CHRYSSA & NEW YORK

Edited by
Megan Holly Witko, Sophia Larigakis, and Michelle White

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diaart.org

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menil.org

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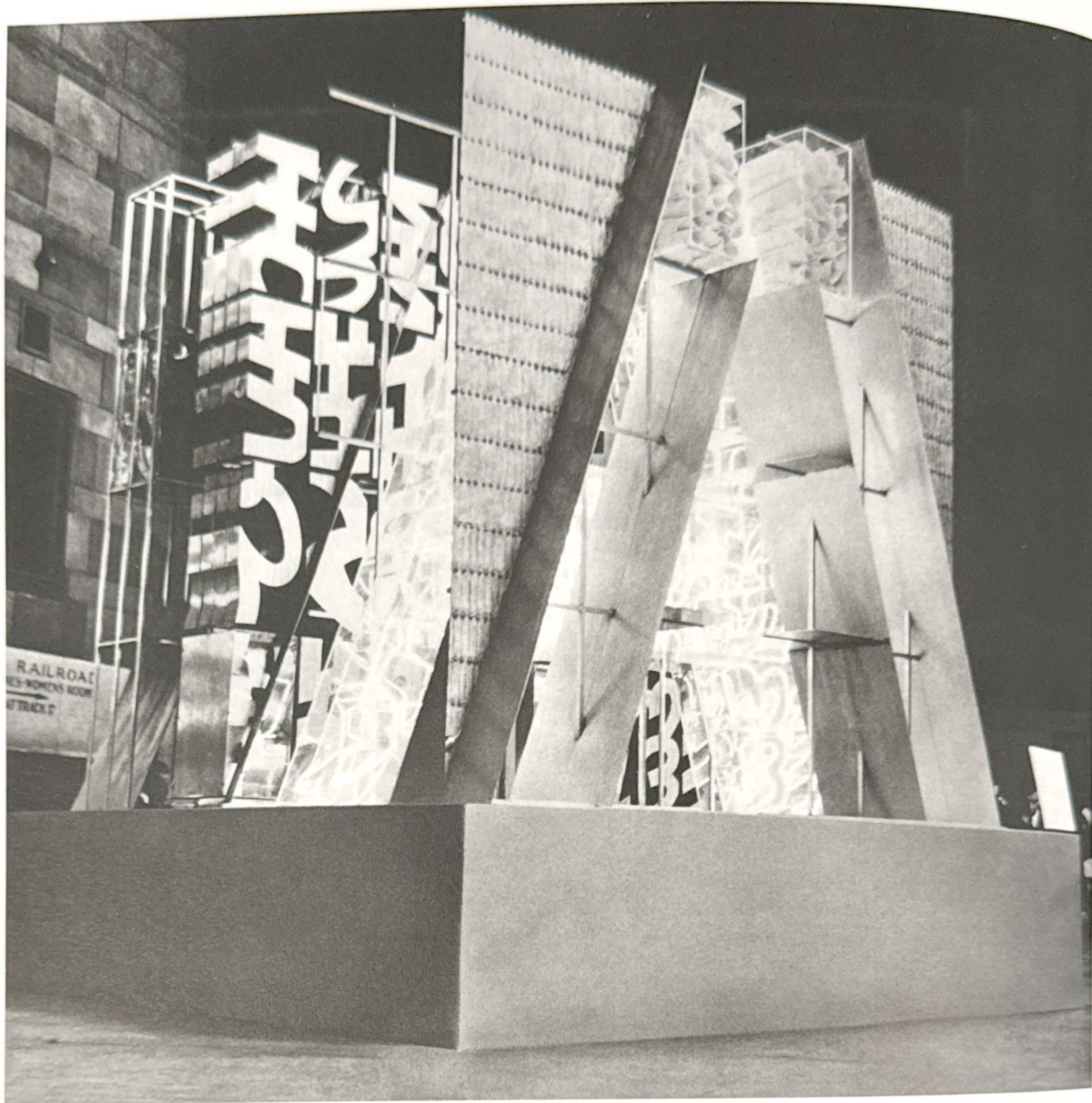

Ever since the introduction of the means of producing high-powered, intense artificial light, it has been one of the elemental factors in art creation, though it has not yet been elevated to its legitimate place . . . The reflectors and neon tubes of advertising signs, the moving lighted letters of store fronts, the rotating mechanism of colored electric bulbs, the broad strip of the electric news bulletin, are all elements of a new field of expression, which will probably not have to wait much longer for its creative artist.

—László Moholy-Nagy

Chryssa, *The Gates to Times Square*, 1964–66. Installation view, Grand Central Terminal, New York, 1968. Collection Buffalo AKG Art Museum; gift of Mr. and Mrs. Albert A. List

"Plug-In Promethean": Chryssa's Neons and the Invention of Light Art in the 1960s

TINA RIVERS RYAN

IN MARCH OF 1966, Manhattan's fledgling Pace Gallery debuted a glowing, industrial-looking structure called *The Gates to Times Square* (1964–66, pp. 63–71). Measuring ten feet tall, wide, and deep, it was the largest work yet produced by Chryssa, a young Greek artist who had arrived in New York in the late 1950s. *The Gates* is mostly made of steel scaffolding, fragmented metal letters, and illegible blue neon signs encased in plexiglass boxes, reflecting the slick, futuristic aesthetic of Pace's stable at the time, which included artists like Larry Bell, Eduardo Paolozzi, and Paul Thek. But its size is more monumental than sculptural (if not quite architectural, despite its echoing of A-frame buildings and struts and braces), as if Rome's Ara Pacis Augustae had been reimagined as a midcentury altar to Midtown's Great White Way.[1]

Long considered her magnum opus, *The Gates* demonstrates Chryssa's enduring interest in sublimating everyday materials including language itself into objects of aesthetic contemplation. It also exemplifies how, whether through explicit references to antiquity or the pursuit of formal balance, she infused a classical sensibility—often attributed to her nationality—into the generally chaotic practices of 1960s art and technology. Like an ancient composition, *The Gates* carefully calibrates the tension between contrasting elements. Masses and voids, closed and open forms, and planes and lines synthesize into what one critic described as her "textured classicism."[2] Fragile glass meets hammered steel, frontality expands into depth, and stability squares off against the dynamism of diagonals and kinetic light. Tangled lines and organic shapes are set into gridded scaffolding resembling the symmetrical capital *A*—in Greek, *alpha*, the start of the alphabet and, by extension, of recorded knowledge itself. (Chryssa repeatedly worked with that letter, calling it "the beginning of things" and comparing it to the balanced, aerodynamic shapes of flying birds and arrows.)[3] The result is a paradoxically classical monument to the modern technologies embedded in the contemporary urban landscape, as was made apparent when the work was presented at New York's Beaux Arts Grand Central Terminal in 1968.[4]

Reviews of the Pace show almost universally hailed *The Gates* as Chryssa's masterpiece.[5] She was already a rising star, having had a solo show at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, and appearing in key surveys such as the 1961 Carnegie International, Pittsburgh, and the 1963 São Paulo Biennial. At first, critics and curators connected her work to New Realism and Pop, given Chryssa's references to popular culture including commercial neon signage. For example, she was included in Pace's 1965 show *Beyond Realism*, which surveyed New Realism for New York audiences, and in Lucy R. Lippard's 1966 book *Pop Art*. Thanks in part to the Jewish Museum's survey *Primary Structures*, which opened only a few weeks after *The Gates* had debuted, Minimalism began to cohere, and her work was associated with that movement, too, owing to her use of industrial materials and repeated forms. Most notably, Gregory Battcock's 1968 anthology *Minimal Art* includes Willoughby Sharp's essay "Luminism and Kineticism," which quotes Chryssa.[6] Her work could also be as heady as Conceptualism: in addition to being fascinated with language, she sometimes experimented with reflexive gestures, as when she included the plans for *The Gates* on the paper scraps that are visible at the front of the sculpture. Ultimately, however, critics judged Chryssa's works as too "elegant," "formal," and "idealistic" to be Pop, just as they were too maximalist to be Minimalist and too crafted to be Conceptual.[7] The irresolvable nature of her practice would become one reason—along with her use of technology and her gender—that her works wound up stranded outside the annals of art history.[8]

