

## **Highlighting Christian Herdeg's oeuvre: Sculptural narrations. Early material experiments. Radical reduction. Opulent light**

Christian Herdeg has now been working with electric light for over forty years. He has devoted himself to a medium that changes according to the time of year and time of day. It is materially incomprehensible, and its technical boundaries and emotional effect have to be tamed repeatedly. Neon tubes<sup>1</sup> were integrated into acrylic glass figures for the first time in 1936 by Czech artist Zdeněk Pešánek. In the 1940s, they were then used graphically in front of a background by Gyula Kosice in Argentina. It was not until the start of the 1960s that artists began to make more use of neon tubes as a malleable medium. Christian Herdeg was one of those pioneers. In Switzerland, based on a few works seen in the USA and Canada, he developed a unique oeuvre comprising neon tube sculptures and wall pieces with different forms, colors and material combinations. In this essay, I shall examine the decisive moments in his artistic development.

### **Sculptural narrations**

Already as a child, Herdeg felt drawn to light. He experimented with small light bulbs and June beetles on a little home-made stage, tried to photograph fireflies, and eventually, as a photographer, lighting technician and cameraman, learned how to use the properties and characteristics of light in a professional

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<sup>1</sup> For simplicity's sake, the term "neon tubes" is used from here on to refer to gas discharge lamps that are filled with inert gas and, as a result of the gas's fluorescent color (neon's is reddish orange, argon's is blue etc.) and either colored glass or a coating of fluorescent pigments, glow in various colors. See Irene Müller, "Spaces

and creative way.<sup>2</sup> His decision to become an artist was triggered by the radiance of blue neon letters that magically allured him in 1969.<sup>3</sup> He was living in Montreal at the time, taking photographs for various clients, traveling the continent and following current art movements. Thus, at *Expo 67*, he came across the latest Pop Art by James Rosenquist, Claes Oldenburg and Roy Lichtenstein, saw brand-new works by West Coast Minimalists and Hard-Edge artists in New York and Los Angeles, and discovered the first of what Herdeg calls the “New Sculpture” works of Post-Minimalist and Anti-Form artists.<sup>4</sup> He found Larry Bell’s acrylic glass cubes, John McCracken’s colored rectangles leaning against the wall, Ellsworth Kelly’s geometric works and Eva Hesse’s textile works particularly appealing. In 1970, Herdeg encountered Rosenquist’s neon tube sculpture *Tumbleweed* (1963-66) in Toronto. This consists of three wooden beams wedged into each other and a curved argon tube that resembles handwriting, all wrapped in barbed wire. The freedom to confidently create a work from these non-artistic materials immediately appealed to Herdeg. His inclination toward art with light was intensified by the work of two other artists: the geometric neon tube piece *Ruby and Yellow Neon* (1967) by Stephen Antonakos, which he saw in 1970 at the Fischbach Gallery in New York, and Dan Flavin’s first works made with standard fluorescent tubes.

In the beginning, it was financially impossible for Herdeg to make neon tubes, so he started to work with light bulbs. With the support of entrepreneur Allen Wilner, he created a total of thirty *Playlights*, which Wilner sold at furniture

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<sup>2</sup> Herdeg in conversation with the author on April 8, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> See Volker Schunck, “Der Klang des Lichts,” in Volker Schunck, *Christian Herdeg*, Basel, 1992, p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> Herdeg uses this term in reference to the exhibition *The New Sculpture 1965-75: Between Geometry and Gesture*, at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, which presented works by Eva Hesse, Giovanni Anselmo, Bruce Nauman, Keith Sonnier and other Post-Minimalist or Anti-Form artists in 1990-91.

trade fairs.<sup>5</sup> These works consist of thirty-six single-colored or multi-colored light bulbs mounted on a monochrome acrylic glass panel and surrounded by a fine silver frame. Here, several bimetal plates are used, which are heated up by electricity, causing movement that either closes or interrupts the electric circuit, such that several bulbs switch on and off at irregular intervals. In the studio, he also experimented with a small selection of neon tubes that a neon advertising sign manufacturer had let him have for a few cents.

