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Experiments in Urban Luminosity

Johanne Sloan

Johanne Sloan is a professor in the Department of Art History at Concordia University in Montreal. Her essay on the Kaleidoscope Pavilion at Montreal's 1967 world's fair, was recently published in the book *Reimagining Cinema: Film at Expo 67* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014).
johanne.sloan@concordia.ca

ABSTRACT This article addresses contemporary artworks that reinvent ordinary urban lighting fixtures and technologies to create complex sensorial environments. In recent years, light art has indeed flourished in many cities – often in the context of extravagant light festivals and all-night art events that are sponsored by municipalities and funded by corporations. The end result of such events can be empty spectacle and the further commodification of urban space. In contrast, the artists Michel de Broin, Philippe Parreno, and Rhonda Weppler and Trevor Mahovsky have created complex works of illumination that directly confront commodification and spectacle. De Broin's massive disco ball was suspended high above the streets of Paris, sending splinters of light across the city; Parreno cinematic marquees seemed to be reanimated historical fixtures from an urban past; Weppler and Mahovsky transform ordinary commodity items into enchanting lanterns that get carried away by city-dwellers. In all three cases the artists emphasize the role that lighting plays within the urban environment, in that

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the nocturnal city is a distinct cultural experience, while the encounter with light becomes embodied and tactile. These experiments with light therefore activate the human sensorium, while also contributing to urbanism as described by Henri Lefebvre – the necessary regeneration of the city through the everyday actions of its inhabitants.

KEYWORDS: light, contemporary art, urban environment, night, spectacle

On a September evening in 2012, *All Night Convenience* was installed on a downtown Toronto street. At first glance this artwork by Rhonda Weppler and Trevor Mahovsky looked to be a brightly lit shop (a so-called convenience store) filled with everyday merchandise, but in fact each of the 2,000 products on display in this temporary structure was a translucent container, encasing a small LED (light-emitting diode) bulb. Over the course of that single evening, each of these glowing objects would be given away, becoming lanterns that people carried off with them as they dispersed through the city streets. With this project, Weppler and Mahovsky proposed that ordinary, disposable commodities were not what they seemed, that they could be reinvented as a new form of mobile illumination. Because these lit-up products were held in the hands and close to the body, the encounter with light became embodied and tactile. And because this artwork/event was held over the course of one night, it was embedded in nocturnal urban experience.

This article asks what is at stake when artworks strategically distort and transform the effects of urban light. Three projects will be addressed in some detail: Michel de Broin's public-art project in Paris, *La maîtresse de la Tour Eiffel* (2009), hoisted an enormous mirrored ball over the city, while powerful spotlights ensured that splinters of light would be sent far and wide. Philippe Parreno's *Marquee* artworks (2006 to the present), positioned both inside and on the exterior facade of museums, resurrect the unique type of illuminated signage that once served to conjoin cinematic light and street light. And finally, the transformation of ordinary commodities into handheld lanterns in Weppler and Mahovsky's *All Night Convenience* will be discussed in greater depth. Each of these artworks is remarkable in its own way, but all of them reinvent ordinary urban lighting fixtures and technologies to create complex sensorial environments. Once we accept the phenomenological principle that vision is embodied, it follows that every encounter with electrified light must have an impact beyond visuality – triggering bodily sensations. This process quickly becomes culturally encoded, moreover: as Marshall McLuhan once remarked: "when technology extends one of our senses, a new translation of culture occurs" (McLuhan 2011: 47). The technologically generated lights in question are embedded in

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cities, so it is more specifically a translation of urban culture that is at stake. These experiments with light activate the human sensorium, therefore, while also contributing to *urbanism* as described by Henri Lefebvre – the necessary regeneration of the city through the everyday actions of its inhabitants (see Lefebvre 2003).