In recent decades, revisiting the work of marginalized or forgotten artists has allowed us to rub now-ossified narratives against the grain, challenging the values encoded in canons and radically contributing to our ongoing reevaluation of the past—and present. In what ways might Chryssa's practice disturb our understanding of postwar art? In addition to questioning the limits of Pop, Minimalism, and Conceptualism, her work invites a reappraisal of technological art in the 1960s—and especially the works of those artists using electric light, who were then known as *light artists*. In the mid-1960s, incandescent bulbs, fluorescent tubes, shaped neon, and strobes all became materials of the short-lived phenomenon of light art, also called *luminism*, which exploded in popularity before fading into art historical oblivion.[9] Of course, art that literally moved at the speed of light was poetically suited to the "far-out" aesthetic of a time period marked by an ongoing space race.[10] But the light artists—including Julio Le Parc, François Morellet, Otto Piene, Martial Raysse, Nicolas Schöffer, and Keith Sonnier—also turned to the velocity of light to

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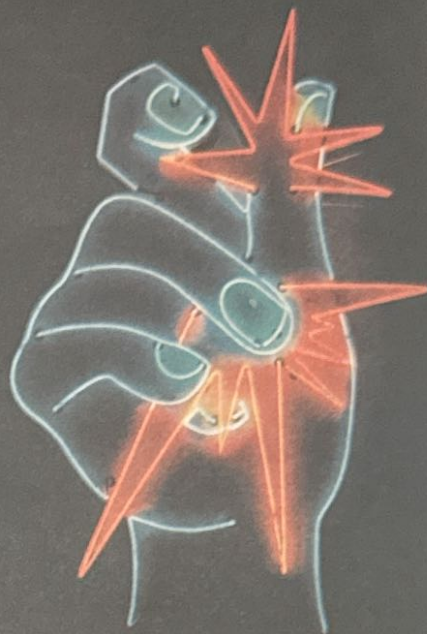
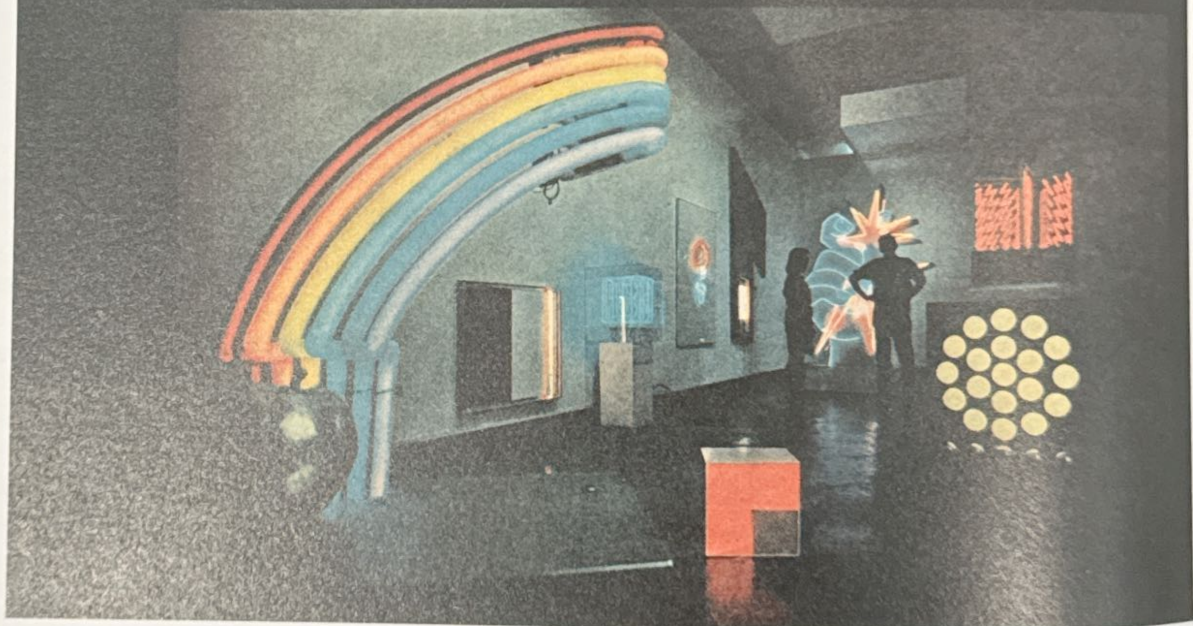
Red neon in Martial Raysse's *America, America* blinks on and off to suggest snapping.



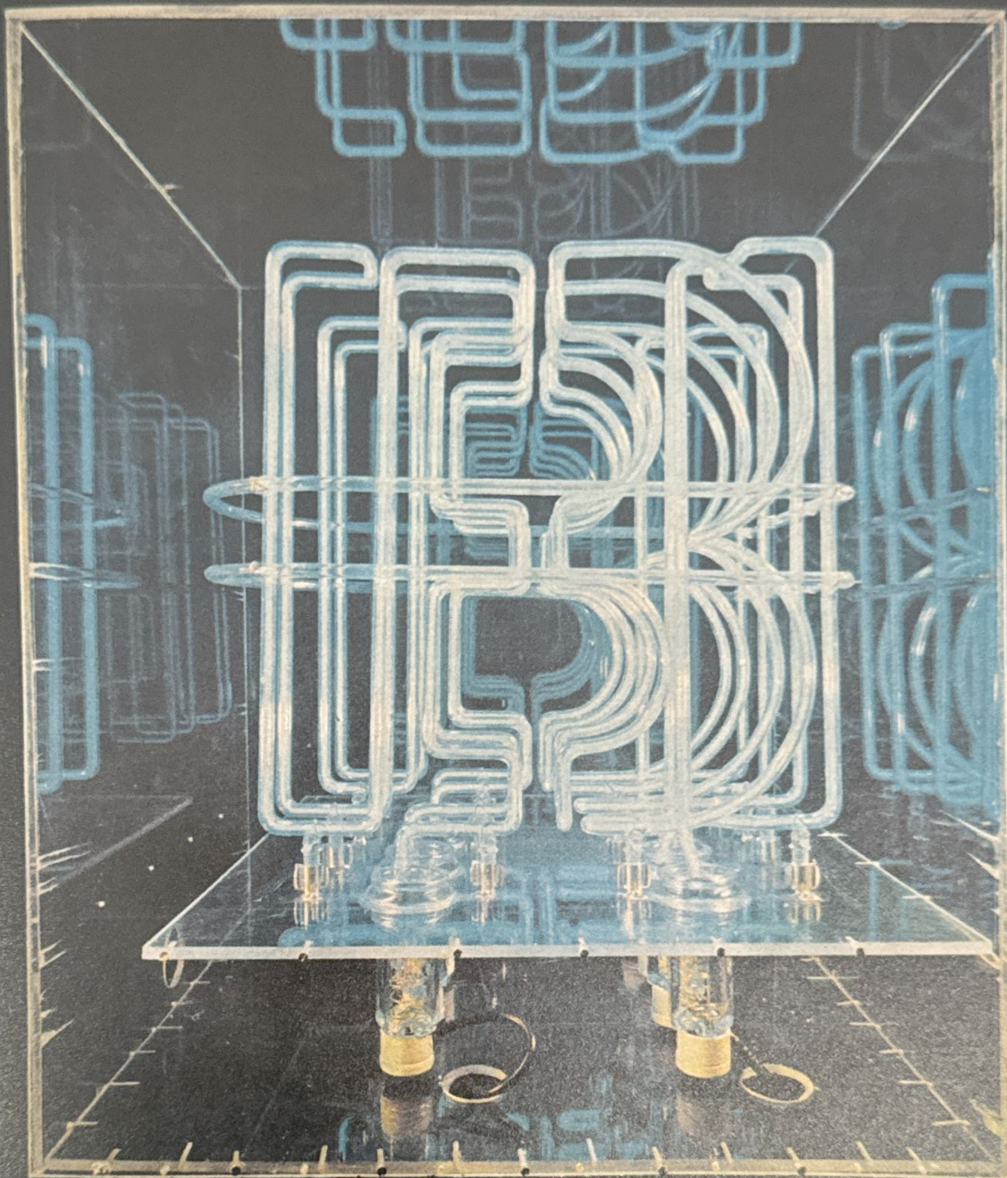
New sculpture lights itself up and blinks

