

The image features a dark gray background with a repeating pattern of overlapping diamond shapes, creating a chevron-like effect. The diamonds are arranged in a grid, with each diamond slightly offset from the one below it, creating a sense of depth and movement. The word "LUX" is centered in the upper portion of the image, rendered in a clean, white, sans-serif font. The letters are bold and have a slight shadow, making them stand out against the dark background.

LUX

# LUX: Light Art in Ireland

Helena Hamilton / Kevin Killen / Helen Mac Mahon  
Lorraine Neeson / Margaret O'Brien

Curated by Davey Moor

Solstice Arts Centre  
10 Nov – 21 Dec 2018

[V] *Video in YouTube LUX playlist at [tinyurl.com/lux-solstice](https://tinyurl.com/lux-solstice) for further reference.*

## Images

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p7 Chinese shadow-play figures; Two warriors, Qianlong set, C1780; photo: Stefan Meierhofer  
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Johnston, November 1 1822; artist unknown

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Olafur Eliasson; *The Weather Project*; photo: Nathan Williams

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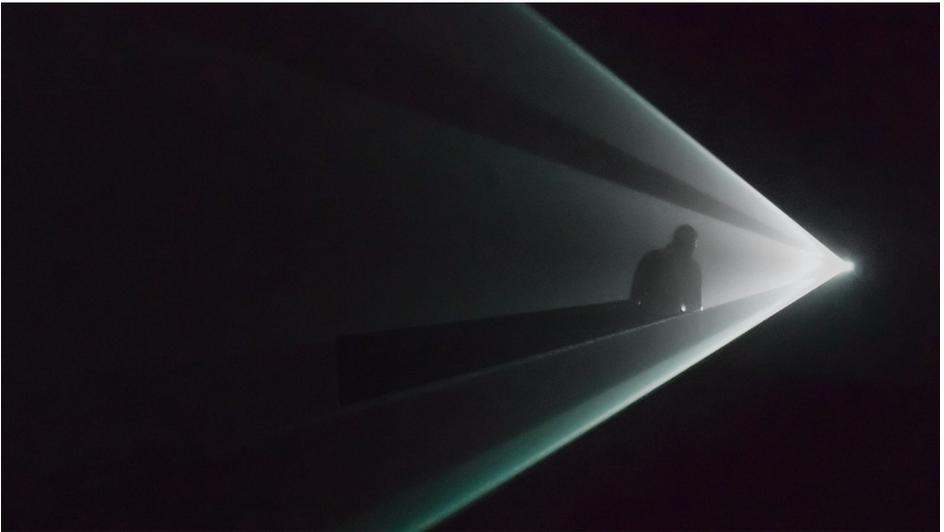
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## Introduction

In 2004, I saw an exhibition featuring the smoke and light projection work of Anthony McCall [V] at the Hayward in London. Despite having trawled galleries and museums for years, it somehow felt like this was the first 'light artist' I had seen—causing me to isolate the medium in a way many other artists' work had not prompted me to. McCall might describe himself as a light artist—or filmmaker, or sculptor or draughtsman—but his light-made-visible aesthetic seemed



conceptually tangible to the medium, however much art that incorporates elemental illumination is not highlighting it as a message. The last twenty years have seen a steady increase in artists using light in every manner, from simple tool to fundamental concept, so I was delighted when Solstice director Belinda Quirke asked me to curate a light art show for their galleries. She felt that a focus on the multifarious ways in which this medium spans contemporary practice has been missing from gallery schedules and critical discourse. The result, LUX, is a group exhibition of sculptural and installation works which feature artificial illumination as an integral element. My research has led me down paths less travelled, to

artists overlooked in their time, and to the contemporary practitioners on this island, of which we have five of the foremost participating here.

Artwork is activated when looked at, listened to or talked about, but light art—typically reacting and changing to its audience—boasts unpredictability as a key facet. All art is experiential, but light art more so than most, with the interaction and effect of its viewers' perceptions completing the work endlessly in a multitude of ways. As a medium, it has an elemental purity. Most art depends on its environment for its illumination, whereas light art predominantly sets its own parameters, using as it does the primary building block of vision, and affecting the space around it accordingly.

