

Michael Schwarz

## **Brigitte Kowanz: In the Mirror of the Light – The Beholder**

For over thirty years now Brigitte Kowanz has occupied herself with artificial light, its principles and its possibilities in terms of both narrative and design. In her early works she inquired into light as light, studied reflection, the effect of shadows, the luminosity of the medium, themed the ability of light to not only create spaces but also make them vanish. And she has discovered forms that allow the physical laws of light to be grasped, that remind us that what we actually see is light, and in her recent works shown that we the observers can also become part of the experimental set-up in her works. Her entire oeuvre in all of its phases and constellations was recently the subject of a large retrospective at the Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, accompanied by a thick catalogue.<sup>1</sup> Museum Ritter is now showing above all her works with neon and mirrors and in this way granting a glimpse into the artist's ways of working and her artistic strategies. With the exhibition of her works on the ground floor of the museum, the luminous messages in her works become immediately legible. But does this alone make the works comprehensible?

We experience spaces through their boundaries, their form and size convey themselves above all via the floor on which we stand and by the corners. For this reason every change in the floor surface or in a corner also has an impact on the experience of the space – not only in exhibition galleries. At Museum Ritter the floor space is opened up by the tetrahedron that forms *Dedicated*, a neon piece which, thanks to its semi-transparent mirror, repeatedly reflects the lettering and expands the existing space into an infinite, virtual space. This work was preceded by *Exit* in 2006, which has not

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<sup>1</sup> Brigitte Kowanz. *Now I See*, exh. cat., Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, Nuremberg 2010.

been exhibited here. Both of the works open up the space with their radiant, overlapping, multiplied images of precisely that space. Works arise from works, and so the corners of the floor can be traced back to the corner lights that Brigitte Kowanz created in 1987 and in the following years, in which she first themed the exhibition space as a perceptual space. In those years a number of young artists turned their attention to the light experiments that had been conducted on the American West Coast in and around the *Art and Technology Program* at Los Angeles County Museum. In particular James Turrell had already worked since 1967 on removing the boundaries of space by means of light in his *Projection Pieces*.<sup>2</sup> These works produce illusions, they are meant (initially) to deceive, to make us believe the corners of the room have been cut open, that every wall bears a shining mural – so as then to belie the deception. Brigitte Kowanz does not overwhelm. She shows the elements, materials and underpinnings of her work. Right from the outset we see what we see: an interaction between the virtual interior space of *Dedicated* and the reflections of the surrounding space. Only later do the questions arise.

Yet another work in the exhibition refers back to an earlier group. The latest work on show here is entitled *Whatwhy* and refers back to the artist's Morse code objects in the latter half of the 1990s; at that time a number of Brigitte Kowanz's works were concerned with the underlying principles of our information society. *In order to arrive at knowledge, she says, we require tools that can encode what has been experienced and then decode that once again.* She devoted herself to the code to which Samuel F. B. Morse – American inventor and Professor of Art, Painting and Design at the University of New York – applied himself when in 1837, he constructed the first Morse telegraph machine from scraps of wire, left-over metal and a clock, and with

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<sup>2</sup> For retrospectives these works are reinstalled. A Cross Corner Projection by James Turrell is on permanent show at the Sprengel Museum in Hanover.

that created the foundations of modern data transfer by means of a binary code. In works such as *Morsealphabet* [Morse code] or *Licht ist was man sieht* [Light is what we see], Brigitte Kowanz translated the Morse code with its acoustic intervals into visual signs. Her new piece, *Whatwhy*, is as simple in form as it is suggestive in its effect. In order to show the characters extending out into space, two concentric neon tubes have been mounted on a likewise concentrically polished stainless steel disk, such that the light produces a seemingly spatial web of light and shadow that extends outwards.

The majority of the exhibited works are displayed as picture objects on the wall. As pictures they grant a gaze into spaces beyond the exhibition space, past the light of the lettering into a mysterious darkness. Point of departure is almost always neon lettering, which presents words such as *Viceversa* or *Extension* and thus names what is to be read: a light sign that is doubled, that is multiply reflected before losing itself in a black picture space. Rainer Fuchs has spoken in this context of a triad of light, language and mirrors which, [...] *combined with each other, push the potential for self-expansion and mutual interpenetration close to the infinite.*<sup>3</sup> This extension into the infinity of the picture space is achieved through mirrorings and counter-reflections which allow the lettering gleaming on the surface to become smaller and smaller until it disappears there where the beholder sees himself shining out from the darkness of the picture object.

