

NEON LIGHT FETISH:

NEON ART AND SIGNIFICATION OF SEX WORK

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Abstract

Neon light has a history as art, fetish, and advertisement of sex-work. In this essay, I explore the historical context of neon, its popularity decline in the United States, post-WWII, and associations of neon with the commodification of sex. While neon light is ubiquitous as sex industry signage, the process of gentrification occurring in many *red-light districts*, mark the demise of neon light and furthers systemic oppression of sex-workers. Through a Baudrillardian theory of fetish, I investigate the semiotics of the neon light in postmodernity, and its communicative power. A history and theory of neon fetish guide the semiotic interpretations of the conceptual art of Bruce Nauman, the transgressive art of *Gran Fury*, and the feminist neon's of Tracey Emin. Each of the three artists use neon light as their art media and for its semiotic registers.

Keywords: neon, art, gentrification, sex-work, feminism, semiotics, Baudrillard

The Sex Work Significance of Neon in Art

As a female artist, activist, and former sex-worker, I pay attention to material objects associated with sex-work (Davis, 2017). The neon light is a material object associated with consumption, entertainment, and often vice. I have worked in areas of the sex industry that embrace the light as an ideal form of marketing for sexual activities, as well as, environments that (due to illegality) avoid neon signage for the exact same reasons. This essay connects the neon light's history to the over signification of the light in the process of gentrification and the systemic oppression of sex-workers.

Through a semiotic lens of connecting an object to social values, I investigate the value of neon light as an object marked for removal in some communities and conserved in others. Bridging the fascination for neon light to the stigmatization of sex-works, I examine contemporary artists who use the light as a medium to communicate concepts related to social norms deemed harmful by Western society. The observation and critique of visual art allows reflection on the circumstances faced by myself and other sex-workers, not otherwise welcome in patriarchal discourse that society is immersed. It is through deep resentment and curiosity that I examine why the historical and social value of a light is often treated with more regard than the lives of myself and other sex workers.

From Neon Modernity to Postmodern Fetish

Popularity and usage of neon light has varied since its commercial introduction as luminous tube signage at the beginning of the twentieth century. Neon light was popularized by French chemist and engineer Georges Claude. Claude presented the first large-scale neon light installation at the Grand Palais in 1910 for the *Paris Salon de l'Automobile et du Cycle* (Ribbat, 2013). (See Figure 1.) Claude was a neon enthusiast and promoter, yet, to his detriment he was also an outspoken Nazi collaborator, who exhibited neon at the theatre Fontainebleau

in 1927 for political promotion of the French extremist group, *Action Française* (Ribbat, 2013). Despite the use of neon by Claude for Nazi politics, his consistent promotion of neon led to its popularity. The first form of neon as advertisement signage was created in 1912 by Jacques Fonseque, a friend of Georges Claude. Fonseque bent and shaped the luminous tube into graphic shapes and letters creating advertisement for the Palais Coiffeur barber shop in Paris (Stern, 1979). By 1930, neon advertisement was implemented on Paris rooftops and on the side of zeppelins lighting up the night sky (Ribbat, 2013; Stern, 1979). In 1927, more than 6,000 neon signs were present in the modern city of Paris. The early installations of neon were a revolutionary form of commodity marketing and its popularity eventually carried over from Europe to the United States.

