



Flickering Light: A History of Neon

Christoph Ribbat

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Without neon, Las Vegas might still be a sleepy desert town in Nevada and Times Square merely another busy intersection in New York City. Transformed by the installation of these brightly colored signs, these destinations are now world-famous, representing the vibrant heart of popular culture. But for some, neon lighting represents the worst of commercialism. Energized by the conflicting love and hatred people have for neon, *Flickering Light* explores its technological and intellectual history, from the discovery of the noble gas in late nineteenth-century London to its fading popularity today.

Christoph Ribbat follows writers, artists, and musicians—from cultural critic Theodor Adorno, British rock band the Verve, and artist Tracey Emin to Vladimir Nabokov, Langston Hughes, and American country singers—through the neon cities in Europe, America, and Asia, demonstrating how they turned these blinking lights and letters into metaphors of the modern era. He examines how gifted craftsmen carefully sculpted neon advertisements, introducing elegance to modern metropolises during neon's heyday between the wars followed by its subsequent popularity in Las Vegas during the 1950s and '60s. Ribbat ends with a melancholy discussion of neon's decline, describing how these glowing signs and installations came to be seen as dated and characteristic of run-down neighborhoods.

From elaborate neon lighting displays to neglected diner signs with unlit letters, *Flickering Light* tells the engrossing story of how a glowing tube of gas took over the world—and faded almost as quickly as it arrived.

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