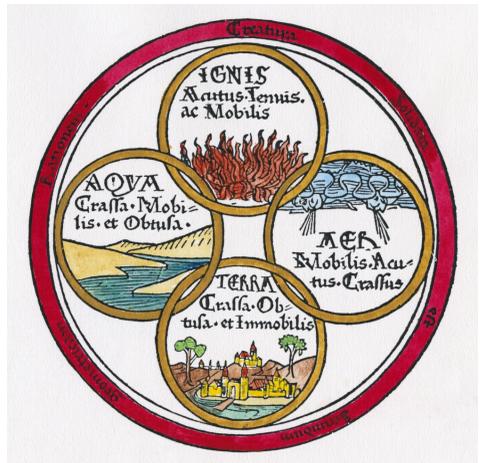
Though the use of artificial illumination has been an active ingredient in fine art since the 1920s, the medium has developed greatly since an experimental blossoming in the field during the 1960s on the American West Coast and to a certain extent in Europe. Many aesthetic tenets of light art were formed during this period, but its evolution continued, and today contemporary practices broaden its visual and theoretical scope through innovative technical and conceptual developments. In the following pages, I will look at the social, scientific and cultural aspects of light; its use in art on both a global scale and here on the island of Ireland as well as each of the LUX artists.

Davey Moor

## Light Reading

There may, ultimately, be little to square 'light', the zippy electromagnetic radiation intrinsic to so much in our universe, with 'light' the symbol, the positively unscientific mystical force central to spiritualism, but their entanglement is enduring. Worldwide, throughout the ages, artistic representations of deities have been bathed in—or the source of—astral illumination, often from a celestial vantage point.

In Islamic teaching, angels were borne of light. Modern Islamic diktats ban figuration and the play of light on sacred architecture is a key way in invoking the power of Allah. The Genesis creation narrative from the Old Testament had God create light—and with it the diurnal/nocturnal demarcation of time—on the first day, as part of a busy week of production, including land, water and the heavens. The Greek philosopher Empedocles, in the fifth century BCE, divided all matter into four categories: earth, air, water and fire. This corresponds with remarkable similarity to the four fundamental states of matter as agreed upon within the scientific community by the 1920s: solid, gas, liquid and plasma, the final of which fire can be defined under. Around the same time as Empedocles, Chinese philosopher



Mo-Zi's writings on physics show an impressive, empirical knowledge of the workings of light, including the mechanics of mirrors and camera obscuras, which create upside-down mirror images through pinholes. This showed an understanding of light's linear nature, which was not elucidated in the west until

Euclid. In the early eleventh century, the Arab scientist Hasan Ibn al-Haytham was the first to record correctly that sight worked by receiving light beams reflected off objects. Heretofore the presiding theory held that vision worked, in part, by the shooting of invisible (elemental) fire from the eyes to the object seen.

Light—particularly artificial illumination—is not something most people give a lot of conscious thought to, despite the profound effect it can have on our mood. It takes uncommon natural lighting conditions, such as a beautiful sunset, to really catch our attention and elicit comment. Light is a prerequisite to life—banal in its ubiquity and its everyday formats. We have an instinctual aversion to the light around us being curtailed. A structured idea of a 'right to light' was borne in 1663 in England with the concept of 'ancient lights', under which established buildings could not be subject to any blockage of light through their windows.

The invention in 1878 of the electric incandescent (heat illumination) filament bulb by the English scientist Joseph William Swan was a technological milestone of the nineteenth century. Before this, light existed from a limited number of sources. The most common was celestial, primarily the sun, and at night its reflection off the moon, as well as more distant stars. To a relatively minuscule degree, bioluminescent light is also emitted in nature by some animals such as fireflies, glow-worms and many marine creatures. Another example is flesh from dead fish and mammals. Fish skins were even used in mines as a safe alternative to combustion lamps. Many types of artificial illumination have been developed since Swan's invention, some of which have great advantages over incandescent bulbs. For example, LEDs have low energy consumption/cost, and a cool running temperature. It was perhaps of little surprise that the European Union banned the sale of traditional bulbs in 2012.

From the mid-seventeenth century, theories on the nature of light were split between whether it was composed of moving particles or operated as a wave, like

sound. Quantum physics settled this in the twentieth century. Maybe. It holds that light behaves both as a physical object (particle) and like a wave. Bizarrely, in experimental scenarios, the act of observing which of these behaviours light demonstrates changes depending on whether it is being observed or not. [V]



People will go to enormous lengths to feel the sun on their skin. Rjukan, a Norwegian town of about 3,000 inhabitants, 110 kilometres west of Oslo, lies in a deep latitudinal valley. The mountain range to its south blocks sunlight to the town from September to March. In 2013, the town placed a heliostat, comprising three enormous sensor-controlled mirrors, on the north range to reflect rays into their town square to provide sunlight. Its creator, Martin Andersen, is an artist, but his 'Solspeil' (sun mirror) was not intended to be an artwork. We will now look at some that were.

