



KS2/3 Art/Design/Technology/Photography

The 'New' Language of Light

Key Learning Points

Students will:

- Learn about the originators and trajectory of 'Neon Art'/'New' Art
- Discuss contemporary examples of this artform
- Examine the power and purpose of this form in relation to advertising
- Use this information to design their own forms of illuminated text art
- Explore the context of where and how this art is displayed

This lesson draws a line from the original 'Neon Art' and its uses in the worlds of advertising and as an artform in its own right, towards an exploration of significant artists who have worked with this form. It examines the friction between advertising and art and considers site-specificity as a key element of the form. Using the example of *Speedwell*, a huge sculpture installed by the artists Still/Moving on the Mount Batten breakwater for September, October and November 2020, it explores the technical apparatus and the boundaries of design when operating at such scale in the open.

Resources included:

- Philosophy for Children Guidelines for Facilitators
- Starter Activity
- Games 1 and 2
- Extension activity
- Image slideshow
- Primary Source: Images and Description of *Speedwell*
- Questions opportunity
- Main Activity: Creative activities for KS2 or KS3
- Plenary
- Illuminated signage examples
- Illuminated art examples (Neon Circus)

Below are offered Philosophy for Children Guidelines that might help to draw out deeper understandings during the course of this session

Philosophy for Children Guidelines for Facilitators

<http://www.philosophy4children.co.uk/>



Philosophy for Children (enquiry-based learning) offers a way to open up children's learning through enquiry and the exploration of ideas. Children learn that their ideas have value, and that the ideas of other children have value too. Through Philosophy for Children they realise that they don't always have to be right, but they gain the confidence to ask questions and learn through discussion.

- Though they look very different, in both activities players follow the same deep structure. Think about a question that has competing reasonable answers.
- Thinking time is crucial – or the children may “sheep” instead of thinking for themselves.
- As the facilitator of the activity, commit publicly to an answer by moving yourself or giving your opinion. This is a very important step. It forces a choice – or perhaps a decision to be indecisive and gets everyone engaged. It enables you to bring shyer children into the dialogue.
- Once a child has committed to an opinion, it's much less abrupt to ask, “So John, why did you think it could never be right to...” rather than, “So John, what do you think?”. If someone feels they can't decide, they can decisively indicate their indecision by standing in between two options or arrange cards on top of each other.
- Try not to offer this option to begin with, as it's better for participants to decide for themselves that their thinking doesn't fit a pattern that's been offered.
- Justify your answer with your best reasons – in response to facilitator or peer questions. As a facilitator, it's easy to see differences of opinion, so that you can ask questions that are likely to lead to dialogue and disagreement. “Green group, you've rated that as much more popular than the yellows did. Why was that?”
- When you can see someone has thought differently to you, it's natural to be curious as to why. If you can see they have agreed, you want to know if their reasons are the same as yours or different. There are more potential starting points for dialogue than with a single thread of speech.
- Taking physical positions to reflect mental positions leads to a little more partisanship than just answering a question and injects energy into dialogue.

- Reflect on what you have heard and show if you have changed your mind. Always give people the opportunity to show they have changed their minds. This stage is often omitted or underexploited.
- You can note questions that arise out of the dialogue to use later or as examples of philosophical questions. It's powerful for a child to see others moving across a circle, or standing by a different choice, in response to the reasons they have given. It also reinforces that it's fine to change your mind when someone gives you a good reason to do so. Sometimes, dialogue will take off from a disagreement or question at this stage. Be opportunistic about it.
- Vote with Your Feet (example – WYF Would You Rather) Ask a question. Place the possible answers, each on a separate sheet of paper, on the floor. Go and stand by the one you think is the best answer. Thinking time is crucial to avoid children “sheeping” instead of thinking for themselves. You can use images for non-readers.

Starter Activity

Context:

Neon itself is invisible – and in every breath we take. It's one of the inert 'noble' gases that comprise a tiny fraction of the Earth's atmosphere, alongside the likes of argon, krypton and xenon. The British chemists William Ramsay and Morris Travers identified and isolated neon ('new') gas in June 1898, filling a glass tube with it and running through it an electrical current to reveal its spectrum. As Christoph Ribbat relates in *Flickering Light: A History of Neon* (2013), the men were astounded when the tube glowed with 'a blaze of crimson'. After pausing a while to admire this unexpected property of the gas, they noted its 'magnificent spectrum', and moved on. The gas was harnessed for neon lighting more than a decade later by the Parisian chemist Georges Claude, who established which gauge of tube produced the most intense light and solved the technical problems that impeded commercial application. Claude also experimented with the colours produced by other noble gases – blue/purple from argon, for instance, and a paler blue from xenon. Claude's tube was first demonstrated to the public at Luna Park, the Paris amusement park that would become so popular with the Surrealists, in 1911. Surrealism was possibly the defining art movement to take place between the two world wars. It was started by Andre Breton in around 1920 and came as a direct result of the influence of Dadaism. The first commercial sign using neon lights was installed on a barber's shop on the Boulevard Montmartre in 1912, and the first rooftop advertisement – for Cinzano – appeared the following year. Though many contemporary critics despised the new light for its vulgarity, it boomed throughout the 1920s and '30s, its first and truest golden age.