When Herdeg returned to Zurich in 1971 with his family, he exhibited in Zurich's Züspa trade fair halls, presenting four neon tube sculptures that he had created while still in Montreal, which met with a big response and soon led to more exhibitions and his first sales. These sculptures had narrative titles and forms, drew on advertising design, and were inspired by the spirit of Pop Art: "Everything is possible, repeatable and reproducible. Using things from everyday life and from mass production is allowed."<sup>6</sup> In a half-open, reflective cube, twisted neon tubes imitate the fire of *Red Explosion* (1971), while blue argon tubes simulate water shooting out of a metal pipe inserted in a standing glass panel in *Splash* (1971). The queues of cars in Los Angeles inspired Herdeg to create the winding yellow neon tube that comes out of a split metal block and onto a plane in *Solid Flow* (1971).<sup>7</sup> The fourth work, *Gemini* (1971), consisted of a chrome-plated cube, from which neon tubes led into a dark blue acrylic glass cube of equal size, where they magically balled up in multiple whorls. One year later, Herdeg produced two rainbow sculptures, along with

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<sup>5</sup> According to Herdeg, Wilner used the money from his bar mitzvah for this purpose. (Conversation with the author on April 8, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> Herdeg in conversation with the author on April 8, 2016. The artist also points out that his return to Zurich enabled him to liberate himself from the enormous continent and to get started without fear.

<sup>7</sup> Schunck, see footnote 3, p. 9.

the object ensemble *Metropolis*, comprising five geometric metal bodies resting on a cylindrical base and embraced by curving argon tubes. These early sculptures are closely related to the symbolically representational neon tube forms by Chryssa (*Birds*, 1969) and Martial Raysse (*America, America*, 1964). They interconnect aspects of urban life, commodity aesthetics and the elementary: the sensory effects of fire and water, the exalted kitsch light phenomena of rainbows and the fascination of shining artificial light in the darkness of the city at night. Herdeg produced his first abstract work in 1973: *Holz und Neon II* (Wood and Neon II), made from three wooden beams and two calligraphically curving colored neon tubes. Reminiscent of Rosenquist's *Tumbleweed*, this led to research involving various materials and light.

### **Early material experiments**

After “plunging into the figurative,”<sup>8</sup> Herdeg investigated the characteristics of light in relation to other materials. Studio photographs show how light spreads out and reflectively doubles when a neon tube is placed against or behind a metal fabric panel. Herdeg also combined rubber and aluminum with individual neon tubes. Here, he was interested in the materials' brittleness and permeability, as well as in the special effect that occurs when a light source is not visible, but nevertheless its emitted light can be detected on the basis of a white reflective wall.<sup>9</sup> His research into materials such as rubber, aluminum, acrylic glass and neon tubes corresponds to the zeitgeist of New Sculpture. In 1967, for example, Richard Serra nailed up several rubber belts, then hung a

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<sup>8</sup> Herdeg in conversation with the author on April 23, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Herdeg in conversation with the author on April 8, 2016.

form in front of them, which was made from neon tubes and simulated the elasticity and weight of the rubber. Although similar in terms of form, the two materials contradicted each other: “the flexible, broad and black rubber strips were up against the rigid, but simultaneously delicate and fragile glass tubes with their intense white light.”<sup>10</sup> Keith Sonnier’s early piece *Hotel Delacourt* (1968) was also about material contrasts between the repellingly rigid and the appealingly soft: over two cool blue argon tubes, he placed a fine cloth, on which dark marks had been made with a cavity sealant, and fastened it directly to the wall.<sup>11</sup>

*Studie zu Black Door* (Study for Black Door, 1976) consisted of a black rubber square mounted on the wall, with a white neon tube fastened behind it. The opaque natural material confronted light, an energetically spreading medium that magically attracted the gaze. Simple and stringent, made with industrial materials, this piece already foreshadowed Herdeg’s later inclination toward geometrically reduced wall pieces. He also examined light’s changing effect on other materials in *Cut off* (1973), *Black cube* (1964), *Tower* (1975) and *Marmor/Granit Prisma* (Marble/Granite Prism, 1977). Dark acrylic glass cubes, granite stones or metal bodies were relieved of their materiality by the encompassing neon tubes placed beneath or between them. Bodies floated above the floor, appearing lightweight and unburdened. In *Step-On* (1975), the artist even invited observers to step onto a metal square with neon tubes

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<sup>10</sup> Dietmar Elger, “Licht als Metapher. Kunst mit Neon,” in: *Lichtkunst aus Kunstlicht*, (exh. cat.), Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe, ed. Peter Weibel, Gregor Jansen, Ostfildern-Ruit, 2006, p. 498.