## Light As Medium: A Potted History

We might fancifully imagine the birth of using light for creative purposes as coinciding with the time humans understood the potential of fire and harnessed it for controlled use. Perhaps in a Palaeolithic African cave, proto-humans partook



in shadow-play on a wall, next to cave paintings. Worshippers during the Neolithic and Bronze Age periods manipulated light for ritualistic purposes, more about of which in the next section. During the first millennium BCE, shadow-puppetry became popular in Asia,

which used flat puppets to create intricate silhouettes on a semi-opaque screen. In the seventeenth century, rudimentary picture projectors called magic lanterns



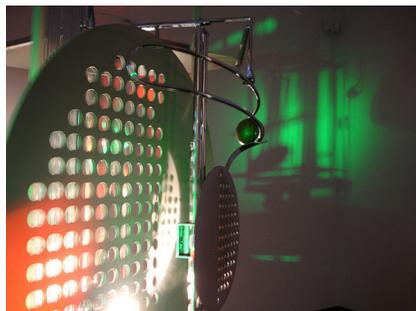
appeared. These were not merely for static images, as with multiple lamps images could be superimposed and given rudimentary motion. The chromatrope, one of a subset of lantern slide types, produced

dazzling, circular kaleidoscopic projections. [V]

In 1725, the French mathematician Louis-Bertrand Castel published an article on his proposal to produce an Ocular Harpsichord, which would 'play' colours rather than sounds. It was common to seek universalities between artistic/scientific systems. Newton's assignation of seven colour sections to the rainbow's spectrum was likely tied to the seven notes of western, modal music.

Castel's article produced great interest, but the organ went unrealised. Based on similar principles, the English artist Alexander Wallace Rimington had more practical success with his first Colour-Organ in 1894, which he demonstrated to music several times in concert. More synaesthetic experiments combining colour and music continued, including the Russian Futurist painter Vladimir Baranoff-Rossiné's Optophonic Piano,[V] featuring colour projections from painted discs.

The development of cinema in the 1890s inevitably infiltrated the art world. In 1924, the French artist Fernand Léger wrote and co-directed the avant-garde film, *Ballet Mécanique*, [V] partially produced using optical and kinetic effects. From the 1920s on, the Danish artist Thomas Wilfred used a variety of optical objects and painted transparent supports to create dynamically shifting abstract visuals (in fantastical forms previously only seen in natural phenomena) with his programmable Clavilux machines, [V] with the image back-projected onto a viewing screen. Wilfred was perhaps the first artist to focus on light exclusively within the realm of the visual arts and he named the form 'lumina'. MOMA bought their first piece by him in 1941 and in '71 co-hosted a retrospective of his work with The Corcoran Gallery of Art, in Washington, D.C.



In 1930, László Moholy-Nagy—the Hungarian artist who taught at the Bauhaus during the 1920s—completed his *Light Prop for an Electric Stage* [V] (later, aka *Light-Space Modulator*), a kinetic sculpture which cast light into its surroundings through moving, interconnected elements made of metal and plastic. Like Leger, he also worked in film, and using the *Light Prop* produced the experimental short, *Lightplay, Black White Grey* [V] in the same year.



Despite being a trailblazer in the field of light installation, Lucio Fontana's work in this area was overshadowed by his painting. The former is inevitably more fragile, expensive, time-consuming to install, space hungry and difficult to sell. Before the sixties, to work exclusively in this slowly burgeoning area was almost unheard of. Fontana's ambitious *Ambiente spaziale a luce nera* (Spatial environment in ultraviolet)[V] in 1949 was followed by many more up until his death in 1968, incorporating either UV on fluorescent material or neon.



The French artist Yves Klein's 1958 exhibition *The Specialization of Sensibility in the Raw Material State into Stabilized Pictorial Sensibility: The Void*, [V] in Iris Clert's Parisian gallery, featured a room

emptied of contents and painted white. Although Klein was using the atmospheric 'void' for the purpose of conceptualising ambience into a

commodity, it is certainly worth considering the (de)installation in the context of experiential minimalism, which was beginning to show its first buds. In another unrealised project from the same year, Klein planned to illuminate the Obelisk on the Place de la Concorde in Paris with blue spotlights. The next year, Otto Piene, the German artist and co-founder of the pan-



European group Zero—which included Fontana and Klein—produced the first of his *Light Ballets* [V]: kinetic installations that filled entire rooms with sculpture and projections.