It must be noted that the terminology used to describe this field of artistic activity remains unresolved. The term "light art" has only fitfully taken hold within the lexicon of contemporary art.[1] Perhaps this is because features such as electric lighting, light fixtures, or projected light have simply joined an expanded repertoire of materials, media, technologies, and techniques that contemporary artists now tend to freely avail themselves of. It is often the case (as with the three case studies presented here) that artists experiment with illumination for a limited time, or in relation to a specific project, without remaining committed to a distinct mode of light art. It is true that some recent exhibitions have made the case for "light art" as a legitimate twentieth-century art form; notably, *Light Art from Artificial Light: Light as a Medium in 20th and 21st Century Art*, a large-scale, historical overview held at the ZKM, Museum für Neue Kunst in Karlsruhe, in 2005–6. The ZKM curator Peter Weibel (2005: 86) bluntly affirms "the development of Light Art as an independent genre," and the term "light art" recurs often throughout the almost 700-page exhibition catalog. *Light Show* was a comparable (if much smaller) exhibition held at London's Hayward Gallery in 2013, and the contributors to the exhibition catalog were, in contrast, more circumspect in their adoption of this expression. And so while Cliff Lauson's introductory essay is titled "Light Art: An Immaterial Material," nowhere in his text does the curator actually reuse the term "Light Art" (with or without capital letters), instead alluding to "the use of electric light in art" (Lauson 2013: 17), "light-based artworks" (2013: 20), artworks that "use light as sculptural medium" (2013: 26), amongst other turns of phrase. What can be said, despite these differences in nomenclature, is that both these exhibitions showcased museum-based art, which is to say that all of the illuminated installations and sculptural pieces were set up within predetermined exhibition spaces. Because the artworks brought forward for this article engage directly with urban space and experience, it is essential to consider the shifting status of light-centric artworks during the modern and contemporary periods.

The avant-garde antecedents of these contemporary projects remain important, and the Hungarian-born, Bauhaus-associated artist Laszlo Moholy-Nagy is deservedly cited as a pioneer of contemporary light art by many critics and commentators; the curator Peter Weibel, for instance, writes admiringly that, "Moholy-Nagy outlined almost the entire spectrum of future Light Art" (Weibel 2005: 220). It was in the 1920s that Moholy-Nagy began proclaiming that "painting with light" was destined to become a significant art form of the future, because applying pigments to paper or canvas was irrelevant in the modern world ("traditional painting has become

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a historical relic and is finished with"; Moholy-Nagy 1969[1925]: 45). Photography and cinema were embraced as more up-to-date media, while even more alluring was the prospect of combining electric light and filmic projection, to create lumino-spatial environments. At times he used the term "polycinema" to describe this inter-media art form of the future,[2] while dissolving the barriers between visual, spatial, and aural art forms was understood to be part of a new "education of the senses" (Botar and Grubar 2013: 7). Moholy-Nagy himself explored light effects using photography and film (notably *Light-play: Black White Grey*, from 1933[3]) and he did build "light-space modulators," but his writings about the potential of light art have been as influential as those partially realized projects. Moholy-Nagy argued that while commercial lighting was of limited value because it sought mainly to distract consumers, it was nevertheless that already-existing realm of illuminated signs and advertisements adorning the modern city that was the site of tremendous aesthetic potential. As Anne Wagner (2013: 37) has commented, "Moholy-Nagy's ideal field of operations was urban and nocturnal." This urban/nocturnal emphasis would not be fully realized by the next generation of light artists, though.

It was during the early 1960s that Dan Flavin began using ordinary fluorescent light tubes, available "from any hardware store," as he himself declared somewhat defiantly (Flavin 2006: 141). The artist thus deployed readily available sources of light to create extraordinary effects – illusionistically sculpting space and setting in motion a play with perception. Writing about the viewer's perceptual/bodily immersion in Flavin's installations, Briony Fer (2006: 26) says, "The phenomenological experience of a room of fluorescent light is not to look *at* it but to be *in* it." It is significant, though, that this assertively sensorial encounter with light occurred within a rarefied museum setting. The fluorescent tubes deployed by Dan Flavin do resemble those used to light up factories, bus stations, or government offices, and likewise the neon taken up by Bruce Nauman and other artists during the latter part of the twentieth century echoes a legacy of main-street signage. It is questionable, though, whether those everyday contexts (the factory, the street) remain consequential, or if those registers of social meaning and usage dissipated once these ordinary lights entered the gallery's white cube.

The so-called "white cube" is what became the paradigmatic model for the exhibition of modern art; Mark Wigley has described "the ideological construction of the idea of white as a default frame of reference" (Wigley et al. 2006: 241). The rules of engagement are certainly different outside of the controlled space of the museum; on the street, artists working with light must adapt to a situation where there are no precisely delineated white-walled rooms to contain a subtle shadow or afterglow. There, the artist's construction will be impinged upon by countless other sources of light – whether stationary or mobile – that already punctuate the cityscape: street lamps,

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illuminated signage, lit-up shop vitrines, the headlights of moving vehicles, the flicker of television screens seen through windows, etc. Urban artwork inevitably becomes inter-medial and multisensorial, moreover, because at all hours the city has a multilayered soundtrack; it is a tactile contact zone of bodies, buildings, and machines; city air is filled with odors of gasoline, perfumes, or cookery. Many contemporary artists have been more than willing to take up this challenge, seeking out urban territories as sites for artistic activity, and deliberately embracing the contingencies and heterogeneity of urban life. Only recently, therefore, has Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's vision of a light art that is both urban and nocturnal been realized.