<sup>11</sup> Herdeg knew about the Bern exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form*, but did not see the included neon tube works by Keith Sonnier, Bruce Nauman and Mario Merz because he was not in Switzerland at the time of this 1969 show. However, when visiting New York in 1972, he became acquainted with Sonnier’s early *BA-O-BA* works, made from neon tubes and glass panels. (Herdeg in conversation with the author on June 4, 2016).

underneath. To the external observer, those who stand on the base lit from beneath appear to dematerialize. Here, much like in floor pieces by Carl Andre or Piero Manzoni, the observer becomes part of the artwork. Finally, for *Drowning blue* (1975), Herdeg positioned argon tubes at various heights between black acrylic glass bodies, so that the blue light appears to descend further from cube to cube.

For his first New York exhibition, at the André Emmerich Gallery in 1974, Herdeg combined various acrylic glass cubes with colored neon tubes and pigment. *Dialog* (1974) is a transparent acrylic glass cube that sits on a base. It is filled with an approximately three-centimeter-thick layer of blue pigment, and contains a horizontal neon tube and argon tube placed on top of each other. Above the blue shimmering “pigment landscape,” the tube lights reflect one another in multiple ways and superimpose each other in their glass container. Such experiments (other works were subsequently produced, although these have disappeared and were not documented) were conducted against the backdrop of Herdeg’s work on expanding neon tubes’ previous color spectrum in cooperation with chemists from Leuchtstoffwerke Heidelberg,<sup>12</sup> and his engagement with Yves Klein’s ideas and experiments regarding the effect of color.<sup>13</sup> *Medusa* (1974) is a more reduced work: due to the use of fluorescent acrylic glass, the diagonal argon tube not only appears as a self-reflective line, but also makes the glass shine, so that the cubic body emerges as such. Eventually, in the following year, the artist positioned the key

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<sup>12</sup> Müller, see footnote 1, p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> Herdeg in conversation with the author on April 8, 2016.

work *Boundless*, an acrylic glass cube with a diagonal argon tube, directly on the floor in programmatic fashion: Less is more.

Under the title *4 x Licht* (4 x Light), Herdeg exhibited together with Jody Burns, Cork Marcheschi and Ludwig Wilding at Kunsthalle Düsseldorf in 1976. His stringent pieces, reduced to light, form and few visual materials (*Black Door*, *Step-On* and *Drowning blue*, for instance) contrasted with the other artists' light works, which were kinetic, holographic and combined with sounds. The conceptual work *Station to Station*, which visualized light-material states, was also produced for this exhibition:

Across five "stations," cubes of equal size were made increasingly immaterial. After a black rubber block, there came two closed cubes of aluminum and acrylic glass, followed by two open volumes. A green tube light on parquet reflected itself perpendicularly on the aluminum body's side surface, while the light's line of motion continued in the acrylic glass cube and beamed into the space as a lying neon axis. Light development, light impairment, reflection, cube without light, cube with light, light that can be seen, light that can only be imagined. But also: links between light and other *media*, other *materials*.<sup>14</sup>

This exhibition marked an end point in his wide-ranging sculptural oeuvre; afterward, Herdeg mainly developed wall pieces.