NOW IT'S NEON

In its fast and whimsical course, today's art has put Pop together with Op, wired it for electricity and come up with something that looks like Main Street on a busy Saturday night. It is called neon art and this spring a show of it opened at the University of Pennsylvania's Institute of Contemporary Art. Ten artists from five countries displayed 24 pieces of sculpture fashioned mainly from neon tubing that kept blinking on and off. Everything was lively and gay, including the curator's title for his exhibit: Current Art. "I want to show joy, not sadness," said one artist, explaining why he works in neon. "Sadness is such an easy way to look profound. What I want are bright colors, the wonderful things of the world."



"Now It's Neon," *Life*, May 21, 1965



Spectators view *America, America* at exhibition. At left is Billy Apple's *Apple at the End of a Rainbow*. At right are lightninglike *The Eliminator* and grouping of frosted globes called *Silver and White*.

In *Analysis of the Letter B*, Greek-born artist Chryssa separated the curves and lines of the letter, repeated it four times, enclosed it in a two-foot square box whose plastic walls show myriad reflections.

CONTINUED

escape the gravity of art's historical limits. Whereas painters had resigned themselves to simulating the dynamic effect of light on depicted forms and sculptors could only shape light and shadow with other materials, now artists possessed the technological means to work with light itself as a medium.[11] Reviving the history of this movement can produce new frameworks through which to understand the current cultural fascination with light-based media art, from public installations of LED panels to digital-projection environments. Between László Moholy-Nagy's prophecy of a "new field of expression" based on artificial light and today's ubiquitous light art experiences, Chryssa's glowing sculptures are a missing link that illuminates the dawn of media art.

Switched On

Building on the Kinetic art of the 1950s—and the interwar experiments of Marcel Duchamp, Moholy-Nagy, and Thomas Wilfred before then—light art became a major international movement in the summer of 1965, when the exhibition *Licht und Bewegung* (Light and movement) began touring through Switzerland, Belgium, and Germany and garnering international press. Another survey, *Kunst Licht Kunst* (Art light art), at the Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, Netherlands, followed in the fall of 1966 and included Chryssa's *Fragment for The Gates to Times Square II* (1966), a sculpture consisting of five neon ampersand signs encased in a plexiglass box.[12] Her work featured in many subsequent exhibitions of light art: in 1967 alone, she was included in *Light / Motion / Space* at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, and Milwaukee Art Museum; *Focus on Light* at the New Jersey State Museum Cultural Center, Trenton; and *Light and Motion* at the Worcester Art Museum, Massachusetts. In fact, Chryssa was often positioned as one of light art's leading figures, undoubtedly thanks to her combination of sophisticated compositions, rigorous concepts, and painstaking handicraft (executed in part with the assistance of commercial artisans).[13] Between 1967 and 1968, she was called one of the three "most interesting artists currently using light" in *ARTnews*, "one of the foremost light artists" in *Arts Magazine*, "head and shoulders above most neon artists" in the *Village Voice*, and the artist "with the greatest sensitivity" to the properties of light in *Art International*.[14] In 1971 the book *Icons and Images of the Sixties* paired Chryssa with Dan Flavin as "the two pioneering artists" of light sculptures, juxtaposing his pictorial use of line with her sculptural use of volume.[15]

As early as March 1966—the same month that *The Gates* debuted at Pace—light art had become such a popular phenomenon that *Time* (then one of the most widely-read publications in America) featured an article on the subject. "Already neon lighting has freed some artists from pigment to experiment with pure colors that need not be squeezed from their tubes," the author noted.[16] Although "those who have tried out this plug-in Promethean palette have achieved mostly primitive op and pop effects," a few "pioneers" were singled out—including Chryssa:

> As a synthesis of street-scene pop and the cool world of science, Chryssa's *Gates*, like many other neon artists' works, is just a flickering glimpse of what pure light sources may someday offer when incorporated into art. Rembrandt depended on sunlight to unmask his carefully constructed layers of color. . . . Tomorrow's artists may ladle their color, at 60 cycles per second, right out of the rainbow.[17]

The following spring, *Time* offered another survey of the "new luminal art," which had "suddenly emerged as both international and popular."[18] "From coast to coast, no major exhibit of contemporary art these days is complete without the zap of neon, the wink of a wiggle bulb, the spiral shadows of a lumia or the ghostly glare of minimal fluorescence," the article boldly declared. By 1968, the importance of Kinetic and light art was so apparent that the first edition of H. H. Arnason's textbook *History of Modern Art* devoted a section to it, giving more space to Chryssa than any of her contemporaries and claiming that she "bridges the gap between pop art and light sculpture."[19]

Although she was not the first in the history of art to use neon light—as has been claimed—Chryssa was certainly among the first to make it an integral part of an artistic composition, following pioneers such as Lucio Fontana, who had created a large installation of curved neon works in the stairwell of the 1951 Milan Triennial. First used to make illuminated signs in 1912, so-called neon bulbs are filled with neon or other gases that give off colored lights when ionized by electricity; neon itself produces red, while argon is blue.[20] The light is so bright that it is visible in daytime, making neon fixtures well-suited for exterior signage. As Dietmar Elger has explained, artists working before World War I turned to this colorful, industrial material to pursue the avant-garde dream of closing the gap between art and industry.[21] In the 1960s, neon became a tool for artists with diverse goals, including engaging with popular culture and especially advertising (as Chryssa did), challenging bourgeois ideas about art-making (especially in the context of May '68), dematerializing art into concepts by using easily replaceable materials, expanding art into spatial environments or systems, engaging the metaphorical connotations of light, including the idea of spiritual transcendence, and exploring the nature of visual perception.

In her interviews and essays, Chryssa was always open about the source of her fascination with neon: the illuminated signs of Manhattan's Times Square.[22] Named in honor of the *New York Times* headquarters, Times Square is located less than a mile from Pace's West Fifty-Seventh Street location, where *The Gates*

debuted. Famously, the neighborhood is lit by the lights of its renowned theaters and the large advertisements that scale buildings and even blocks.[23] The first electric sign appeared there in 1903; by midcentury, individual signs had visually collapsed into what architectural historian Sandy Isenstadt described as a "moving palimpsest of overlapping planes of flashing lights," heralding "a new urban semiotic regime" of "semantic anarchy" that "was the native patter of free enterprise itself."[24]

Times Square would prove an enduring theme throughout Chryssa's career. She first referenced it directly in one of the works in her Projections series, *Arrow: Homage to Times Square* (1958, p. 107), a mosaic of aluminum bars forming a large arrow pointing downward, as if directing pedestrians into a storefront. This was soon followed by her first works to use electric light, *Times Square Puzzle* (1961–62), a painting framed by a tube of blinking blue neon, and *Times Square Sky* (1962, p. 105), a sculpture made of metal letters topped by a thin line of blue neon spelling the word *air*.[25] As the artist explained in 1973, her decision to add neon tubing to *Times Square Sky*, which began as a metal sculpture, was primarily a formal one. "During the development of this rather baroque piece," writer Vivian Campbell recounted, "Chryssa had the constant impression that it was suffocating," so "she added the word 'air' in blue neon and the problem was solved."[26] While counterbalancing the visual weight of the metal letters below it, the neon also adds layers of semantic meaning. Because neon bulbs give off light when electricity passes through the gases ("air") contained within them, the neon in *Times Square Sky* describes itself, creating the kind of wordplay found in the works of Conceptual artists such as Joseph Kosuth. Further, because the neon lights of Times Square are set in relief against the heavens—which Chryssa compared to the setting of Byzantine icons against a background of gold—a sky-blue neon tube spelling the word *air* arguably conflates foreground (sculpture) and background (sky), turning pictorial depth into a puzzle of illusion and allusion.[27]

