobacco through the addition of freezing structures and a poetic light element ("the air vibrates").

In **François Morellet's** installation *Néon 0-90° avec rythmes d'éclairage interférents*, the neon lights are programmed to produce different geometric configurations when the foot pedal is pressed. This introduces randomness and interactivity into the work, principles advocated by the members of GRAV as a means of bringing new life to abstraction.

Exploring the relationship between art and science, **Piotr Kowalski** invites the viewer to consider objective vision and the phenomena of optical illu-

sion. Depending on the angle of observation, the neon arrows of *Identité n°1*, seem to change position and colour.

Like his fellow advocates of New Realism, **Martial Raysse** seeks to bring the world of objects, especially the world of advertising, consumer society and leisure, into art. Very early on, between 1962 and 1966, neon occupied a growing place in his work as "living colour, colour beyond colour" which he used in his object-paintings. *Snack*, a seminal work, is part of a series that takes fashion shots of young women at the seaside, coloured with artificial colours and with the addition of various real objects, including a neon sign. Raysse also uses neon in a stand-alone way in sculptures, part pop art, part op art, as in *About Neon (Obelisk II)*.

The physical tensions between materials are essential to the work of the American artist **Keith Sonnier**. In 1968 he began to introduce neon into his assemblages of various materials (fabric, metal) in a bid to intensify their sensuality. Anthropomorphic references can be seen in *Hôtel Richelieu* at the entrance to the gallery, while *Triple Loop* takes a more graphic approach, playing on the oppositions between two types of light source.

The American artist **Dan Flavin** stands out for his use of shop-bought industrial fluorescent tubes whose characteristics - modular, standard, impersonal - fit perfectly with the aesthetic of minimalism, of which he is one of the chief exponents. After 1963 he worked exclusively with fluorescent tubes, exploring number, dimension, colour and arrangement in all their possible combinations. Above all, Flavin works on the perception of the surrounding space and the effects produced by the luminous aura of the works. Bathed in this yellow light, the floor, the wall, and the viewers themselves are absorbed into the same "situation."

In 1965, **Bruce Nauman**'s early experiments with neon involved performances, leaving behind just a few photographs. In 1966, neon became one of his preferred materials and he adapted it successively to his interests: first

experiments involving the body, then textual works in the 1970s. Play on words, anagrams (*None Sing, Neon Sign*) and palindromes (*Raw/War*) emphasise the arbitrary relationship between a word, its sound and its appearance, while opening up language to new meanings and new visual possibilities.

By the mid-1980s, textual pieces gave way to a series of figurative neon installations in which characters (mainly clowns, men and hanged men) engage in actions that are sometimes absurd and funny, but also brutal or explicitly sexual. Moving hands and genitals are recurrent motifs. The bright colours and the animation do not elude a certain violence that is intensified by the incessant repetition of sequences.

Trajectories

Words, which have such a strong presence in the exhibition, disappear. All that remains are trajectories, sometimes angular in the tradition of geometric abstraction, sometimes organic and random.

In the room's line of sight, *Ifafa V (Stella)* by **Bertrand Lavier** references a *Shaped Canvas* by Frank Stella (the principal exponent of American hard-edge abstraction in the 1960s), which he "transubstantiates" by replacing the linear coloured areas with neon tubes. Part of the questioning of traditional categories which Lavier began in the 1980s, this series is also a play on the notion of author: each work is both a Stella and a Lavier.

Hung opposite, above the steps, **Jonathan Monk**'s work reveals its sources. An enthusiast for minimal and conceptual art, he reactivates its forms by creating unexpected intersections with day-to-day elements, but also with his own interest in combinations and randomness. The green cross, the standard sign for a French chemist's shop, is programmed to light up in every possible configuration.

Like Lavier's transposition of Stella, **Bethan Huws** proposes a humorous

rereading of Marcel Duchamp's bottle rack. Neon injects an aura into this ordinary object, chosen by Duchamp for its alleged "visual indifference" - a metaphorical aura of its status in art history.

In the work by **Malphettes**, the undulating neon lights trace enigmatic rising trajectories, which the title - *La fumée blanche* (White Smoke) - explains. The artist continues to give substance to the transient and evanescent.

Iván Navarro uses mirrors to create works that produce the illusion of an infinite space. **Brigitte Kowanz** uses the same process: through reflections, an enigmatic line (*Arise*) becomes a whirl of arabesques that push back the limits of the cube.

An implicit reference to Lucio Fontana, the work of Swedish artist **Gun Gordillo** gives neon an essential role, in a register that is entirely one of drawing and abstraction. The curved, iridescent lines seem to have disengaged themselves from the picture to float freely in space.

In this apparently spontaneous but in reality methodically planned and drawn work by the Greek artist **Vassiliki Tsekoura**, neons springing from the wall seek to suggest "the strongest possible intensity of movement."

Dream, eclipse, blackout

The artists in this room attempt, paradoxically, to use neon to recreate a phenomenon of light disappearing, of being gradually or unexpectedly extinguished, in reality or symbolically.

The young Danish artist **Jeppe Hein** sees himself as an heir to minimalism and to conceptualism whose formal simplicity and impersonal approach he takes up. But instead of using geometric forms to emphasise literal presence, he traps them. They become the centre of mechanisms activated by the viewer; their playful aspect breaks with the seriousness of minimal art.