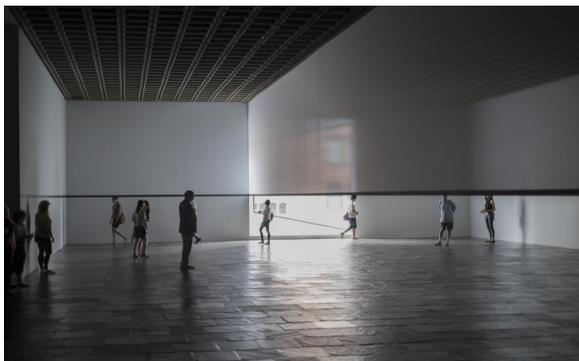
The first major group exhibition of light art was *KunstLichtKunst* in Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven in 1966 and many of the artists mentioned above participated. There were several American artists, including the American East

Coast minimalist Dan Flavin, who became, arguably, the most famous American light artist, but the nexus of innovation in the medium was happening at that time in California on the West Coast, in what became



known as the Light and Space (L&S) movement, or Phenomenal Art, due to its conceptual ties to phenomenology, the wide-ranging philosophical field that at its

core espouses human consciousness' lived experiences of the world over more fanciful abstractions of it; the way in which the subjective mind experiences phenomena rather than reality. It included Robert Irwin, James Turrell and Doug Wheeler [V]—artists who distinguished themselves from the more matter-of-fact



delineation of East Coast minimalism, towards more experiential artistic encounters. They used subtle methods and materials to pique and alter viewers perception of space by receiving,

manipulating or transmitting artificial or natural light in innovative ways. Using daylight as an intrinsic material as opposed to a tool for object display was radical and borne from both the landscapes the artists came from and the airy, bright new galleries they were displaying in.



Since L&S, itself a sub-movement of minimalism, there hasn't been a conceptual grouping of artists using light. The most well-known light artist to have emerged since the nineties is Olafur Eliasson, who riffs on vision,

colour and optics through the lens of phenomenology—a true L&S descendant. In his best know work, *The Weather Project* [V], staged in Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, he created a mellow sun bathing the huge industrial space with a warm glow under a ceiling-sized mirror.

The passage tomb at Newgrange in Meath, at over 5,000 years old, is probably one of the earliest optical device fabricated by humans. The exact purpose of the solstice sun illuminating the inner chamber on the 21<sup>st</sup> December each year is up for conjecture, but the sun was evidently an important element of Neolithic culture on the island. [V] This followed into the Celtic period, where the goddess Áine joined the firmament of pan-European solar deities. But while ancient symbolism did undergo both rebirth and reinterpretation in the twentieth century—the circular motifs found in many of Patrick Scott’s seminal works point to the dyed-in-the-wool Celtic mysticism in Irish culture—there was precious little physical light in Irish art up until the 1990s.



This year, the stated themes of the EVA International biennial were ‘nationhood, technological progress, electricity and metaphors of power’. Its spark was Seán Keating’s allegorical painting *Night’s Candles Are Burnt Out*—the dramatic cousin to his other, unofficial renderings of the Shannon Hydro-Electric Scheme that piped power to huge swathes of Ireland—and while the invisible energy of ESB’s roll-out had a multiplicity of potential uses, replacing the burnt out candles was by far the biggest outcome. Rural Irish life had been afforded a nocturnal shine.





Thinking on light art I have seen in the last couple of decades in Ireland, three key pieces come to mind. Liam O'Callaghan's *Time finds you a good place to fall* (2004) was exhibited in both the RHA and National Gallery. As an experience it plants seeds of expectation, however sceptical, on approach—the backstage thrill of observing the workings of a miniature world. The dazzling cacophony of light(s) around the corner makes you appreciate the journey and realise that art is not subject to the on/off allocation of time. Gavin Murphy's *Light cares can speak but heavy ones are dumb*, constructed of fluorescent tubes in triangular geometric patterns. Pyramids have an overt monumental quality, but the content of what meaning this triggers in the viewer is as likely to come from the personal as it is from (perhaps lost) historical sources. Elaine Leader's

*Untitled*, featured in 2011's *Transference* group show in Monster Truck. On approach, a tall industrial shutter shoots open and two lights ignite to blind you and to activate any guilt—imagined or otherwise—stored in your conscience for an intense and confusing two seconds.