Mirrorings have a long tradition in light art. Not every example that could be named is relevant in artistic and conceptual terms to Brigitte Kowanz's mirror objects. But nevertheless they form the backdrop, as it were, without which the historical and contemporary context of the work would be incomprehensible. László Moholy-Nagy's *Light-Space-Modulator* from 1930

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<sup>3</sup> Rainer Fuchs: Precision without Borders; in: Brigitte Kowanz, *Now I See*, Nuremberg 2010, pp. 40-47, p. 45.

picked up for the first time on the theme of the viewer over whom the light reflections and shadow forms from the kinetic object glide – while he himself remains in the dark as the observer of a spectacle. The light objects created by Nikolaus Schöffer, Adolf Luther, the *ZERO* group or the *Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel* (GRAV) 30 years later even demanded an autonomously moving viewer when the luminous sculptures themselves rotated. In the 1950s and 1960s two parameters in particular of light art were laid down on a broad basis: the dualism of projection and reflection, and motion – either as the movement of the object or as the movement of the observer. Artists such as Olafur Eliasson, Mischa Kuball and others have continued to work along both of these parameters. This has led in an installation like *Remix/Broca II (Letters/Numbers)* (2007) by Mischa Kuball – a work that relates to Broca's area in the brain, the region that controls the motor action of speech – to an experience of time in the perceptual space of the projection that is induced by means of acceleration and deceleration. When compared to such projection and reflection spaces, the differences to light art in the tradition of kinetic mirror objects à la Moholy-Nagy become quickly apparent. Point of departure for Brigitte Kowanz's works is language as writing or sign. The handwritten concepts rendered in neon for her light objects [...] *display their meanings in spatial appearances and signalize their instability and dynamism in the experience of the viewer confronted with a permanently shifting and never unequivocally graspable scenario.*<sup>4</sup>

What still must be discussed are the two floor objects, *Eins unendlich* and *Unendlich eins* [One Infinitely and Infinitely One], which as so often in Brigitte Kowanz's work are conceived of as a diptych. The result is a dialogue that perpetuates the mirror theme in the neon-and-mirror-based works in the current exhibition, and once again poses the question of the bounds of space:

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<sup>4</sup> Rainer Fuchs, *ibid.*

infinite or one? Quite indistinguishable from one another, the cubes stand like *dioscuri* in space and shine with identical brightness. Likewise the signs fragmented by the mirrors appear identical – although the meaning invested in them could not be more different. As he approaches, the viewer recognises at a certain point in front of the objects two quotients:  $1 / \infty$  and  $\infty / 1$ . Far beyond any philosophic questions, I see them as holding the key to understanding the artist's entire oeuvre, but especially the mirror pieces exhibited here. I had maintained that the experience of boundless space was possible in them, a picture space in which the work (more precisely: the designation of the work) takes a step back. In this infinity the work takes the viewer with it – if he allows it:  $1 / \infty$ . For everyone else, the neon/mirror objects remain what they also are, which is to say objects made of various materials – unattainable:  $\infty / 1$ .

Light creates spaces – picture spaces as well as real spaces. The beholder moves in this space generated by the light objects. *Light space must always be thought of as dynamic and must constitute itself above and beyond a possible 'void' as ambient and possessing atmospheric qualities.*<sup>5</sup> Drawn by light reflections, words slivers and mirrored fragments of space, the viewer approaches the work and finds the spot from which the word, the phrase or the sign can be read – so as to lose himself precisely at that moment in the work. But perhaps he finds there, where it is darkest, an answer to the questions *Whathowwherewhowhen*.

Übersetzung aus dem Deutschen: Malcom Green

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<sup>5</sup> Daniela Zyman: On "Making-Room" or How Seeing Takes Place in a Light Space; in: Light Art from Artificial Light. Light as a Medium in 20th and 21st Century Art, exh. cat. ZKM/Museum für Neue Kunst Karlsruhe, Ostfildern 2006, p. 466-487, p. 467.