Michel de Broin and Urban Spectacle

The Montreal-based artist Michel de Broin participated in Paris's one-night-only *Nuit Blanche* event in 2009, with a work called *La maîtresse de la Tour Eiffel* (the English translation is literally "The Eiffel Tower's Mistress," but the French word *maîtresse* has a double meaning, referring both to a lover and to a schoolmistress) (Figure 1). In the city's storied Luxembourg Gardens, a giant mirrored ball (7.5 meters in diameter) was held aloft by a towering crane (60 meters high), while powerful spotlights at ground level were aimed at the revolving ball. The crowds of people passing through the surrounding space were as a result awash in moving, flickering, striated light – as were the city's buildings, monuments, and statues, since the artwork's scale ensured that refracted light would travel great distances. The mirrored ball (sometimes called a disco ball) has been a standard piece of low-tech equipment in bars, music venues, and dance halls since the beginning of the twentieth century, and indeed it is closely associated with the pleasures of nightlife. It is not

Figure 1
Michel de Broin. *La maîtresse de la Tour Eiffel*, 2009. Courtesy of the artist.

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in itself a lighting fixture, since it is literally nothing more than pieces of broken mirror glued to a spherical object, but it is capable of transforming the glow of an ordinary light bulb into a kaleidoscopic wonderland, creating the illusion of multiple beams of projected light. This is usually something that occurs indoors, of course, and so de Broin's outdoor iteration of the disco ball introduces new levels of meaning. Because the massive mirrored sphere was suspended from the type of crane used on construction sites, La Maitresse somewhat resembled a wrecking ball used for demolition; one could imagine the ball swinging back and forth and crashing into buildings. The strategically aimed spotlights, meanwhile, evoked institutional or military power; one critic referred to "air raid-style searchlights" (McLaughlin 2012: 100). This artwork therefore embodied opposing impulses: the intimacy and libidinal energy of a crowded dance floor on the one hand and a sense of danger and menace in public space on the other hand.

La maîtresse ruled over the streets of Paris over the course of a single night, and this is the fate of many works of illuminated art these days, as all-night-long art events and festivals of light continue to proliferate across the globe. While *Nuit Blanche* events do not exclusively call for light art, the night-time setting does make illuminated art forms popular with artists and audiences. More explicitly themed "Festival of Light" events have also become common – in Lyons, Amsterdam, Berlin, Osaka, and Melbourne, to name just a few of the cities that host such festivals. What is the appeal of these ephemeral events? In Berlin, organizers say that their city is thereby transformed into an "enchanting world."[4] Osaka's Festival of Light website attests to the "mysterious and wonderful power of light."[5] A comparable vocabulary of enchantment, mystery, and wonder recurs throughout the publicity for these events, wherever they might be. Dubai inaugurated its first Festival of Lights in March 2014, having done so with the assistance of experts from Lyons – this French city being renowned for having the longest-running festival of light. The Dubai festival's press release unabashedly announces that its goals are "visual splendour" and "celebratory lighting for each building." At the same time, it is implied that the prestige and cultural capital provided by art will also prevail, since "each lighting installation will be undertaken by different artists, all of them with proven credentials."[6]

Only sometimes, in fact, are the contributors to such festivals self-identified artists, while in other cases they are design or architecture firms, and then too, companies that otherwise stage expensive light shows for pop concerts and sports events are increasingly called on to illuminate specific buildings and spaces for urban light festivals. The practice of lit-up architecture has a rather contradictory genealogy: on the one hand the ephemeral *expositions* and world's fairs of the nineteenth century introduced the notion of a spectacular

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"electrical fairyland" (Williams 1982: 84–9) emerging at night, but it is also important to note the alternate tradition of light architecture (*Lichtarchitektur*) that developed in Germany during the 1920s, when architects and designers strove to use light in expressive ways while still respecting the integrity of individual buildings and their contribution to the illuminated city as a whole.[7] Twenty-first-century festivals of light would seem to combine these tendencies, except that the historically resonant buildings and monuments targeted within a given city often disappear beneath a barrage of ostentatious effects. And so Berlin's Brandenburg Gate has been swathed in a psychedelic purple and green pattern, and Lyon's City Hall is covered with multicolored splotches, with ever-more riotous hues and motifs promised for the following year's festival. The performance of moving and flashing light in these instances implies that a city can be literally switched on and off for the purpose of entertainment. But such festivals can be regarded, more ominously, as glaring evidence of the commodification of urban space – especially when an emphasis on "visual splendour" (to quote again from the Dubai Festival of Light) coincides perfectly with an "image of the ruling economy," to use Guy Debord's (1970[1966]: para. 14) definition of spectacle. More recently, Jonathan Crary (2013: 9) has written that "an illuminated 24/7 world without shadows is the final capitalist mirage."