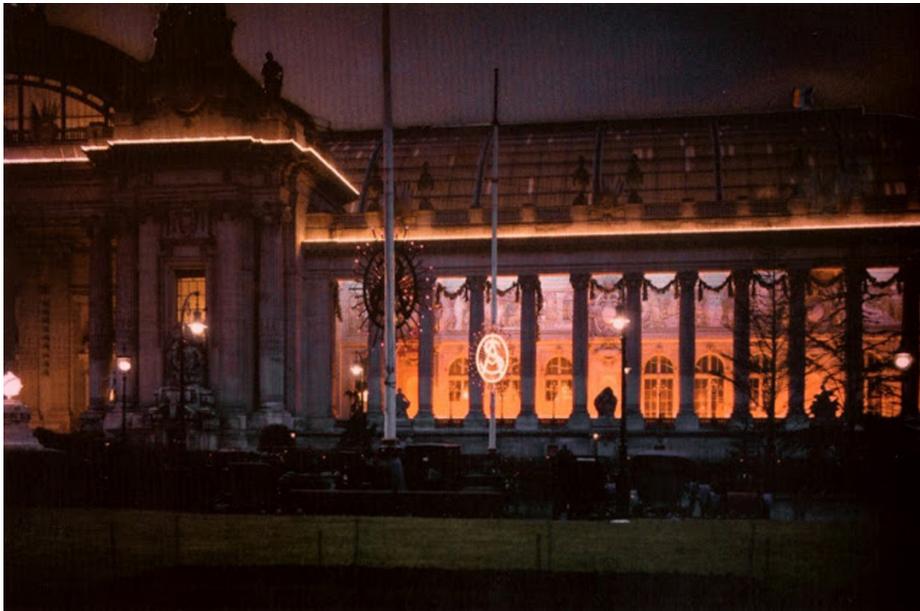


Figure 1. [Grand Palais \(Georges Claude Neon Display\)](#), 1912, Photo by Leon Gimple.

In 1923, the U.S. automobile entrepreneur, Earle C. Anthony purchased two of Claude's neon signs for the Los Angeles Packard dealership (Cavette & Davis, 1996). By the 1920s, the popularity of the neon sign spread across the visual landscape of cities throughout the United States. Neon popularity rose

in 1929 when a New York City agency declared Times Square's real estate a national advertising medium (Ribbat, 2013). In Times Square, innovative electric advertisements evolved throughout the 1930s and the neon light show became a tourist attraction with 1,100,000 people visiting the area every day (Ribbat, 2013). By 1934, New York boasted nearly 20,000 neon advertisements installed in Manhattan and Brooklyn alone (Ribbat, 2013). Neon light offered colorful signage that could be bent and shaped into a variety of graphic symbols, which made the light ideal for the growing United States marketplace. The U.S. marketplace embraced neon as *American signage* and popularity continued throughout the 1930s and into the years preceding World War II.

Neon Decline

Despite the rise of neon popularity before 1940 in the United States, aesthetic choices and public attitudes changed following World War II. Economic restrictions in wartime hindered the expansions of new large-scale neon advertisement and by the end of World War II tastes in design and advertisement had changed (Stern, 1979). Previously neon advertisement displays of Packard and Claude were large-scale handcrafted installations but following WWII advertisements, the production of neon evolved with the introduction of streamline Plexiglas and fluorescent lighting (Cavette & Davis, 1996). The introduction of new, easy to maintain, affordable Plexiglas lowered demand for neon advertisement and between the 1950s and 1960s neon was gradually displaced by plastic signage (Cavette & Davis, 1996). For those still attracted to neon, cheaper neon-like alternatives were available with the fluorescent light.

The fluorescent light offered the visual aesthetic of neon but was manufactured in large quantities without the expertise of handcraft (Miller, 1952). Regarding both fluorescent and Plexiglas advances *The New York Times* in 1950 reported the expectation for both new signage options to solve problems of high electricity consumption, expensive maintenance, and initial cost compared to neon (New York Times, 1950). The remaining neon production had shifted from elaborate installations to small-scale mass-produced beer and point-of-purchase signs affordable to small low-end establishments (Glancey, 2014). Movie theatres, diners, bars, and bowling alleys could all purchase maintainable small-scale neon

as the large-scale sign market had yielded to Plexiglas and fluorescent.

