Leonardo, Issue "Art + Electric Light"

Deadline: Jun 2, 2025

Maggie Bell, Norton Simon Museum

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Since the mid-19th century electric light has become increasingly essential to daily life, from nation-spanning power grids to the glow of smartphones. This often-precarious reliance on artificial illumination has long attracted the attention of artists, scientists, and engineers, giving rise to collaborative works that explore the aesthetic, conceptual, and affective possibilities of electric light through technological innovation. Such experiments began soon after the advent of electricity as artists, designers, and illumination engineers contended with new light-emitting technologies that embody and express light's multifaceted roles as a technological form, an artistic medium, and a rich symbol for ingenuity and, indeed, enlightenment. Electric light remains a provocative point of intersection for art, science, and technology, especially as artists and engineers grapple with accelerating climate change and inequitable access to energy. Taking a long view of the twentieth century, we seek contributions that bring forth new perspectives on artificial illumination as a historical and contemporary conduit of artistic, social, and scientific dialogue. Themes include but are not limited to:

- Electric light as an artistic medium: Building on expanded definitions of media and mediation (focused, for example, on air and water), how has artificial illumination served as both an artistic medium and means for creating new types of media environments? What can works of art that use illumination technologies contribute to key themes—such as communication, distribution, and transmission—that cross media studies and engineering discourse?
- Electric light and the environment: How have artists, at times in collaboration with scientists and engineers, used light to engage questions about climate change, the risks of mass energy consumption, and more sustainable energy futures?
- Electric light and infrastructural contingency: How does light's absence—for example, in contexts shaped by limited, contingent, or failing electric infrastructure—shape artistic practice, and how do such practices challenge assumptions about the smooth functioning of infrastructure and privileged notions of access?
- Electric light and the body: How has electric light been used to understand, visualize, aestheticize, objectify, or torment the body? How have artists and scientists used artificial light to produce physiological and psychological effects, and to what ends? Does the artistic medium of electric light create opportunities (or challenges) for accessibility?
- Ethics and practices of conserving light-based art: What are best practices for conserving works of art that rely on illumination technologies that will inevitably fail? What are some of the technological and ethical challenges in doing this work? What might art conservation demonstrate about the broader challenges of infrastructural maintenance?

Submission word count: 2,500-5,000
Submission deadline: June 2, 2025
Submission guidelines: https://leonardo.info/preparing-your-materials-journals#man

Guest editors: Brian R. Jacobson, Maggie Bell; contact via editor@leonardo.info

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