Many night-time arts festivals and festivals of light receive funding from governments, banks, and commercial enterprises, all of these players presumably eager to boost a city's profile by attracting tourism and business. Sometimes an entire event gets corporate branding, as is the case with Toronto's "Scotiabank Nuit Blanche" event, for instance. In contrast, there are events such as the light festival in Melbourne, Australia (titled *The Light in Winter*, and running yearly since 2007), where organizers clearly contest the notion that the deployment of urban light will result in empty spectacle.[8] The epicenter of this festival, year after year, has been a campfire installed in the city's main square, created in collaboration with the city's indigenous community. This example shows that high-tech pyrotechnics can be positioned dialectically, in relation to forms of light that are not only naturally occurring, but that have profound symbolic value, and are rooted to a particular place and its inhabitants.[9] If festival organizers and curators have attempted to complicate the fairground model, many individual artists have sought to undermine urban spectacle in some way. Krzysztof Wodiczko must be mentioned here, since his influential projections (beginning in the 1980s) proposed a confrontational form of public art, whereby spectral images could speak to the power embedded in monuments and buildings, to highlight issues of militarism, real-estate speculation, or homelessness.[10] Many other artists, while not so overtly political, have used light inventively while also engaging with spectacle, public space, and urban experience.

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Michel de Broin's art practice has involved many examples of public art commissions and interventions in urban space. His project in Paris did not suppress its participation in urban spectacle, while the scale of the artwork, its prominent location, and the very title, *La maîtresse de la Tour Eiffel*, confirm its monumental ambitions. While the Eiffel Tower is attention-grabbing within the Parisian nightscape, *La maîtresse* apparently had a thing or two to teach the tower, concerning its domination of the nocturnal city. As previously mentioned, the streaks of light dispatched by the elevated mirrored ball could extend far beyond its placement in the Luxembourg Gardens, to reach buildings, streets, vehicles, and people much further away. There was an illusion at work here, of course, because the mirrored ball is not in itself a light source, nor is it a piece of technology except in the most basic sense. Here it is helpful to consider Daniel Sherer's comment (2013: 121), that "de Broin's art reveals a blind spot in our technological consciousness," and that his artworks "are allegories of technology and its complex web of social effects."

If the mirrored ball is itself only pseudo-technological, the other component parts of this public artwork did provide the technological infrastructure, electrical power, and wattage necessary to make the whole apparatus operational. Most conspicuously, de Broin's artwork made use of giant spotlights at ground level, which were aimed upwards at the mirrored ball. De Broin is not alone to appropriate spotlights (sometimes called searchlights, floodlights, or klieg lights) for his art. Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, an artist who has participated in festivals of light, all-night art events, and public art projects in many different cities, has used spotlights in his *Vectorial Elevation* projects, to create architectonic forms in the airspace above cities. Another striking use of spotlights was Jiang Zhi's *Things Would Turn Nails*, staged in the city of Chongqing in 2007, where powerful beams of light were directed (downwards this time) at a tiny house that was the only one standing amidst an expansive terrain of demolition, part of a relentless process of urban "regeneration." These artworks are effective because they capitalize on the spotlight/searchlight's association with positions of institutional authority; such beams of light are too extreme for use in an urban context except under extraordinary circumstances. In the essay "A Short History of the Spotlight," the media theorist Friedrich Kittler revisits this light-form's association with military power. The climactic moment in the history of the spotlight is not its use to glorify movie stars attending a premiere, but rather its deployment on battlefields and other theaters of war, once it was discovered that "the spotlight makes light tactically available" (Kittler 2005: 77). As previously mentioned, the oversized disco ball hanging from a crane resembled a wrecking ball, and this, together with the searchlight's history as an instruments of power and war, meant that La Maitresse *de la Tour Eiffel*'s claimed on the Parisian skyscape depended on a latent potential for violence.