### **Radical reduction. Opulent light**

From the start of the 1970s onward, Herdeg also made reliefs from neon tubes. For *From Rose to Violet* (1973) and *Great Breeze* (1975), he used neon tubes with slightly different colors, placed closely beside each other on a white acrylic

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<sup>14</sup> Schunck, see footnote 3, p. 13. In Düsseldorf, Herdeg also exhibited six geometric acrylic glass bodies, which were placed in front of a black acrylic glass panel and contained colored neon tubes. This work was a precursor of the commissioned piece *Seven light bodies* (1982), created for UBS Zurich.

glass panel. The piece is similar to the arrangement of warm white and cool white fluorescent tubes in Dan Flavin's *daylight and cool white (to Sol LeWitt)*, only more pictorial. Herdeg developed the extraordinarily subtle hues together with the aforementioned company Leuchtstoffwerke Heidelberg. In a radical gesture in 1977, he then placed two differently colored horizontal neon tubes on the wall, one in front of the other, separated only by a large acrylic glass panel, to create *Butterfly*, the first work in the series *Licht vor Licht* (Light Before Light). The color of one light meets the color of another light, without being varied by any materials such as metal, rubber or pigment. At most, the acrylic glass panel gives the neon tube behind it a softly spreading glow. The perception of colored light becomes central. In addition, the neon tube is reduced to a mere line, while the technical equipment is openly visible and the stabilizing acrylic glass case becomes the image space for a color space that changes with the light conditions in the room.<sup>15</sup>

Alongside various colors, Herdeg used black light for the first time in the 1979 piece *Air*. Here, like in his early experiments with opaque materials, he was interested in making changes via light emission, without the light source itself being identifiable or visibly emitting light. As color combinations and color effects are difficult to predict, many tests have to be carried out before the desired result is achieved.<sup>16</sup> Herdeg's investigations bring to mind the study book *Interaction of Color* (1963) by Josef Albers, in which the reader is impressively shown that the perception of a color depends on the neighboring

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<sup>15</sup> Herdeg always presents his works with ambient light, so as to make the changeability and indeterminacy of light, material and color perceptible. (Conversation between the author and the artist on April 8, 2016).

<sup>16</sup> In conversation with the author on April 23, 2016, Herdeg said that he often works at night in order to keep the light constant and on the next day he checks whether the work also withstands changing daylight.

color. Herdeg's work seems to produce different effects on each encounter. Memory is deceptive. With *Karmin* (Carmine, 1995), Herdeg once again expanded his range of materials somewhat and abandoned the pure line, placing a uniformly painted square MDF board beneath a circular neon tube's geometric form<sup>17</sup> as a further development of the incomprehensible game of colored light combinations in the series *Circle meets Square*: neon tube light combines with monochrome painting in a manner that depends on the daylight. Much like in *Station to Station*, he also went through various combinations of paint with light, paint without light, and light beside light.<sup>18</sup>

In 2011, Herdeg set everything material to one side again and went back to working directly with neon tubes. This time, however, it was not reduction, but excess that led the way. The arrangement of straight neon tubes with different colors and lengths on a white underlying surface causes a colorfully iridescent sea of light to unfold before the human eye in *Neon Stage*. Pure color opulence without painting. Due to the work's size and elevated position in the space, the observer becomes physically involved. In fact, if there is not much ambient light, the whole space shines colorfully. Unlike in the work of light-and-space artists such as James Turrell, the neon tubes remain visible and are a key compositional element of the piece.

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<sup>17</sup> The first appearance of a white circular neon tube was in the work *Untitled* (1975) at the Düsseldorf exhibition. This was leant against a wooden beam.

<sup>18</sup> With regard to the works involving painting, see Deborah Keller's article in this volume, as well as Elisabeth Grossmann, "Christian Herdeg," in: Angela Thomas Schmid (ed.), *Herdeg, Magnússon, Signer, Tagwerker*, Sulgen, 1999, pp. 16.

In retrospect, it is clear that light, as a medium, was central to Herdeg's artwork from the very start. At first, he used it in a narrative way, drawing on Pop Art. Neon tubes formed rainbows or queues of cars, but not words or sentences like in works from the same period by Joseph Kosuth or Maurizio Nannucci. After that, inspired by the zeitgeist of New Sculpture, Herdeg found examination of the interplay between neon tubes, geometric bodies and various materials important. The neon tubes were no longer representational in nature and instead became autonomous lines. At the end of the 1970s, he turned away from sculptural forms and devoted himself entirely to light as color: in the tube, on the wall, or in the space. He created a distinctive oeuvre that ranges from formal stringency to opulent extravagance. It could be described as abstractly narrative.

Yvonne Ziegler