Neon Urban Landscape and Sex Advertisement

Throughout the 1960s, businesses that could afford intricate neon billboards gradually replaced their signage with alternatives that required less maintenance and cost. In U.S. cities, neon signs remained primarily in areas of neglect as popularity of neon degraded with the changing landscape of urban areas. As the suburbs grew in the United States and low-income urban areas fell to disrepair, neon created a marker for the disparities between middle-class neighborhoods and rundown areas (Ribbat, 2013). Residents of affluent neighborhoods adjusted to the changing trend as a matter of community responsibility and respectability. Ordinances were passed in the elite Bel-Air suburb of Los Angeles in a community that imposed a ban on all neon signage after 1949. The *Los Angeles Times* (1949) reported: “The esthetic atmosphere of exclusive Bel-Air district will not be tainted by crass commercialism of a neon sign” (p. A1). Within a matter of a few decades, the public opinion of neon light had gone from popular display to crass kitsch. In 2014, Jonathan Glancey of the BBC highlighted unpopular associations with neon light stating, “There was a period, though—between the 1960s and 1990s—when neon signs became associated with run down areas of the world’s inner cities ... the realms of back street dives, of sex shops and hostess bars, with neon showing the way to the seedier sides of city life” (Glancey, 2014, para. 12). This negative association to neon was not exclusive to Great Britain but coincided with the disfavor toward neon in urban settings around the United States.

Degraded associations with neon impacted urban centers differently across the United States during the late twentieth-century. Times Square had a neon rich landscape, which became negatively associated with sex following the expanded presence of prostitution and the 25-cent peepshow. (See Figure 2.) Christopher Ribbat, professor of American Studies and author of *Flickering Light: The Enduring Glow of Neon Light*, notes: “By the mid-1970’s the majority of cinemas in Times Square were devoted entirely to pornographic films. Entrepreneurs on the make opened up topless shoeshine booths as well as intimate peepshow joints, sometimes doing away with the glass screen between the clients and performers

and thus providing extra services” (Ribbat, 2013, p. 109). Times Square in this period of the 1970s became associated with disrepute and vice where neon was a marker for taboo sexual practices. Once a popular tourist destination, Times Square became in the 1970s a neon landscape illuminating society’s relationship to subversive and underground urban culture with much of its commerce revolving around the underground sex work community.



Figure 2. Times Square, 1960’s, [Erotic Theatres/Peep Shows](#)

Tantamount to Times Square are the Nevada urban settings Reno and Las Vegas. Both locations are epicenters for leisure, entertainment, and the commodification of sex with a strong presence of neon light. The popularity of neon in Nevada began around the same time as the rest of the U.S. when gambling was legalized in the 1930s (Harris, 2001/2001). With massive neon signage for casino and showgirl entertainment, Nevada’s businesses for gambling and entertainment idealized neon as signage for sexual consumption. Starting in the 1950s, the Las Vegas strip became synonymous with sexual consumption as glitzy showgirls were photographed with the iconic signage without additional pay for global and national promotion (Goodwin, 2002). Nevada is the only U.S. state

with legal prostitution (in counties with populations less than 400,000), which is aggrandized by the history of promoting neon around the female visage while regulating the female body. Brothel workers in Nevada are regulated through mandatory registration, STD checks, and curfews—all of which place the safety of the client above that of the sex worker (Siegal, 2007/2015). The idealization of the female form backlit by the neon light, and neon in the urban setting, is compromised by the inconsistent and biased treatment of female sex-workers where standards of living as a sex-worker are far from ideal.

The contrast between Nevada's cities and New York's Times Square is evident in the treatment of the sex-trade. Nevada, with legal gambling and regulated prostitution seeks to control and profit from sex, whereas Times Square, maintained a fully underground sex-trade. Yet, the locations are linked in the connection to the signification of neon as a calling card for sexual consumption.

Neon in Gentrification: Sex-work Signage

Confronting the associations of commodified sex and neon, one fabricator responded to the fluctuation in neon popularity by specializing the craft to sex-work. London's oldest neon fabrication company, Electro Signs, produced neon for London's red-light district to remain stable during recession of neon use (Foyle, 2016). A generational sign company, Electro Signs, began with Dick Bracey illuminating fairgrounds and seaside boardwalks with neon in the early 1950s. Inheriting Electro Signs in 1972 from his father, fabricator Chris Bracey gained stability for the company by creating a large portion of the neon lights in the red-light district of Soho (Foyle, 2016). Interviewed by *The Times* (2014), Chris Bracey affirmed, "I did 99 per cent of every sex establishment in Soho for 20 years'... 'For me it was an artistic endeavor" (para. 5). Bracey's neon signage is acknowledged for the conception and production of the original, *Girls Girls Girls* sign. Seen in Figure 3, the simple slogan as a text-based neon sign was one of many that shaped the underground visual landscape of Soho and initiated visually recognizable imagery synonymous with sex-work.