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De Broin's artwork managed to sustain a tension between menace and pleasure within public space, though, because the mirrored ball shattered that formidable, penetrating light-form. The spotlight's single beam of light became innumerable, crisscrossed shafts of moving light, which could no longer be used instrumentally to identify people or track events within the urban environment. The mirrored ball's association with night life and dance floors is essential as well, because its psychedelic light effects open up non-visual modes of experience. The flickering light presides over bodies that are in principle moving, dancing, sweaty, and libidinally charged ... energized by a collective, pleasurable experience within public space. *La maîtresse* can thus be regarded as a technological/ social "machine" that promised to redistribute and re-mediate the spectacle of urban light.

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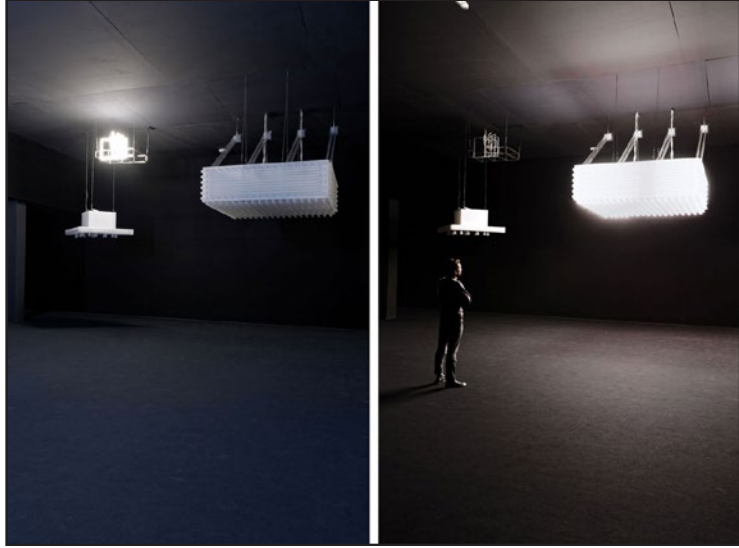
Philippe Parreno's Cinematic Light

Since 2006, the Paris-based artist Philippe Parreno has made a series of illuminated artworks with the title *Marquee*. Some of these are temporarily attached to the exterior facade of buildings: *Marquee(Guggenheim)*, for instance, was installed over the front entrance of New York's Guggenheim Museum. On other occasions the marquees are brought indoors, and in 2013, sixteen flashing and pulsating marquees were arranged in a shadowy basement in Paris' Palais de Tokyo gallery; this time the artist gave the entire grouping the title *Danny La Rue*[11] (Figure 2). The marquee is a straightforward object in material and technological terms: a plinth jutting out from the facade of a building is studded with dozens or hundreds of ordinary incandescent light bulbs. Parreno's marquees do not include titles of films, names of actors, show times, or other types of linguistic information that would traditionally have appeared amidst the lights. The lack of text does not mean these signs have been emptied of meaning, though, and Parreno makes us aware that the marquee is a complex cultural object. These intensely luminous objects still resonate as fragments of nocturnal urban culture, and as articulations of cinematic experience.

The movie-theater marquee was once a familiar sight on the streets of cities and towns, visible from a distance by people in passing cars and buses: "The marquee created a visual landmark, extending from the facade so that the building stood out physically and aesthetically from all others on the street" (Valentine 1994: 97). The marquee is a "time-bound typology" (Wagner 2013: 37) in that this para-architectural object develops alongside the twentieth-century custom of screening films in purpose-built structures. But the glowing marquee also proposed a distinct kind of street-level experience. It is telling that Maggie Valentine's history of the movie theater is titled *The Show Starts on the Sidewalk*, thus acknowledging that the dramatic light effects outdoors served as a

Figure 2
Philippe Parreno. *Danny La Rue*, 2013 (detail).
Photo: Aurélien Mole.



prelude or opening act for the main attraction, i.e. the feature film to be shown within. Parreno's illuminated constructions prolong and aestheticize that street-level experience prior to watching a film. Even if they no longer announce a specific spectacle or event, Parreno's reconfigured marquees are still powerful enough to evoke what Ernst Bloch referred to as "anticipatory consciousness."[12]

Thus Parreno's artworks fulfill Moholy-Nagy's hypothesis that the light art of the future would be proto-cinematic in some respect. Parreno's art practice has indeed touched on various aspects of cinematic experience, resulting in the production of actual films, of ghostly cinematic presences, and installations that experiment with the placement, size, or transparency of screens. Cinematic light often comes up against everyday light, moreover, as when he used tiny domestic-usage "night-lights" to punctuate a suite of rooms at London's Serpentine Gallery, that otherwise contained four of his films. One critic writes that "Parreno's unnervingly blank, glowing marquees seem to elegiacally acknowledge the likely demise of the movie theatre" (Rian 2014: 204). It is true that in the twenty-first century, in most North American and European cities, old-school movie palaces have been replaced by cineplexes or theaters in suburban malls. If this particular object/sign has disappeared from view on city streets, other aspects of twentieth-century cinematic experience have also faded away in recent years, as noted by many film historians (see e.g. Mulvey 2006). In the pre-digital age, and before it was possible to watch or make movies using one's cell phone, "cinema" implied an interlocked set of practices regarding the apparatus, spectatorial behavior, and the encounter with narrative. It also encompassed the conventionalized interplay of darkness and illumination: thus, you would arrive at a movie theater