With *The Gates*, Chryssa utilized even more neon in the attempt to reflect—but also elevate—an urban space that she described as a "garden of light."[28] As in this "garden," the work's visually layered lights are imposing in size and alternate on and off at intervals, creating rhythmic patterns. The resemblance to Times Square is reinforced by the sculpture's other elements, too. Its height roughly matches the low doorways under cantilevered roofs through which viewers would funnel into Broadway's theaters; the grids recall the gates that are pulled down over storefronts; the stacks of steel and plexiglass mimic the International Modernist skyscrapers then ascending the Midtown skyline. One might even say that its diagonal lines echo the boundaries of Times Square itself, which centers on the two scalene triangles formed by the crossing of Broadway and Seventh Avenue. Yet the work is less a description than a refinement of Times Square and its lights, which already appeared outmoded to most Americans in the 1960s.[29] Like *Times Square Sky*, described by *ARTnews* as "ubiquitous city ciphers which are transformed and divested of their natural vulgarity and are made stanchions of elegance," *The Gates* distills Times Square's cacophony through the filter of abstraction.[30] By stripping the square's signs of their semantic meaning and therefore their utility, the work functions as a portal through which popular kitsch passes into the realm of art (or at least art as it was then defined by the Modernist theory of Clement Greenberg).[31] "I have always felt that when things are spelled out they mean less, and when fragmented, they mean more," Chryssa reported in 1966.[32]

The Gates secured Chryssa's reputation as a leading light artist.[33] Her subsequent solo exhibition at Pace, which opened in February 1968, included six of a series of neon works titled The Studies for *The Gates*. These were made both during and after the two-year fabrication of *The Gates* and led *Artforum*'s Robert Pincus-Witten to hail her as a "major sculptor" of works of "enormous attractiveness."[34] The Studies include rheostat-modulated neon lights housed inside dark-gray plexiglass cases that look like sci-fi monoliths. The dark framing invokes both the nighttime sky that frames the lights of Times Square and the history of

Chryssa, *Times Square*, 1970–73. Mixed media and plexiglass, 108¼ × 96½ × 8⅝ inches (275 × 245 × 22 cm). National Gallery of Art – Alexandros Soutsos Museum, Contemporary Greek Art Institute (iset), Athens; donated by Chryssa and Nikolaos Goulandris

nocturnal landscapes in art. (It also contributes to what critic Barbara Rose later described as the "darker, dystopian *BladeRunner* [*sic*] feeling" of Chryssa's works.[35]) Many of the Studies feature bulbous forms that are doubled left to right and mirrored front to back, creating smooth repetitions that reverberate within and against each box's rectilinear frame like ripples on the surface of a pool. The bands of bright-blue neon ricocheting off each surface overlap with the viewer's reflection to create new visual pleasures—concretizing then-current ideas about the "open" work of art and the transformation of the passive viewer into an active participant.[36]

By abstracting her allusions to urban lettering and reducing the number of formal elements in the Studies, Chryssa crystallized her artistic vision: an exploration of communication as visual form, and visual form as communication. Born in Athens in 1933, she experienced the occupation of Greece by Axis forces during World War II, which influenced her lifelong interest in language as a visual medium. Although people were shot for violating the 8 pm curfew, "there was a Greek underground at work that would keep our people informed about important events," she remembered in 1966. "They wrote their messages on the walls of buildings—in the dead of night. Then, some brave souls would venture out to read the news before the enemy could erase what had been written."[37] The idea that language is as physical as the things it describes, like powdery chalk on a dark wall, is the key to Chryssa's art, which is fundamentally about not the transparency but the opacity and even materiality of meaning. Tellingly, many of her seemingly abstract compositions are simply fragments of words that she rotated: in *Fragment H.C.* (1971), she rendered the letters illegible by turning them clockwise ninety degrees and only illuminating the left (formerly bottom) half with neon. As one of the most insightful reviews of *The Gates* noted, "Chryssa's obsession with letters, and with the play of neon lights attest to her deep involvement with the symbols of communication. But to her, they remain mysterious fragments—clear, beautiful, yet forever elusive."[38]

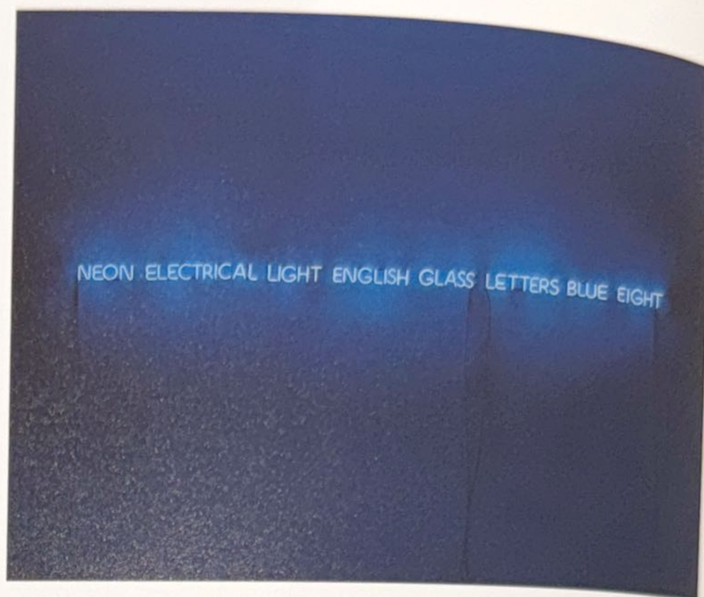
Chryssa demonstrated this "obsession" with the mysteries of communication from the beginning of her career. We can trace it from her first major series, the Cycladic Books, to her Tablets, and subsequently to her Newspapers, which feature fragmented snippets of texts and images from the titular publications arranged in a grid. While recalling the layout of a printed page, these compositions pointedly negate the legibility of the printed word. It was perhaps inevitable that her works inspired by newspapers would be followed by a major work dedicated to the symbolic heart of the American newspaper industry: Times Square. During her regular walks there, Chryssa encountered not only the sensual pleasures of neon lights, but also the transformation of language into what Isenstadt described as a "coherence of fragments":

> Linguistic particles, translated into pulses of light, achieve a simultaneous transparency and opacity, rich with signification but, without conventions of grammar and sometimes relying on indirect references or paradigmatic relationships . . . not to mention random juxtapositions as well as endless repetition, the whole becomes illegible, literally. In its mobility of reference and combinatory structure, Times Square submerges proximate meaning within a larger discourse *about* meaning. . . . Times Square cannot be "read" in any conventional sense, yet it continually invites, indeed, insists on reading.[39]

The Gates and its related Studies pay homage to Times Square by not only elevating neon into an artistic material and distilling lettering into classical compositions, but also emulating the square's disruption of the conventions of signification. Like the neighborhood's overlapping signs, these works refuse the possibility of being read, instead inviting the viewer to reflect on the very possibilities and limitations of communication itself as part of a "larger discourse *about* meaning."