Source: <https://www.apollo-magazine.com/neon/>



Luna Park, Paris

Game 1: Remembering:

1. In groups of four, in only 3 minutes, name as many visual examples that use light and text. (Try to get students to think of their own but if stuck...brands, artists, shops, signs, buildings)
2. Show slide for an extra minute of pictures of neon writing, to add to their ideas. (see below)
3. Take a further 3 minutes to sort these into separate categories of your own deciding. (adverts/information/art)
4. Why did you choose these categories? Share with rest of class - questioning led by facilitator
5. Using whatever resources to hand (whiteboards/i-pads/colours/paper) each member of the group tries to present one example to the best of their ability.
6. 1, 2, 3 Show Me - Share with class - all students to display work at once.

Extension Questions

Are there any repeated examples?



Why are these examples given by the groups so powerful?
Why have they remained in their imaginations?

Game 2: *Kim's Game*:

The classic, covered-tray game, whereby objects are removed, and you have to guess which one it is. In this version, images of illuminated brands, artists, shops, signs, buildings are placed into a grid which the students can look at for a while, then one is removed, and the challenge is to remember which one. This could be extended that the students draw on a piece of paper or whiteboard, which one they think is missing. We are including this game to emphasise how prevalent this form of text is in the built environment, and how we visually distinguish between advertising, signage and art.

Extension Questions

Why are these examples given by the groups so powerful?

Why have they remained in their imaginations?

**Image slideshow of contemporary artists working in light
(see below)**

Primary Source:



Description of project

Speedwell uses the poetry of light to oppose the historic idea that there ever was a ‘New World’. It urgently asks us to imagine new ways of living, caring and dying well together on this damaged planet. The ‘New World’ is a colonial term, which showed a particular view of the world, which isn’t what we think of today. Decolonialising narratives is really important in museums, as we move forward into wiser understandings of the world and its peoples.

In 1620 the *Speedwell*, sister ship of the *Mayflower*, was deemed unseaworthy and did not make the journey across the Atlantic to America, but instead returned to Plymouth. In seeking a ‘New World’ the *Mayflower* settlers left these shores 400 years ago and landed in an Old World where indigenous people already lived.

Still/Moving’s sculpture *Speedwell* appears on the horizon as a site-specific installation on Mount Batten’s breakwater situated in Plymouth Sound, UK. *Speedwell* is a light that joins the constellation of other navigational beacons within the Sound that illuminates a path to safe harbour.

It uses modular, recyclable technology that has the capacity to be re-written in the future. Through its rhythmic, randomly generated sequence of iterations, individual authorship is relinquished, and the sculpture embodies an intuitive voice of its own.

Plymouth Sound is the threshold of the Atlantic Ocean, a site of military and sea defence, a canvas upon which this object can play out these multiple meanings, futures and possibilities.

Opportunity for questions:



1. Why do you think it is so large? (63 x 6.4 metres)
2. Why have the artists decided to shift between different phrases?
3. If you were designing a structure for this sign - what might you use instead of scaffolding?
4. What are the pros and cons of the different modular elements of this design?

Main Activity: Design and Making KS2/KS3:

Still/Moving went through a lengthy research and development stage in the design process of this sculpture, often in quite a home-made way!

Message**What do you want to say to the world that is important, honest and valuable?**

Still/Moving challenge you, using craft materials, science circuit resources, construction kits or CAD technology in your school to design a message that you want to share and to create a version of it and share it to our website.

Who might be the audience for this message?**Where should it be situated?**

We would like you to create a labelled drawing/design of your sculpture first.

How will this message be supported and made visible?

You can choose whether you make a model (maquette) of the structure, or whether you decide to go for a full-scale piece of text.

Plenary:

If your sculpture were to contain more messages - what would it read?

How would you know if your sculpture was 'successful'?

Illuminated sign examples for Game 1

**THE
BOX**

●
STILL
MOVING





Image slideshow of contemporary artists working in light



Claire Fontaine, I Am Your Voice (We The People), 2017



David Batchelor, *Cement Mixer* in Installation view of *NEON: The Charged Line* at Grundy Art Gallery, Blackpool, UK (all photos by Phill Heywood, all images courtesy Grundy Art Gallery)



Lucio Fontana: *Spatial Environment with Neon Light*, (1967/2017)



Martin Creed: *WORK NO. 203: EVERYTHING IS GOING TO BE ALRIGHT*, 1999 (TATE BRITAIN)



Cerith Wyn Evans: *TIME HERE BECOMES SPACE. SPACE HERE BECOMES TIME*, 2014



Tim Etchells: *A Stitch in Time*, 2013



Jenny Holzer: *Survival (1983–85)*, 1985