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at night, having walked through darkened streets; you would stand for a time on the sidewalk under the marquee's hot and blinding light; you then entered the screening room and experienced a temporary blackout, until a single beam of light was emitted from the projection room, resulting in the immense illuminated screen that generated "the absolute isolation of absorbed viewing," in the words of Laura Mulvey (2006: 27). Understood in this way, the historical experience of cinema can be regarded as a sequence of light effects, with accompanying multisensorial impressions as one moved from hot lights to air conditioning, encountered smells of food, heard ambient street noise and then booming sound in the actual theatre, stood in close physical proximity to strangers in a queue.

Whether affixed above doorways on the exterior of museums, or positioned indoors, Parreno's marquees seem to perpetually announce some future, albeit unnameable event, perhaps as a comment on the exultant sense of futurity that once informed so many artistic, architectural, and urban modernisms. The most striking reincarnation of the marquee light-fixture occurred when Parreno positioned sixteen of these, of different sizes and shapes, in the newly renovated Palais de Tokyo, as part of his solo exhibition there. It is important to note that this renovation did not result in white-painted walls, orthogonally aligned rooms, and uniform lighting. Instead, as proudly proclaimed by the museum's director: "Nothing is perfectly clean, nothing is perfectly painted on purpose. It is so important in art not to control everything."[13] The deliberate embrace of a raw, unfinished quality must be understood as a post-white-cube museological sensibility, and indeed it was in this roughly textured and gloomy subterranean space that Parreno's assembly of street-smart marquees erupted in staccato bursts of light and sound, like unruly ghosts from an urban/cinematic past, haunting the present day.[14] Provisionally detached from the cinema and from the urban environment, each of these marquees awakened in turn, apparently intent on communicating with each other and with human interlocutors, through an aggressive language of flashes, blasts, flickering, and pulsation. This light art engages the visitor sensorially and affectively, speaking the language of the urban night.

Rhonda Weppler and Trevor Mahovsky: De-commodified Light

All Night Convenience (Figure 3) was presented to the public at one-night-only art events, as was the case with Michel de Broin's Paris artwork, and once again it is evident that such works can be extremely powerful, capitalizing on the quality of ephemerality. Weppler and Mahovsky constructed and hand-assembled 2,000 individual "products," each with an LED light affixed to its interior ... and by the end of that one September night every single one of these objects had been distributed without cost to the Toronto public. The

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artists were later convinced to recreate this artwork for Atlanta in 2013, as part of that city's so-called Flux Night.

In both Toronto and Atlanta Weppler and Mahovsky re-presented the type of ordinary food items, cleaning products, and pharmaceuticals that can be purchased at any time of day or night in little shops across North America: a can of Dole pineapple chunks; a box of SOS-brand scouring pads; a container of Tylenol extra-strength painkillers, for instance – although the collection of products and brands varied from city to city, since some items are available only in Canada, while food items typical of the American south were introduced in Atlanta. This re-presentation of boxed consumer items recalls Andy Warhol's facsimiles of Brillo soap pad boxes of the 1960s, and indeed Weppler and Mahovsky can be regarded as inheritors of the Warhol legacy insofar as the processes of replication and commodification that permeate cultural life remain fascinating to contemporary artists. Even the most commonplace commodity has a complex "biography" or "social life"[15] that encompasses the people, technologies, and raw materials involved in its production, and also the circumstances of its commercial appearance, display, and consumption. Walter Benjamin's writings often investigated this latter aspect, noting that capitalism brought about the "enthronement of the commodity and the glitter of distraction around it" (Benjamin 1973: 165). Thus a person/consumer gets drawn into the orbit of a shiny new object on display, and falls under the enchanted spell of that commodity, as it were. While critical of capitalism, Benjamin did not entirely condemn this imaginative and multisensorial connection to the world of objects, and indeed it informed his very understanding of modern subjectivity.