From Medium to Media

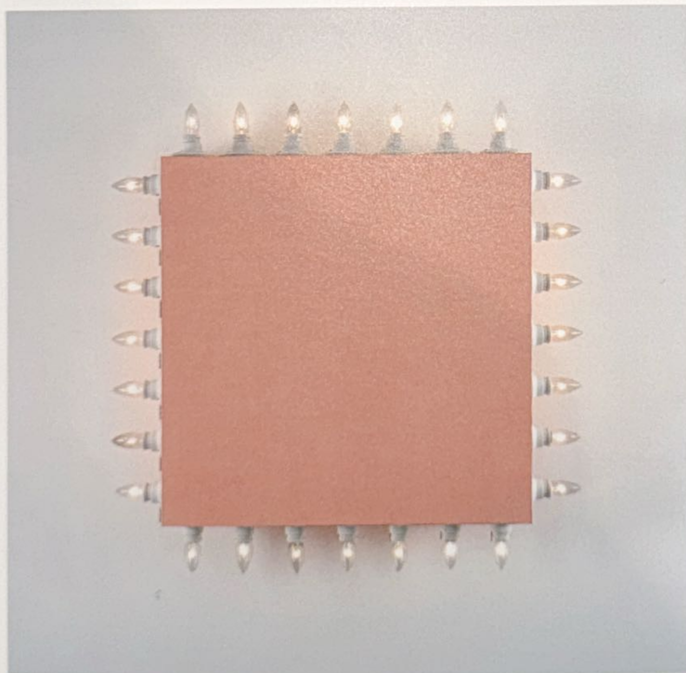
By turning to neon in 1961, Chryssa shifted her attention—and ours—to the ways in which mass communication had become and continues to be a key visual element of our built environment, like the messages scribbled in Athens writ large. Unlike those letters in chalk, however, the lettering of neon signs is mediated by electronic technology—a point central to her work



Joseph Kosuth, *'One and Eight—a Description' [Blue]*, 1965. Neon, 120½ inches (306.1 cm) long. Collection Buffalo AKG Art Museum; The Panza Collection and George B. and Jenny R. Matthews Fund, by exchange, George B. and Jenny R. Matthews Fund and Charles Clifton Fund, by exchange, 2008

that distinguishes her from many Minimalist and Conceptual artists who turned to neon at the same time. For example, Kosuth's *'One and Eight—a Description' [Blue]* (1965) is an over ten-foot-long installation of blue neon lights that spell out eight words that describe the work itself: "NEON ELECTRICAL LIGHT ENGLISH GLASS LETTERS BLUE EIGHT." The work performs the kind of reflexive exploration promoted by Greenberg's theory of modernism but without engaging the specificity of "neon electrical light" as an electronic medium, insofar as its static light disavows the currents of electricity coursing through it. By contrast, Chryssa's programmable or adjustable neon works acknowledge the dynamism of light and electricity by turning off and on, whether automatically or manually.

Dan Flavin—whose deadpan sculptures of bare fluorescent bulbs were included in some earlier shows of light art—nevertheless took great pains to distance himself from the idea of technology, speaking disparagingly of light art as gimmickry. Early in his career, Flavin made works combining small bulbs and everyday materials that he called *icons*. As the series title implies, these objects invoke the idea that technology has supplanted religion in modern times.[40] But by 1965, Flavin worried that the bulb "had the potential for becoming a modern technological fetish." Further in his statement for the *Kunst Licht Kunst* catalogue, he emphatically declared that "electric light is just another instrument" and referred to works of light art as "the very latest [advances] in Canal Street pyrotechnology," denigrating them as both techno-fetishistic and romantic.[41] Flavin's rejection of light art is instructive: as he claimed, light art *was* about technology.



Dan Flavin, *icon V (Coran's Broadway Flesh)*, 1962. Oil and gesso on Masonite, porcelain receptacles, pull chains, and bulbs, 31⅝ × 31⅝ × 9⅞ inches (80.3 × 80.3 × 25.1 cm). Private collection

Although his light sculptures are not commonly associated with light art, either, Bruce Nauman's works indicate how electronic light might be understood as a fundamentally technological medium. His eighteen-foot-wide sculpture *My Name as Though It Were Written on the Surface of the Moon* (1968) spells the artist's first name in lowercase cursive letters, but each letter is repeated six times such that the text looks as much like a coursing current, or perhaps a coiled telephone cord, as a name. In fact, the composition was inspired by the first photos of the moon, as implied by the work's title, which were broadcast for television from multiple lunar orbiters via satellite and assembled like puzzle pieces.[42] The work's neon light is therefore tied to the electronic transmission of images and modern telecommunications, encompassing radio, television, satellite networks, and eventually the internet, which was then being developed in specialized research centers. (Poetically, the internet now literally runs on light, as data is transmitted through fiber-optic cables.)

As Nauman's work suggests, electric light, and especially electric light art, was inextricably tied to the role of cutting-edge technology in the popular imaginary of the 1960s, much as Flavin feared (and Kosuth ignored). Although electric lights were not particularly new, they provided the aesthetic for visions of the near future, as they had ever since their introduction in the nineteenth century.[43] For example, visitors to the 1964 World's Fair in New York enjoyed a color-shifting pavilion sponsored by General Electric and the luminous fountains and Tower of Light sponsored by the conglomerated Electric Power and Light Companies, which together positioned electric light as a symbol of technological progress. This form of lighting became exemplary of what cultural historian David E. Nye calls the "American technological sublime," which emerged at the world's fairs of the late nineteenth century and "soon became the basis for permanent night illuminations and the phantasmagoria of the Great White Way," investing the landscape of urban areas like Times Square with "transcendent significance."[44] Within this cultural context and despite the retro appearance of neon signage, the light art of the 1960s appeared as a dazzling representation of what was imagined to be the near future, as if art destined for the Starship Enterprise (which debuted in 1966, the same year as *The Gates*).

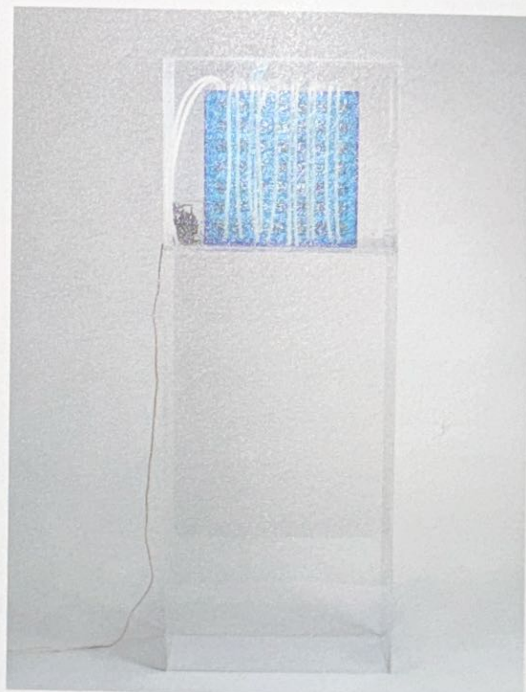
While Flavin and other Minimal or Conceptual artists working with bulbs eschewed their technological connotation, Chryssa and the light artists embraced it, often making the electronic components of their sculptures a visible part of the work. This is taken to the extreme in her 1967 sculptures *Non-Functioning Electrodes*

Tower of Light postcard, 1964. World's Fair, New York

No. 1 and *No. 2*, which encase stacked layers of the titular electrodes in square plexiglass boxes. Parallel bands of neon tubes line the top of each box and one of its faces, as if the lights were literally displaced to center the electrodes, symbolically privileging the apparatus over its phenomenological effects. Furthermore, Chryssa elegantly arrayed the electronics that control the functioning neon lights under a sheet of plexiglass inside the base of each box—a strategic decision to leave them visible that highlights the fact that these works are in fact technological. (She also did this in many other works, including the Studies.) This emphasis is evident not only in the artist's presentation of the electronic components under her neon lights, but also in the way she designed the tubes themselves. The neon tubing between letters in commercial signage is typically hidden by black paint, which allows each letter to appear distinct. In contrast, Chryssa used cursive lettering or simply allowed the lines of each letter to run into the next, making them more ambiguous but also foregrounding the technological flows of energy between them, much like Nauman's cursive lowercase lettering. Finally, many of her works from around 1968 included rheostats that allowed viewers to adjust the intensity of the light—as if the sculpture itself were a kind of appliance or at least a technological apparatus.