Figure 3. Chris Bracey, *Girls Girls Girls*, (n.d.), [Lights of Soho](#).

Today the area of Soho, where Bracey's work left a lasting mark, amidst pornography theatres, and brothels, is being redefined through gentrification. Many of the peep shows, sex shops, and brothels are being phased out and the landlords are under pressure from local authorities to sell or change the use of their property (Mullin, 2015). Yet, the current development of Soho's cultural capitol exists around the sex-trade sans actual sex-work. New business owners salvage the red-light district's neon for use as focal points in galleries and restaurants. The retention of the lighting sans sex-work creates a cultural pastiche, which emphasizes neon light without the context of sex-work. "We are bringing the red lights inside and turning them into art," asserted the managing director of *Lights of Soho*, to *Vice* magazine (Mullin, 2015). The gallery *Lights of Soho* curates the neon lights of the urban community as cherished objects, which may sell for upwards of \$100,000 each (Mullin, 2015). The signifier neon without its referent sex-work, is suggestive yet sanitized of sex-acts performance when exhibited in galleries throughout the Soho area.

The renewed interest in neon lights encourages removal from sex establishments while sex-workers are forced into even further marginal conditions. Cities—such as Las Vegas, Warsaw, Los Angeles, and New York—all have their own version of neon galleries collecting and displaying the vestiges of neon (Ribbat, 2013). In observation, Frankie Mullin (2015), of *Vice* magazine, clarified what this means for the sex-worker: “Around us, people’s lives are being demolished and sold back to the wealthy as a gimmick; a fetishized, hyperreal version of London that, if you don’t scratch too deeply, gives the illusion that all is well outside the Square Mile” (para. 15). The significance of neon in the gentrified red-light district is visible not only in the disassociation of the light from the sex industry but also in similar communities where neon is targeted for removal because of neon’s association to sex-work.

Many red-light districts are subject to gentrification and the preoccupation with neon is evident in the coastal resort town of Blackpool, England. Emily Cooper (2016), of Northumbria University, provided a detailed impact study on the official removal of neon in Blackpool. The study offered a nuanced examination of factors leading to social and spatial exclusion of sex-workers starting with the removal of parlor signage that had indicated sex-workers available (Cooper, 2016).

Passers-by are aware of what they are ... the (optical) governance of these parlours ... what the local authorities typically want to ‘cleans’ (e.g., turning vibrant colors to white or removing from view the lamps with sexually-oriented decorations) ... are important when understanding relations between sex-work and communities; the visibility and style of advertisement ... creates fluctuation and perception. (Cooper, 2016, p. 556)

The whitewashing of communities such as Soho and Blackpool arise from a pre-existing binary debate surrounding sex and prostitution, and the separation of *pure* (normal) and *impure* (abnormal) sex (Cooper, 2016). Upon the removal of neon light, premises are monitored by law enforcement for compliance in removal of signifiers, thereby, cleansing the community of *immoral (impure) sex*.

The cleansing of neon in areas like Blackpool and the gentrification of

Soho conflate meaning between the neon light and standards for normalcy. The removal of lighting is one of the first steps in the restriction of autonomy toward sex-workers. Neon advertisement and decoration offer an affordable alternative to the online and periodical advertisements, which charge rates per post (Eros.com, 2017). In addition, the light fosters necessary anonymity in a consensual exchange, reinforcing an intimate but not personal atmosphere. The decision by authorities to remove the light is one of the many tools in silencing women and queered voices (Mac, 2016). This disregard for sex-worker rights occurs despite the outcry by the sex-work community for control over the terms of their own safety and environment.