Weppler and Mahovsky's *All Night Convenience* projects are the outcome of an art practice that consistently intervenes in the

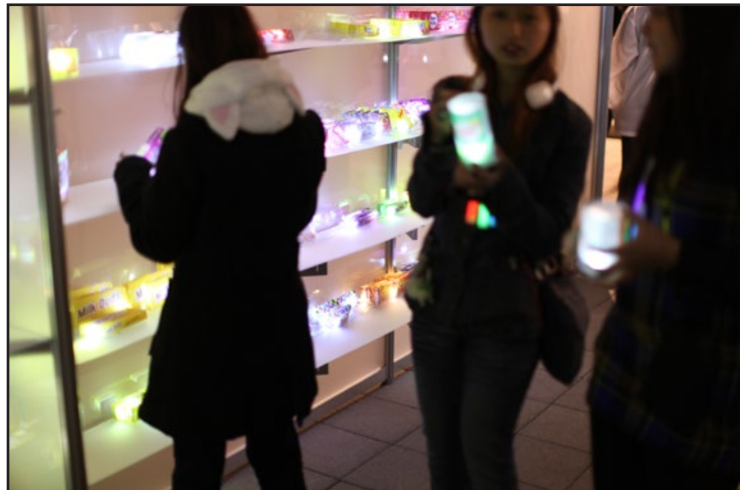

Figure 3
Rhonda Weppler and Trevor Mahovsky. *All Night Convenience*, 2012 (detail). Photo: Richard Winchell.

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contemporary object-world. Collaborators since 2004, the artists have used aluminum foil to create full-scale molds of cars, as in *1989 Ford Escort 2* (2004), for example, and on other occasions they created painted-plaster versions of fast-food containers. While it is the hollowness of the aluminum-foil cars that is uncanny in the first instance, and the unexpected weightiness of throwaway objects which makes itself felt in the latter case, both projects call our attention to the surfaces of recognizable objects, as compared with their (lack of) depth or interiority. Ken Lum has commented that, "the surface of their art is an index of an eviscerated interior," while suggesting that "their works point to questions of affect, truth and fiction in subject-object relations" (Lum 2006). These preoccupations are taken up again in *All Night Convenience*, with further permutations. Consumable items are once again hollowed out, but because they are now filled with light, they reroute the consumer's conventional response, and propose an alternative biographical episode for these commodities.

Light often plays a key role in practices of display and consumption, whether in theatrically lit commercial spaces or in street-facing vitrines. Metaphors of illumination are equally important, though, when it comes to how commodities enthrall us: the latest streamlined gadget or sleek accessory arrives with that Benjaminian "glitter of distraction," and that sparkling quality seems to also promise that desires will be fulfilled. Weppler and Mahovsky's 2,000 product boxes were vividly colored as well as being illuminated, so the cumulative effect, initially, was that of a glittering jewel box. The artists themselves noted how long people lingered in the *All Night Convenience* "store," apparently mesmerized by and deriving pleasure from their encounter with a box of instant cake mix – now transformed from an ordinary packaged item into a mysteriously glowing thing.[16] Leaving the pretend shop, people took possession of a "product," that could be hung from a lightweight stick, so that when they stepped back into the streets of Toronto or Atlanta, they were in possession of a softly radiating lantern. It is possible to imagine an aerial view of one of these all-night events, as the dense concentration of light in the *All Night Convenience* shop at the beginning of the evening segued into a starburst effect, as 2,000 individuals eventually wandered off through the streets of the city bearing their own hybrid commodity-lanterns. In all probability many of the people who acquired a fragment of Weppler and Mahovsky's artwork would already have been clutching lit-up objects, which is to say smartphones/communicative devices with their intermittently lit-up screens. *All Night Convenience*'s luminous products would necessarily interact with these ubiquitous sources of mobile urban light, becoming companion pieces or temporary substitutes for those pieces of everyday technology.

Contemporary Nocturnes

Festivals of Light and *Nuit Blanche* all-night art events illustrate how a city can be "on" at all times. Jonathan Crary has been harsh in his criticism of the 24-hour mindset; he writes: "A 24/7 world is a disenchanted one in its eradication of shadows and obscurity and of alternate temporalities," and he goes on to deride "the fraudulent brightness that presumes to extend everywhere and to pre-empt any mystery or unknowability" (Crary 2013: 19). For Crary, the contemporary erasure of night is synonymous with the imperative to be always connected, networked, communicating, and consuming – without respite. It is significant, then, that the artists discussed in this essay have not attempted to deny the supremacy of light within the urban night; they are not amongst those described by Tim Edensor, who are "inspired by a desire to create nocturnal landscapes that are not dominated by artificial light" (Edensor 2013: 414). Nor can it be said that they simply provide an escape from the spectacularized city, or from the commodification of light. The artworks by Broin, Parreno, and Weppler and Mahovsky do, however, appropriate, intensify, and aesthetically distort instances of electrified urban light, and in so doing call attention to embodied modes of inhabiting public space. They also imply that the urban night brings forth distinctive modes of behavior and civic engagement.