## Helena Hamilton

Another artist dealing with the elusive nature of the present is Helena Hamilton. *Untitled (With)*—though a mutable work, metamorphosing to each new room it is shown in—always feels like a pivotal moment frozen in time; a moment of latent potential. Its soundtrack is a result of transducing the bulbs' vibrating cases into ambient musical sounds. As you approach the dazzling, deconstructed tangle of light strips, the sonic ambience of the room seems to shift around you, as if acknowledging your presence, as you circle and traverse. It is a paean to the whirrs, buzzes, hums and purrs of electrical machinery age from the mid-nineteenth century till now, when appliances are falling silent.



**Untitled (With) edition of 36**

photo: Simon Mills

## Kevin Killen

Kevin Killen's playful arcs, sweeping lines and energetic twists would be striking when considered as formal artistic strokes, but are all observed in and extracted from the real world. He uses neon as a way to suspend time and space in beautifully concentrated arrays of light and colour. Killen is inspired by movement; as an art student in the mid-nineties, he began to visualise methods



Certain Moments photos: Simon Mills

for translating what he saw, such as the nocturnal plays of light created by vehicles, into objects that could retain the dynamism of their source. Showing here is another series, *Certain Moments*, in which Killen has used the motion of dancers—capturing fluid, fleeting gestures on video—and reanimated them in the gallery with flourishes of light. Globally, since the 1990s, there has been a sharp decline in the use of neon and Killen, who hand-produces all his own material is part of an



artistic movement that is keeping this beautiful technology relevant in the twenty-first century.

## Helen Mac Mahon

Helen Mac Mahon focuses her artistic lens on the intrinsic aesthetics of optics, colour and light, in a true phenomenological sense. Many of her artworks are unique from moment to moment, bringing together carefully studied elements that set in motion algorithms that shift and play on the eye beyond the control of the artist or the viewer. The joy of discovery is a tangible element in Mac Mahon's work; scientific experimentation writ large, for the delight of sharing something worthy with its viewers. Aesthetically, *Hesperidae* has echoes of both Wilfred and Baranoff-Rossin's work—via the fluid, saturated light-shows of the 1960s psychedelic, live music scene—but is more expansive, not containing the imagery to the boundary of a frame. Mac Mahon also blurs dimensional boundaries and creates projections that seem to hover out from its viewing plane, towards the viewer. *A Series of Catastrophes* produces the same effect, with a different light source and deceptively simple optics.



A Series of Catastrophes

Hesperidae



## Lorraine Neeson

Darkness is more than the opposite of light in the work of Lorraine Neeson. Her art has an uncanny ability to seemingly imbue both states simultaneously, with both equally palpable and powerful, such as *Trap*.

In works such as *The future is not what it used to be* (2015), where the titular phrase dissolves into obscurity and back and especially *THERE*, in which the 'T' wavers between present and errant, the simple act of reveal and hide, through a flick or a fade, embeds either possibility at once in a sort Schrödinger's Cat scenario\*. In a similar vein, *Where do we go now but nowhere*, light is personified as a meagre yet irrepressible life-force, linked to a phased soundtrack of laboured breathing.



**Where do we go now but nowhere**

photo: Claire Ryan



**THERE** photo: Miranda Driscoll



**Trap**

\* The cat is the star of a thought experiment that—by virtue of it being isolated in a box with an apparatus that offers a precisely 50% chance of killing it—proposes it can be alive and dead at the same time. This idea is related to another quantum theory: entanglement (aka 'spooky action at a distance'), that posits that two particles can instantaneously influence each other over any distance, however large. Many, including Einstein, were dismayed by the idea that anything could beat the speed of light in a race to transfer information. Contradicting physics in such a way seemed like witchcraft.



Like Hamilton and Neeson, Margaret O'Brien cultivates a symbiotic relationship between light and sound. Her jarringly evocative installation *THIS ISN'T IT*, employs a variety of lighting types: cinematic projection, the bare incandescence of a filament bar heater and neon to illuminate her theme. They are the visible players, in synch to the atonal strains of an accompanying sound-collage composition. Together, in unpredictable sequences and intensities, they act as a barrage of psychological triggers. It presents a distillation of the frustration one inevitably experiences in the act of everyday creation. One every accomplished artist knows well.



**THIS ISN'T IT**

photos

above: artist

left: Mark St John Ellis

# LUX

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