Neon Fetish in Modern Industrial Society

The focus on the neon light as signifier of *immoral sex* overinflates the meaning of the object. In the linguistic understanding of how meaning is formed, through a sign as the basic unit of the semiotic system, this over-inflation constitutes a fetish of the sign as a cultural symbol. The fetish occurs when a sign, such as materialized in a neon sign, is attributed to a socially constructed meaning greater than itself. In *Fetishism and Ideology: The Semiological Reduction*, Baudrillard (1981) addressed fetishism as a semiotic sign and social symbol. A semiotic fetish of neon is formed in the system of coded abstraction with the emptiness of the commodity and the supplement of signification. The neon light’s status in society takes on the fetish value once it has become synonymous with class and social values, not properties of a light. Baudrillard states: “It is the sanctification of the system as such, of the commodity as system: it is thus contemporaneous with the generalization of exchange value and it propagated with it” (1981, p. 92). The “system as such” that Baudrillard noted, is the fixation of meaning of the non-tangible social/class system attached to an object, which then signifies more than its material value.

Timothy Dant (1996), in *Fetishism and the Social Value of Objects*, exemplifies the pure fetish with this instance, “The television set that is broken but retains its prestige value in a culture in which hardly anybody can afford a television is an example for the ‘pure fetish’” (p. 505). The same logic may be applied to neon light as it is pushed further into obsolescence but marked with

\$100,000 price tags in London galleries. In this case, the object serves no logical function outside of its recollection of social symbol. The neon light, which has a debased status in contemporary society due to associations with vice, is also a subject of fascination. In the words of Dant (1996), the object is over signified “in the restrictive logic of a system of abstraction” (p. 500). Society finds fascination in disassociated symbolic meaning and cultural appropriation of neon light, but maintains disdain for the signifier when ownership of the physical and symbolic sign is maintained by sex-workers.

The overt signification of neon light to human classifications severs the neon light from its basic use in the commodity system as luminous signage. The light is eviscerated from substantive history and becomes the marking of difference (Baudrillard, 1981). In historical reference to Times Square, Blackpool, and Soho—the light marks the difference between societal boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable sexual practices, typically gendered as unacceptable women as sex-worker and acceptable men as clients of prostitution (Cooper, 2016). The overt signification of neon is present in many communities with a presence of sex-work, some treating the neon light as valuable art and others as obscenity.

Neon in Contemporary Art

Fascination with neon in its relationship to sex-workers can be found in the neon installations of contemporary artists. The communicative power of the neon light in art exemplifies an attunement to the visual culture of sex-work and sets a precedent for society at large to also reflect on their material consumption as analogous to the treatment of women, girls, and queered bodies. Through neon installations commenting on sex, propriety, and violence, artists such as Bruce Nauman, *Gran Fury*, and Tracey Emin create a visual discourse on neon’s relevance as a fetish object.

The neon fetish in the art of Nauman, *Gran Fury*, and Tracey Emin, discussed in this section, draws attention to a specific kind of stigmatization and social disregard, one that over emphasizes material culture to demean marginal populations of humanity. As a communicative element in visual art, the neon light demonstrates the same physical properties of its original advertisement use, as well as compounding a loaded sign in postmodern representation of stigma.

Conceptual Neon Art: Bruce Nauman

Employing neon as a masculinist cultural sign, Bruce Nauman choreographs the neon fetish in his conceptual neon art with manipulation of cultural signs and language. In the catalogue title essay, *Elusive Signs*, the art historian and theorist Joseph D. Ketner II points to language and cultural signs in Bruce Nauman’s work stating, “Nauman understood that Wittgenstein’s ideas on language and meaning involved not only linguistic constructs but cultural signs and human behaviors as well” (Ketner, 2006, p. 25). In the neon wall installation, *Raw War*, (Figure 4) Nauman uses a simple construction of horizontal neon lettering to illuminate the text “war” from right to left. *Raw War*, made in 1970, comments on organized aggression in Vietnam War times through the play of language. The linear text recounts window signage similar to Chris Bracey’s *Girls Girls Girls*, where a word repeated three times in large red neon holds a loaded context (Ribbat, 2013). The simplicity of *Raw War* calls attention to the relationship of signage with an exposed transformer and timing mechanism, revealing that although the light plays on the multifaceted significance of neon light, it is in fact just a light word.