Many light artists of the 1960s similarly embraced the materiality of technology in their work, but their pieces are almost entirely abstract. For example, Karl Gerstner's flashing *Times Square 3* (1965) captures the intersection's electric luminescence but belies the fact that its lights were also used to communicate. In other words, other light artists did not share Chryssa's dedication to exploring the nature of language, just as most of the major Conceptual artists who explored the nature of language did not share her interest in technology. Within light art, Chryssa's works uniquely emphasize the materiality of both language and technology. By bringing them together, she suggested that technology is itself a kind of language. Technology, for her, is a form that itself communicates—or more accurately, shapes meaning. As we find in *The Gates* and her other works, the "meaning" of language is determined by the relative elasticity or inelasticity of letters and the ideas they capture in words, just as the "meaning" of technology is determined by the way it structures and even becomes the condition of possibility for what we can express, understand, or experience.

Put another way, when it comes to both language and technology, "the medium is the message." This adage was first popularized by Marshall McLuhan in his enormously influential 1964 book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, which was published just as Chryssa began work on *The Gates*. Essentially, McLuhan's statement posits that the ultimate significance of media—by which he meant not only the technologies of print, radio, film, and television but also concepts like money or time—is not the content that it conveys, but the way in which it extends the sensory capabilities of the human body and fundamentally alters our relationship to the world. For McLuhan, the ur-example of this idea is precisely electric light, even though it typically "escapes attention as a communication medium just because it has no 'content.'"[45] As he went on to note, electric light liberates us from the sun's tyranny over our schedules and the nature of



Chryssa, untitled, n.d. Plexiglass, non-functioning electrodes, and neon, 60½ x 22½ inches (153.7 × 57.2 cm). Private collection

our activities and extends our vision into unfamiliar spaces. The ability to transform human life in this way is the true "message" of electric light—not the words or images it carries.[46] Chryssa's abstracted neon works seem to embody McLuhan's theory by literally effacing the content of commercial signs to foreground electric light itself as a medium. This is not to say that her works are mere illustrations; rather, she arrived at the same conclusions through methodical exploration of communication and technology throughout her career.[47]

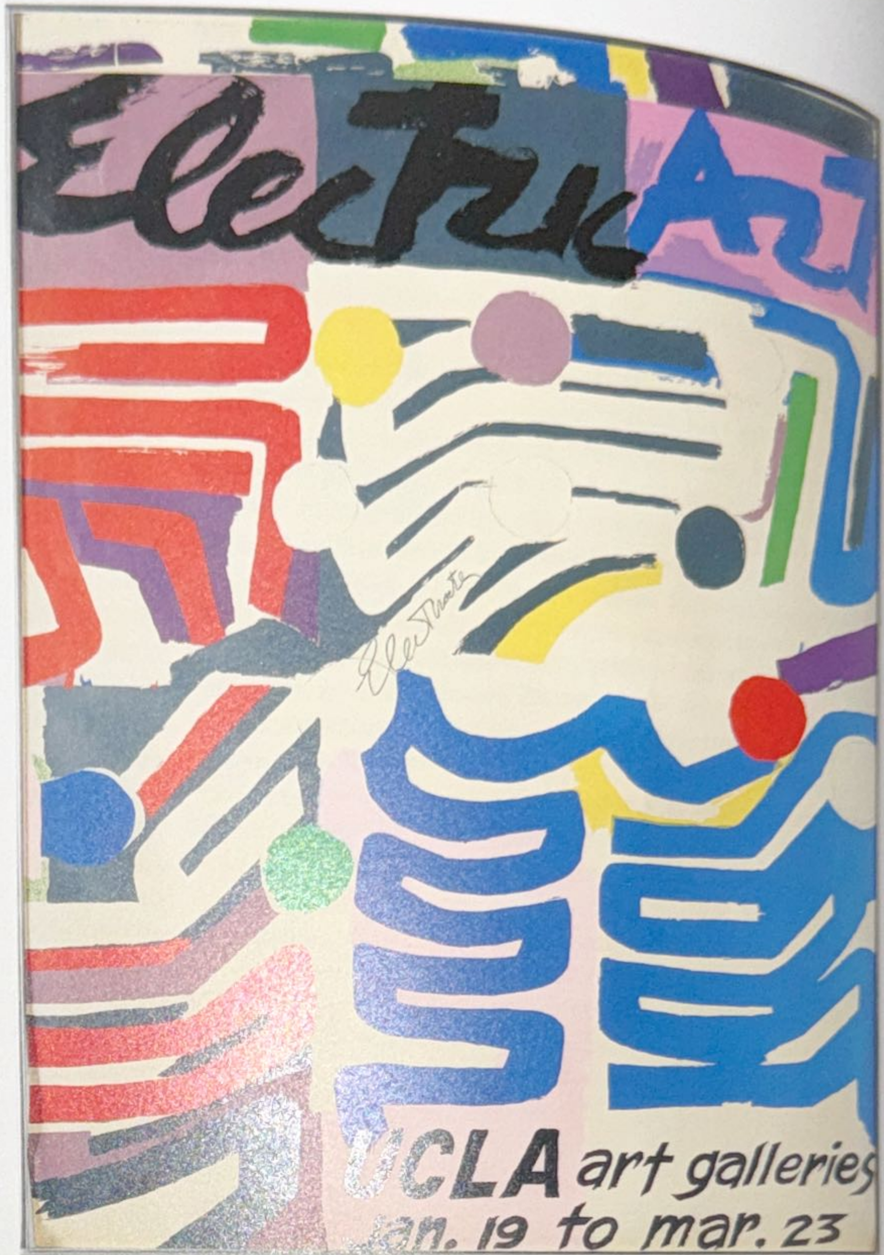
McLuhan's reading of electric light helps us understand that more than merely "fetishizing" technology, Chryssa's work with neon proposes a new theory of technology as not just an artistic medium, but a kind of *media*, in McLuhan's sense of the term, which is an origin of media theory and media studies. Correspondingly, her sculptures, which explore the materiality of communication and the idea that technology itself is its own message, are in a profound sense media artworks. Some of the first ever made as such, they deliberately positioned technology as a kind of language that structures the work's meaning, just as the materiality of language structures communication. They are a missing link between the 1960s art and technology movement, which proposed that technology can be an artistic medium, and the rise in the 1970s of so-called *media art*, which encompasses art that is made with technologies, including film, video, computers, and the internet, and is often explicitly concerned with the creative and communicative possibilities and limitations of those technologies. In other words, Chryssa's work foreshadows the transition away from the modernist concept of the medium and toward the contemporary concept of media, which would have profound consequences for how we understand the role of technology in art and in society more broadly. Her sculptures demonstrate the power of technology as a new artistic material *and* as a force that shapes our very lives, conditioning our ability to perceive and express reality (rather like art itself). They herald the dematerialization of art into conceptual and technological systems and further the abstraction of communication, the everyday activities of our lives, and the social fabric more broadly, into electronically-modulated flows of information. If both the subject and the society to which it belongs were once imagined as unitary, stable "bodies," her glowing signs document their ongoing transformation into interconnected, dynamic electrical systems animated by continuously flowing currents: an art for the emergent information age.