One problem with festivals of light is that the material cityscape underlying the fanciful projections and garlands of light can become irrelevant, a mere pretext for the show. It might even be said that urban space becomes akin to the dematerialized realm of cyberspace, since the festival's exoskeletons of light resemble digital constructions.[17] In contrast, the artists discussed here engage with forms of vernacular illumination that are rooted in material and social contexts. They present us with heightened and intensified versions of everyday urban light, which trigger complex sensorial responses. Philippe Parreno's marquees are visually alluring from a distance, but up close the light becomes too bright to see by, we feel the heat of the extreme wattage, and when the performances begin each new pulsation and blast of light registers as a slight bodily shock. Cinematic light is no longer a contained historical entity, but has become a restless apparition assailing the contemporary audience. Michel de Broin's strobing lights might appear to unify human bodies with the surrounding built environment, but there is an underlying tension to this spectacular light effect: the mirrored/wrecking ball evokes the escapist sensory pleasures of nightlife, but there is also a palpable sense of bodily danger from the giant overhanging ball and the all-powerful searchlights. And finally, when 2,000 people have walked the streets of Toronto holding onto Rhonda Weppler and Trevor Mahovsky's illuminated product-boxes, we understand something about the energy and movement of urban crowds, and also of individual pathways. The dense concentration of light is commercially oriented at the start of the evening, but it

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can be argued that this light is eventually de-commodified, as the gifted lanterns are held aloft, passed from hand to hand between friends, and brought into private homes and intimate spaces. In such ways these artworks reinvent ordinary forms of light, while drawing attention to the nocturnal identity of cities. In each instance the utilitarian capacities of light are overwritten, and so too is the notion that light is a purely visual media. Light is experienced by embodied urban subjects, and it is the sensory knowledge of light that activates the urban night.

Notes

1. For example, an online search of the (NYC) Museum of Modern Art's collection using the term "light art" yields no results.
2. The term "poly-cinema" appears in Moholy-Nagy (1969[1925]: 42).
3. The light-space apparatus was originally visible in the film, making evident the close connection between the two projects (see Goergen (2010: 212–13).
4. Berlin Festival of Lights website: http://festival-of-lights.de/en/ (accessed May 25, 2014).
5. Osaka Festival of Light website: http://www.hikari-kyoen.com/en/index.html (accessed May 14, 2014).
6. Dubai Festival of Lights website: http://emaar.com/index.aspx?page=press-release-details&id=1530 (accessed April 15, 2014).
7. For a discussion of this history, see Werner Oechslin (2002: 28–35).
8. *The Light in Winter*, in Melbourne, Australia. http://www.fedsquare.com/events/the-light-in-winter/history/ (accessed April 14, 2014). The festival website announces that "Light in Winter began ... with the idea of bringing Melbourne's diverse multicultural communities and artists together to create light installations and events to warm the seasonally chilled heart of the city."
9. Helena Reckitt notes another such instance: "Lisbon's Luzboa festival, established in 2004, reimagines public space and rehabilitates unsafe or undesirable neighbourhoods through light" (Reckitt 2013: 42).
10. Rosalyn Deutsche is a major scholar of this politicized public art tendency. See her *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Deutsche 1996).
11. Danny La Rue (1927–2009) was a popular British drag performer, beginning in the 1950s. "La rue" also means "the street" in French.
12. The concept of "anticipatory consciousness" is developed in Ernst Bloch's *The Principle of Hope* (1986) and refers to a modern attitude but also a temporal orientation of the human psyche.

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13. Jean de Loisy, Palais de Tokyo president, quoted in "Palais de Tokyo art centre reopens after major reno" (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation 2012).
14. During Parreno's Palais de Tokyo exhibition, passages from Igor Stravinsky's *Petrushka* sometimes accompanied the awakening marquees, and it is no coincidence that this piece of music is meant to tell the story of a puppet that comes to life.
15. These are the terms introduced in Appadurai (1986), building on an earlier Marxist methodology.
16. Author's conversation with Trevor Mahovsky, February 2014.
17. This urban/digital commensurability is apparent in commercial visual culture. See for instance the 2014 Heineken beer campaign, where bursts of light radiate from the city itself, looking like communicative networks while encircling the product.

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