Figure 4. Bruce Nauman, *Raw War*, 1970, [Kamel Manneur Gallery](#).

Other works, such as *Run From Fear/Fun From Rear* (Figure 5), incorporate the charged sexual atmosphere of brothels by leading the viewer into a text and content connected to sexual violence (Ribbat, 2013). Gregory Volk (2006) contends, “One way (among others) of interpreting [Nauman’s] work is as possible rape scene featuring a victim in flight from a leering pursuer” (p. 71). The text *Run From Fear/Fun From Rear* is sexually aggressive, yet unapologetic; it recounts the scenery of underground sex in places such as Times Square where sex and violence existed in an underground but public setting.



Figure 5. Bruce Nauman, *Run From Fear/Fun From Rear*, 1972, [Hauser & Wirth Gallery](#).

Utilizing playful pink and yellow coloration and easily read text, this work dissociates from outdoor signage when displayed in a gallery. In a gallery, the work affirms a fetish fascination with neon light. Nauman’s skillful management of discrepancy between commercial sign, placed in a gallery setting, and the sign’s relationship to the outside world, suggest the fluidity of meaning in systemization. This semiotic over-inflation is highlighted in Baudrillard’s (1981) fetish theory where, “The more the [commodity/sign] system is systemized, the more the fetishist fascination is reinforced” (p. 91). Exhibited in the gallery setting, the neon light in Nauman’s work is no longer the light of the brothel window, nor is it simply an art object, it is instead a linguistic sign trapped in a closed circuit of patriarchal meaning, eviscerated from its forms of use.

The neon light in Bruce Nauman’s art is used as a communicative tool and physical material. Nauman uses themes of sex and violence to question humanity’s relationship to vice and the human condition by casting the viewer entrenched in patriarchy in the colored light of the neon object as part of the artwork. The neon light reaches the viewer not only as physical light implying their participation but as a vestige of the commodification of sex. Through society’s relationship to the sex industry in Nauman’s art, the viewer is asked, “where are you in all of this?” In this way, Nauman’s neon art does the exact opposite of the community programs in Blackpool intended to “cleanse” the city. Nauman brings the neon lights inside where they fill the rooms with their combative excess while teasing out the missteps of morality in their references.

Transgressive Neon Art: *Gran Fury*

The reference of taboo neon signage endures in activist art, which has used neon to empower messages for social change. Utilizing the fetish value of the neon light, neon plays an integral part in the piece *SILENCE = DEATH* (Figure 6). The neon installation was created in the 1980s by the provocative group of artists and activists known as *Gran Fury*. *SILENCE = DEATH*, is a text based neon installation, featuring the entitled text and a triangular insignia of the Nazi regime signifying homosexuality (Smith & Gruenfeld, 1998). The reference to fascist genocide activates *SILENCE = DEATH* as an integral tool in resistance. Both the text and triangle insignia outwardly address the effects of gender and sexuality prejudice through the historical precedent of genocide.



Figure 6. Gran Fury, *SILENCE = DEATH*, 1986, [New Museum of Art](#)

The necessity for radical and communicative resistance for *Gran Fury* stems from a remarkable time in the Gay Rights Movement. The comprehensive *SILENCE = DEATH* was created in the 1980s during the AIDS pandemic and called attention to inadequate and biased perspectives on people with AIDS. Here, neon was an object performing complex social roles and status of stigmatization for the graphic neon text of *SILENCE = DEATH*. The artists of *Gran Fury* denounced harmful publications such as the 1986 *New York Times* editorial *Crucial Steps in Combating the AIDS Epidemic; Identify All the Carriers with SILENCE = DEATH* (d'Addario, 2011). The prejudiced editorial, written by conservative William F. Buckley called for the tattooing of all HIV patients' forearms and the buttocks of homosexuals to effectively warn others of their sexual activity as possible AIDS transmitters (Buckley, 1986). Ignorance and fear driven by the article was compounded by the U.S. government's negligence in funding AIDS medical care research. These failings were some of many barriers AIDS awareness artists and activists subverted as a matter of survival.