The Legacy of Light

By the time Chryssa passed away in 2013, both her work and the larger movement of light art had fallen into obscurity, obsolescing even faster than its bulbs, timers, and wiring. A major factor was its relationship with the larger art and technology movement, which was widely perceived as complicit with the organization of society according to the principles of rationality and efficiency. This technocracy was associated with disasters such as the war in Vietnam and the poisoning of the earth, as Anne Collins Goodyear has argued.[48] Later editions of Arnason's *History of Modern Art* dropped the section on Kinetic and light art that included Chryssa; her work doesn't appear anywhere in most of the recent major books on '60s art, including the surveys of Pop and Minimalism in Phaidon's popular Themes and Movements series. Yet light art has never felt more relevant. Many of the most important artists working today make works with—and about—electric light. Some explore its perceptual effects, such as Olafur

Chryssa, *Cityscape Times Square #2*, 1988. Aluminum, paint, and neon, 87¾ × 124 × 28¾ inches (223 × 314 × 73 cm). National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens; permanent loan by the artist, 2002

László Moholy-Nagy, *Photograph*, 1937–46. 35 mm color slide projection, dimensions variable. László Moholy-Nagy Estate Collection



Chryssa, *Electric Art* poster, UCLA Art Galleries, January 19–March 23, 1969. Drawings, Prints, and Graphic Design Collection, Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, New York

Eliasson, Iván Navarro, and Cerith Wyn Evans. Others echo Chryssa in their aping of commercial neon signage and exploration of language as a visual medium, from Jenny Holzer to Tracey Emin, Alfredo Jaar, Glenn Ligon, and Patrick Martinez. Some even use electric lights to signal and engage with emerging techno-cultural paradigms: Angela Bulloch's flashing cubes and Ryoji Ikeda's projected strobing patterns suggest the encoding of digital information in discrete units, while Leo Villareal's programmed light displays and Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's interactive light installations negotiate the contradictions of our increasingly digitized urban landscape. In 1930, Moholy-Nagy imagined that a "new field of expression" based on artificial light would "not have to wait much longer for its creative artists"; in 2001, the Turner Prize was awarded to Martin Creed's *Work No. 227, The Lights Going On and Off* (2000), which presents an empty room in which the lights are turned on and off in five-second intervals, dramatizing the act of artificial illumination and the way in which it alters our perception of the world, exactly as McLuhan described.

Few artists working with light today openly cite Chryssa as an influence. And yet her work helped imagine technology as not just applied science but something that changes our relationship to the world around us; that is, she allows us to see technology as media. Today, we do not often describe artists working with light as *light artists*, per se, and only some artists working with light might be called *media artists*. And as Anne Wagner has pointed out in her overview of the last century of light art, artists today are less likely to "see artificial light as a modern emblem, the sign and symptom of technological change" or to want to "invent a 'new vision' consciously adapted to 'modern' experience," focusing instead on the biological and social conditions of sight.[49] But like the mythical Prometheus who stole fire from the gods and gave it to humans, Chryssa's work continues to give us the powerful knowledge that all technologies—from fire to neon bulbs—are not just the medium, but the message.

NOTES

The epigraph is from László Moholy-Nagy, *The New Vision: From Material to Architecture*, trans. Daphne M. Hoffman (New York: Brewer, Warren & Putnam, 1930), p. 132.

1. An *ARTnews* review of Chryssa's 1961 show at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, used the word "monumental" to describe her sculptures of fragmented symbols: "Words and sentences are senseless, meaning is lost. But as symbolic power is lost, monumentality is gained. . . . It is a modern version of those archaic stone monuments that read 'I am the king of kings, the king of the universe . . . forever and ever.'" Natalie Edgar, "Reviews and Previews: Chryssa," *ARTnews* 60, no. 9 (January 1962), p. 12.

2. Sidney Tillim, "In the Galleries: Chryssa," *Arts Magazine* 37, no. 3 (December 1962), p. 48.

3. Chryssa, "The Artists Say," *Art Voices* 4, no. 4 (Fall 1965), p. 62. Although she never mentioned it, the letter *A* may also have been attractive to her as not only the "beginning of things" alphabetically but also as a metonym of her own "beginnings" in the city of Athens.

4. Appropriately enough, Chryssa's 1982 retrospective at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery (now Buffalo AKG Art Museum), which had acquired *The Gates* a decade prior, was titled *Urban Icons*.

5. See Charlotte Willard, "In the Art Galleries: The Language of Color," *New York Post*, March 20, 1966, p. 50; Elizabeth C. Baker, "Chryssa," *ARTnews* 65, no. 1 (March 1966), p. 12; John Canaday, "Art: A Pleasure, a Headache and a Delicate Balm," *New York Times*, March 19, 1966, p. 25; and Sam Hunter, "Chryssa: 'esthetic sobriety, finesse and fanatical patience,'" *ARTnews* 72, no. 1 (January 1973), p. 65. The only notable negative reviews came from William Berkson, who in *Arts Magazine* panned *The Gates* as "the scene of a traffic jam" that was "missing the oddly spacious logic of Times Square itself," and Rosalind Krauss, whose commentary in *Artforum* dismissed Chryssa's works as "formally derivative" of Cubist bas-reliefs by way of Louise Nevelson, condemning them as "curiously solid, inert containers of Kitsch." Berkson, "In the Galleries: Chryssa," *Arts Magazine* 40, no. 7 (May 1966), p. 60; Krauss, "New York: BRIDGET RILEY, Richard Feigen Gallery; MORRIS LOUIS, Andre Emmerich Gallery; CHRYSSA, Pace Gallery," *Artforum* 4, no. 10 (Summer 1966), p. 52.

6. Willoughby Sharp, "Luminism and Kineticism," in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 317–58.

7. Grace Glueck called Chryssa's work too "elegant" in "Trend Toward Trendlessness," *Art in America* 55, no. 6 (November 1967), p. 126; David Ebony noted that "although her work is often shown alongside that of Pop artists, she seems to strive to avoid their habitual ironies. Basically, her concerns are formal and her outlook is idealistic, without a trace of cynicism." David Ebony, "Chryssa at Castelli," *Art in America* 84, no. 10 (October 1996), p. 118.

8. See, for example, Tillim, "Chryssa," p. 48: "No matter if she uses crossword puzzles and neon tubing, she still associates art with luxury and believes in elegance. This in itself builds a moat between her and the onrushing 'kitsch-en' sink school of 'pop' art, with which she has everything else in common." Chryssa's incorporation of the plans for *The Gates* in the sculpture itself is also telling of her distance from a lot of Conceptual or Postminimal practices. Although this gesture recalls Robert Morris's iconic 1961 sculpture *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making*, which challenges conventional ideas about artistic labor and the objecthood of art, Chryssa's paper scraps affirm traditional notions of both skilled labor and objecthood.

9. For a more complete history of light art, see Tina Rivers Ryan, "McLuhan's Bulbs: Light Art and the Dawn of New Media" (PhD. diss., Columbia University, 2016); sections of that work appear here.

10. On the connection between postwar art and space-age rhetoric, see Stephen Petersen, *Space-Age Aesthetics: Lucio Fontana, Yves Klein, and the Postwar European Avant-Garde* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2009).

11. The premier light art dealer Howard Wise wrote that light art depended on the invention of electronics and "the existence in New York of Canal Street and its many little shops where electronic components, plastics, motors, etc., are plentifully available at far below original costs." Wise, "Kinetic Light Art," *The American Home* 72 (October 1969), p. 28.

12. Chryssa made many ampersand sculptures; a very similar work also made of five stacked ampersands is titled, *Ampersand III* (1965), while *Five Variations on the Ampersand* (1966, pp. 78–79) comprises five independent sculptural boxes each containing multiple neon ampersand signs.

13. As recounted by Gordon Brown, Chryssa's manufacturing process progressed in stages, from making drawings of her observations to adapting her designs into uninterrupted lines of light and meeting with glassblowers. See Brown, "The Cool Mind: Notes on Neon from Chryssa," *Arts Magazine* 42, no. 5 (March 1968), p. 40. Although Chryssa would eventually learn to weld metal on her own (working from her Brooklyn studio in the mid-1960s), her neon sculptures were the product of collaborations between the artist and companies such as Broadway Maintenance Corp.

14. Elizabeth C. Baker, "The Light Brigade," *ARTnews* 66, no. 1 (March 1967), pp. 53 and 54; Jeanne Siegel, "Documenta IV: Homage to the Americans?" *Arts Magazine* 43, no. 1 (September–October 1968), p. 40; John Perreault, "Art: See-Throughs and Early Neon," *Village Voice*, February 29, 1968, p. 15; Diane Waldman, "Chryssa," *Art International* 12, no. 4 (April 20, 1968), p. 44.

15. Nicolas Calas and Elena Calas, "Light-Sculpture: Dan Flavin, Chryssa," in *Icons and Images of the Sixties* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1971), p. 301.

