



# Flickering Light: A History of Neon

*Christoph Ribbat*

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## **Flickering Light: A History of Neon** Christoph Ribbat

Neon signs illuminate modernity's ambivalence. For some observers, they stand for crass commercialism; for others, they light the way to the vibrant heart of popular culture. Energized by this tension, *Flickering Light* explores neon's technological and intellectual history, from the discovery of the noble gas in a late nineteenth-century London laboratory to its flickering career in the art spaces of our time.

This wide-ranging book discusses neon's relevance for the cultural critic Theodor W. Adorno and the British rock band The Verve, for the novelist Vladimir Nabokov and the artist Tracey Emin, for the poet Langston Hughes and the singers of American country and western ballads. It shows how glowing advertisements, carefully sculpted by gifted craftsmen, brought elegance to western metropolises between the wars. It investigates how neon transformed a sleepy desert town called Las Vegas in the 1950s and '60s. It demonstrates how writers, artists, and musicians, on the move in European, American, and Asian neon cities, turned the blinking lights and letters into powerful metaphors of our time.

And yet there is a melancholy tone to neon's story, a note of failure. It was only a few decades after their invention that the fragile inventions were seen as dated and as characteristic of the most run-down and problematic neighborhoods of the modern city. Passing from neon spectacles to neon jungles, this book thus tells the story of a glowing tube's decline – halted only by its most passionate admirers.

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