The manipulation of the fascination of neon in *SILENCE = DEATH* is analogous to the approach of Bruce Nauman's neon art. Brenda Richardson (1980) interprets Bruce Nauman's neon art from a Duchampian model, in which the public means of communication for private purposes is the focus of analysis. The neon sign for some is painfully personal and fraught with moral conflict making the personal political, a long-held practice of feminism (Fudge, 2006; Richardson, 1980). This application of neon requires humanity to be accountable for its role in the risk of disease transmission heightened by silence and stigma (*SILENCE = DEATH*, n.d.).

SILENCE = DEATH bridged the communicative power of art with the needs of social justice and activism. As Richards wrote: "It is through language, and its power to move people that demographics and governments are altered" (1980, p. 22). Neon light in transgressive art utilizes the over signification of neon light as a sign synonymous with taboo sex to engage the greater community.

Feminist Neon: Tracey Emin

Continuing the radical dialogue of neon art into the twenty-first century is artist Tracey Emin. Her prolific body of neon art began in the late 1990s and continues today. Emin's neon sculptures are fabricated to reflect her handwriting in a range of autobiographical snippets. These unconventional sculptures are amplified by the color and radiance of neon light. With a similar context to the gentrified resort town of Blackpool and the boardwalks illuminated by Tracey, Tracey Emin grew up in a seaside resort town of boardwalk neon attractions. She lived in the city of Margate in the United Kingdom, which also is the place that Emin experienced her first sexual trauma at the age of 13. In a town known for its colorful neon boardwalk, Emin revealed that sexual assault—rape to be precise, was 'par for the course' for the girls of Margate (Hackett, 2008). Recalling sexual trauma in intimate detail, Emin not only reclaims her own experience but uses the light, formed into her own script, to share statements on the arduous process of healing. Through the physical properties of neon light, and its personal and social significance, Emin makes public the sources of personal shame. Her work is indicative of female sexual pleasure linked to sexual trauma. In the interview *The Story of I*, Stuart Morgan confronts Emin with the content of her art stating: "Much

of your art involves violence toward women” to which Emin replies, “Because I am a woman, people have been violent towards me” (Morgan, 1997). Emin directly confronts status quo notions of art and women survivors of sexual trauma. She layers meanings of the neon fetish to systemization of shame and stigma but also suggests upheaval and fortitude.

The neon fabrications, *You Forgot To Kiss My Soul* (2007) and *Everything For Love* (2005), describe a private and languorous desire to find intimate connection. Bonnie Clearwater (2013) writes: “her neon works, with their intimate and cryptic messages, were like private notes written on a piece of paper and left on a table where they might be discovered, read, and understood by someone she loves” (p. 198). These candid gestures have been criticized as “teen-like angst” (Sheerin, 2016, para. 7), yet, what is lost in the criticism is the potential genesis of Emin’s angst ridden youthful voice. When interpreted as the voice of childhood trauma, it no longer fulfills the shallow romanticism of “teen-like angst.” In *Love Poem For CF*, Emin lights up a wall with pink neon, which recalls her rape at age 13. The pink neon text reads:

*You put your hand across my mouth
But still the noise continues
Every part of my body
Is screaming*

*Im lost. About to be smashed into a thousand, million
Pieces*

*Each Part For Ever
Belonging to you.*

The words imply a violence, spiritually and physically. The letters are radiant with the pink neon, a color often referencing femininity, and are elegantly connected to the transformer by swooping cords. The handwritten text paired with high craft of neon fabrication merge the role of the artist and lived experience. In *Love Poem for CF*, neon serves as conduit for artistic communication exploring its relevant association with public display and the advertisement of erotic and violent acts (Indiana, 2013).