Douglas Gordon's work is written backwards and around a corner, making it hard to decipher. It is addressed to the viewer; it speaks to us of our very

essence, of our luminous essence. It forms an intimate relationship with its viewer, and questions our relationship with looking and with the disappearance of vision, an important aspect of the artist's work.

Eclipses are a recurrent subject in the work of **Laurent Grasso**, who is fascinated by these almost magical phenomena which are perfectly natural but produce an effect of strangeness. Two neon circles suffice to produce the special radiance that appears when the moon obscures the sun. Meanwhile, **Cerith Wyn Evans** writes/describes the same phenomenon in neon letters covered with black paint; this occultation of the light mimics the subject of the piece.

The moon's pallid whiteness blends well with the medium of neon. **Laurent Pernot** has put the moon in a cage, in a poetic installation that takes us back to a child's imagination, when it is possible to capture the moon.

He Han, from Wuhan in China, defines himself as a sign thief. "Each stolen ideogram is a piece of the soul of my city, which I am re-appropriating. I am transforming the soul of my town and my own soul." Each sign is accompanied by an inscription describing the place and the day it was "removed." The artist becomes witness to the lightning transformation of Chinese towns, whose relics he preserves with nostalgia.

Better known as the vocalist with *Suicide* and the inventor of electronic rock than as a visual artist, since the end of the 1960s **Alan Vega** has produced drawings, paintings and sculptures, including numerous works in light. The fluorescent tubes and coloured light bulbs of *American Supreme*, picked up off the streets of New York during his night-time wanderings, are reassembled in an installation that evokes the energy of the city, as well as giving off a melancholic, end-of-party atmosphere. With Vega, there is no fetishisation of the work of art. The artist is adamant that these are just accumulations of wires, neon lights and light bulbs, which can be substituted and rearranged

without altering the status of the piece.

Fiona Banner recycles pieces of broken neon letters in order to "regenerate language" both literally and metaphorically. The artist tries to retrace the perfection of a circle using these awkwardly irregular fragments.

Claude Lévêque urges us to dream - *Rêvez!* - and to keep alive that childhood capacity to come out of ourselves and the grip of reality. "My mother's quavering handwriting which I have transcribed and reproduced in neon explicitly opposes the norm to the deviance of individual expression." Opposite, in *Brainwaves* **Jan Van Munster** presents a profoundly intimate form, even if it does take on an abstract appearance. The artist graphically represents the flow of his thought and creates an equivalence between the energy of brainwaves and the luminous flow of neon, which recreates their line.

Written in Arial font, like all his textual works, the work by **Stefan Brügge-mann** gives an instruction, coldly, in the style of conceptual art statements, concerning his own death. *This Work Should Be Turned Off When I Die* implies an analogy between the artist and his work in neon. At the same time he poses an essential question: what is a piece of art in neon when it is switched off? Is it still art?

Broken beams

After all this light, how tempting it is to plunge into darkness. And so the exhibition end with works whose subject is neon turned off.

The young Belgian artist **Xavier Mary** proposes a rewriting of minimalism using elements from industrial culture, applied to complex geometric forms, often hexagons. This two-part sculpture appears to be one and the same deconstructed form, spilling its "guts" of light, wires and transformers.

Fritz Panzer transforms objects into phantom forms by "drawing them in space" with wires. Here, fluorescent tubes are emptied of their volume and function.

Further on, **Adam McEwen**'s work sculpts neon's shape from a block of graphite. The work of **Monica Bonvicini** takes a critical new look at the relationship between space, power and gender, using materials related to architecture and various lighting systems (light bulbs, tubes, LEDs, etc.). Light is often present in her work. Since 2009, she has been assembling these almost incandescent bundles of fluorescent tubes bound by their own cables and which dazzle the visitor like cannons of light (*Kleine Lichtkanone*).

In (*Word(s)*), the series of neon words which he produced in 2006, **Melik Ohanian** places brackets so that two words, usually with contradictory meanings, can be read at the same time. "The luminous aura of the ghost."

The fragility of neon seems to arouse a destructive impulse, as in the photography of **Michel François**, whose work frequently records the traces of violent actions, constraining the material. Not without humour, **Andrea Nacciariti** takes the opposite stance to the order and rigour of minimalism, and the fetishising of the fluorescent tube that resulted from Flavin's work, by piling dozens of tubes haphazardly in a transport crate. The piece produces a temporary blindness in the viewer: another form of blackout. Dozens of tubes haphazardly in a transport crate. The piece produces a temporary blindness in the viewer: another form of blackout.

Objects start to move independently in the installations of **Delphine Reist**. In *Averse*, shown in the last room, fluorescent tubes in an undefined space fall to the floor and break one after the other, until the room is left in pitch darkness. This disintegration, accelerated in the video, is built into every object, especially neon lights whose technology is destined for obsolescence.

The last work of the exhibition takes us back to the ground floor. Discreetly placed above the door, **Adel Abdesselmed's** *Exit* seeks to merge with the usual signage of public spaces. Uncrossing the t transforms "exit" into "exil" which gives the work a new meaning. A political refugee in France between 1994 and 2000, the Algerian artist makes reference to his own story, and metaphorically offers visitors the same experience as they are sent back out into the street...

...where **Marie José Burki** has hung some strange fruit in the tree in front of la maison rouge. Her questions in neon are the ones we have each had occasion to ask ourselves: Why do I believe what is written? What do people think?