16. "Sculpture: A Times Square of the Mind," *Time* 87, no. 11 (March 18, 1966), p. 100.

17. Ibid.

18. Piri Halasz, "Techniques: Luminal Music," *Time* 89, no. 17 (April 28, 1967), p. 78.

19. H. H. Arnason, *History of Modern Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1968), p. 614.

20. By comparison, fluorescents, which are often used to provide illumination in industrial interiors, are filled with mercury gas. This gives off an ultraviolet light, which in turn causes a special phosphorescent coating inside the tube to emit its own colored light.

21. Dietmar Elger, "Light as Metaphor—Art with Neon," in *Lichtkunst aus kunstlicht / Light Art from Artificial Light*, ed. Peter Weibel and Gregor Jansen (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2006), pp. 490–505.

22. In a 1965 interview in *Art Voices*, Chryssa recalled, "Years ago, when I first came to America, I was very drawn to Times Square. I used to go walking there, as people go searching for certain moods." Chryssa, "The Artists Say," p. 62. In a 1967 interview, she explained, "From the beginning of my work, Times Square and its lights were my inspiration. I walked a great deal in Times Square. I would walk from Eighteenth Street and Broadway to Forty-Second or Forty-Eighth or Fifty-Eighth Street and then all the way back again. It was a great pleasure. I actually did this for several months." Chryssa, "Chryssa: Comments by Don Cyr," *School Arts* 66, no. 7 (March 1967), p. 23.

23. On the lights of Times Square at midcentury, see, for example, Thomas E. Rinaldi, *New York Neon* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012).

24. Sandy Isenstadt, "New York City: Electric Speech in the City," in *Cities of Light: Two Centuries of Urban*

Illumination, ed. Isenstadt, Margaret Maile Petty, and Dietrich Neumann (New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 83 and 85.

25. Many critics would later claim that *Times Square Sky* was Chryssa's first neon work, given its widespread exposure.

26. Vivian Campbell, "Chryssa—Some Observations," *Art International* 17, no. 4 (April 1973), p. 30.

27. Ibid. Chryssa repeats the observation about Byzantine icons being formally comparable to neon signage in Robert Hughes, "Mysteries of Neon," *Time* 101, no. 23 (June 4, 1973), p. 97.

28. Chryssa, quoted in John Gruen, "Chryssa's Neon Garden," *New York Herald Tribune*, March 27, 1966, p. 36.

29. See, for example, Christoph Ribbat, *Flickering Light: A History of Neon* (London: Reaktion Books, 2013).

30. Valerie Petersen, "Chryssa," *ARTnews* 61, no. 7 (November 1962), p. 11.

31. These terms were defined by the influential critic Clement Greenberg in his essays "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939), in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, vol. 1: Perceptions and Judgments, 1939–1944*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 5–22, and "Modernist Painting" (1960), in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, vol. 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1969*, ed. O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 85–93.

32. Chryssa, quoted in Gruen, "Chryssa's Neon Garden," p. 36.

33. Chryssa's celebrity was cemented by the opening events, which were reported by the *New York Herald Tribune*: after an opening at the gallery (where Cecil Beaton had made an appearance), over four hundred guests celebrated Chryssa at a party at her loft on Broadway, including critics Lawrence Alloway and Susan Sontag; artists Larry Bell, Roy Lichtenstein, Louise Nevelson, and Paul Thek; Warhol star Edie Sedgwick; and "three models known only as Bebe, Candy and Imu." As the *Herald Tribune* noted, "A falling bomb would have wiped out a handsome percentage of New York's art world." "The Best Mixture," *New York Herald Tribune*, March 15, 1966, p. 18.

34. Robert Pincus-Witten, "JACQUES LIPCHITZ, Marlborough Gallery; LES LEVINE, Fischbach Gallery, CHRYSSA, Pace Gallery [. . .]," *Artforum* 6, no. 9 (May 1968), p. 61.

35. Barbara Rose, "Passages: Chryssa (1933–2013)," *Artforum* (April 24, 2014), https://www.artforum.com/passages/barbara-rose-on-chryssa-1933-2013-46422.

36. Notable examples include *Study for The Gates #5* (1967), which was featured on the cover of the March 1968 issue of *Arts Magazine*, and *Study for The Gates #14 (Clytemnestra) from "Iphigenia in Aulis" by Euripedes* (1967), a composition she reiterated as a towering rainbow-hued neon sculpture at Documenta 4 in 1968. It appeared in the *New York Times* review of the show on February 24, 1968, and later became the cover of the monograph by Sam Hunter published by Abrams in 1974, making it one of Chryssa's most iconic works.

37. Chryssa, quoted in Gruen, "Chryssa's Neon Garden," p. 36.

38. John Gruen, "The Galleries—A Critical Guide: Chryssa," *New York Herald Tribune*, March 19, 1966, p. 7.

39. Isenstadt, "New York City," p. 84. Emphasis in the original.

40. Flavin's *icon V (Coran's Broadway Flesh)* (1962) even references the lights of Times Square. This purported homage to a young gay man is a square board painted the color of pink flesh and lined with twenty-eight working incandescent bulbs, evoking a dressing-room mirror or perhaps a marquee.

41. Dan Flavin, "'. . . in daylight or cool white': An Autobiographical Sketch," *Artforum* 4, no. 4 (December 1965), p. 24; Flavin, "Some Remarks . . . Excerpt from a Spleenish Journal," *Artforum* 5, no. 4 (December 1966), p. 27. The following year in *Artforum*, Flavin again demeaned light artists, claiming that his own work "requires no technological embellishment nor must it join the technocratic, 'sci-fi' art as progress cult for continuing realization." Flavin, "Some Other Comments . . . More Pages from a Spleenish Journal," *Artforum* 6, no. 4 (December 1967), p. 21.

42. Jonathan Goodman, "From Hand to Mouth to Paper to Art: The Problems of Bruce Nauman's Drawings" (1988), in *Bruce Nauman*, ed. Robert C. Morgan (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), p. 32.

43. On the social history of electric light, see Jane Brox, *Brilliant: The Evolution of Artificial Light* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010).

44. David E. Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), pp. xv and xiii.

45. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), pp. 7 and 8. In addition to explicitly positioning electric light as the chief exemplar of his maxim, McLuhan also chose (or, at the least, did not oppose) the use of the electric bulb as a visual icon of his work. Two early mass-market paperback editions of *Understanding Media* from 1964 and 1965 both feature bulbs on their covers, and the 1967 film *This Is Marshall McLuhan: The Medium Is the Message*, which aired on NBC as part of its "Experiments in Television" programming, opens with the image of a single bulb.

46. More specifically, McLuhan wrote: "Whether the light is being used for brain surgery or night baseball is a matter of indifference. It could be argued that these activities are in some way the 'content' of the electric light, since they could not exist without the electric light. This fact merely underlines the point that 'the medium is the message' because it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action." McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 9.

47. Notably, the same May 1966 issue of *Arts Magazine* that reviewed Chryssa's first show at Pace, which included *The Gates*, featured one of the art world's early attempts to directly engage McLuhan's work: Amy Goldin, "McLuhan's Message: Participate, Enjoy!" *Arts Magazine* 40, no. 7 (May 1966), pp. 27–31.

48. See Anne Collins Goodyear, "Expo '70 as Watershed: The Politics of American Art and Technology," in *Cold War Modern: Design 1945–1970*, ed. David Crowley and Jane Pavitt (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 2008), pp. 197–203. I have argued elsewhere that "art and technology" was not as complicit with technocracy as it seemed; see Ryan, "Blown Circuits: Technology and Irrationality in Postwar Art," in Kelly Baum with Lucy Bradnock and Rivers Ryan, *Delirious: Art at the Limits of Reason 1950–1980* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2017), pp. 76–95.

49. Anne Wagner, "Vision Made Visible," in *Light Show*, ed. Cliff Lauson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), p. 34.