In the two separate but related works, *Is Anal Sex Legal/Is Legal Sex Anal* (Figure 7), Emin presents the taboo subject of anal sex against social/sexual standards. Considered as part of the evolution of neon art catalyzed by Bruce Nauman, the pieces draw out the fluidity in the sexual standards of society. *Is Anal Sex Legal/Is Legal Sex Anal* contend with the prickly taboo of sodomy and the centuries-long legal and moral boundaries around the female body. Emin’s play on language may not explore the formation of meaning through Wittgenstein as Nauman did (Ribbat, 2013), but draws attention to the lived experience of the artist and the public expression of the personal.



Figure 7. Tracey Emin, *Is Anal Sex Legal*, 1998, [Tracey Emin Studios](#).

To reconcile opposing voices of violence and romanticism in Emin’s art, it is beneficial to assess Emin’s entire oeuvre. If the work is viewed in its entirety, the divisions of love and abuse, anguish and languor are blurred. Overall, each series and individual work Emin creates is part of one body—one work of art. Vincent Katz (2011) of *The Brooklyn Rail* commented in his review, *Love Is What You Want*: “In fact, everything Emin makes—blankets with fabric appliqué, neons, ephemera, sculpture, films, videos, installations, works on paper, paintings, and writing—is all part of one piece” (para. 5). Understanding Emin’s oeuvre

as one conceptual corpus is imperative in comprehending the autobiographical context. Often one piece elicits empowerment and redemption against plight, as others seem to be pulled back into it; when one statement is emerging from a place of love another is connected to hate and abuse. This milieu of trauma and the impact of sexual violence on human life give agency to exploited bodies in art and society. Gary Indiana (2013) in the essay, *Munch's Telephone* indicates this aspect particular to Emin's neon art, "The first person singular approach of Emin's work runs against the grain of decades' worth of cerebrally distanced, techno-sleek conceptual art" (p. 191). Fusing the physical product of art with the artist's identity, Emin breaks the precedent of male-dominated emotional-distance in neon art and uses neon to celebrate the conceptual depth of social and autobiographical commentary.

Conclusion: The Critical Impact of the Neon Fetish and Neon Popularity in Art

The artworks of Nauman, *Gran Fury*, and Emin utilize neon for a variety of related causes. With reverence for the craft of neon fabrication and the light's rich history, artists recognized the communicative power of neon. Nauman used neon in the 1960s for cultural critique of vice and the human condition through conceptual art. Transgressive artists and activists *Gran Fury* enlisted neon as a bright and clear message against harmful sexual conservatism. Then, beginning in the 1990s and still in production today, the feminist art of Tracey Emin revealed the complexities of the rape survivor with intimate and cognizant expression in neon text. Each of these artists utilized the signification of neon to contribute to activism and critique harmful and oppressive social norms.

The capacity for neon art to draw attention to stigmatization and social disregard is a powerful tool for art and activism. However, neon has been co-opted into consumerist tastes for its rich cultural implications. When subversive neon light is only accessible to those who can afford the expense of artisanal neon, be it from visual art or vintage signage, it is no longer radical or revolutionary. If art is truly to contribute to social discourse on issues of sex, violence, and oppression, it must also combat the dehumanizing aspects of the neon fetish. To do so, artists and reverential consumers must acknowledge and resist the system reinforcing

harmful social norms. Artists must start with the artworld and its power to produce creative capital. A key element in assessing the artworld's power is examination of its role in the resurgence of neon popularity. Greg Bordowitz (2017) argues, "the contemporary art world generates so much capital that it is on a continuum with the culture industry" (p. 6). The obsession with salvaging neon at the expense of women can be assessed in the resurgence of neon popularity around the commercial fame of these artists and their use of neon.

The circumstantial role of neon in urban gentrification, commodification of sex, commercial art galleries, and high-end collector galleries is now subject to the demands of the affluent consumer for the neon light. If, in fact, today's contemporary art world holds this much power, it is critical for social justice to be part of the conversation. Without commitment to social justice for sex-workers, and the agency of women, neon's commercial popularity runs the risk of outweighing decades of critical insights put forward by these artists and further jeopardizes the livelihood and welfare of the sex worker.

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