

Norton Simon Museum For Immediate Release

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The Norton Simon Museum Presents

Plugged In: Art and Electric Light

September 20, 2024–February 17, 2025



Robert Rauschenberg (American, 1925-2008), *Green Shirt*, 1965-67, neon and enameled metal, Norton Simon Museum, Gift of the Artist, © 2024 Robert Rauschenberg Foundation / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

Pasadena, CA—The Norton Simon Museum presents *Plugged In: Art and Electric Light*, an exhibition that explores the emergence of electric light as an artistic medium in the mid-20th century as artists engaged with new technology, mass media and industrial materials. These themes are explored through 11 works of art produced between 1964 and 1970, all drawn from the Museum’s collections. Presented in the Museum’s lower-level exhibition wing, *Plugged In* is on view from September 20, 2024, through February 17, 2025, concurrent with the Getty-led initiative PST ART: *Art & Science Collide*.

The 8 artists represented in *Plugged In*—Walter Askin, Laddie John Dill, Dan Flavin, Robert Irwin, Jess, Robert Rauschenberg, Allen Ruppersberg and Andy Warhol—incorporated electric light into their practice as a way to shape and respond to sweeping artistic and social change. For some, accelerated innovations in electronics and industrial production sparked collaborations among artists, engineers and fabricators that investigated electric light from aesthetic and scientific perspectives. Other artists employed the ephemeral medium in deeply personal, sometimes anti-scientific ways, by literally illuminating the most intimate parts of themselves, or incorporating the effects of domestic lighting to provide psychological relief from the devastating fallout of technological warfare. Still others created transcendent experiences out of mundane light sources, repurposing the corporate glare of prefabricated fixtures to question the very definition of art.

Robert Rauschenberg's *Green Shirt* (1965–67) is an intricate marriage of technical skill and artistic vision. Due to its monumental size—10 feet high and 20 feet long—the sculpture will be installed on its own at eye-level in the final gallery of the exhibition, visible as visitors enter and navigate the exhibition. Resembling an amalgam of commercial signage, the work is adorned with multicolored neon tubes bent into motifs derived from various works in Rauschenberg's oeuvre. (The artist had used neon only once before in *Map Room II* from 1965, a performance piece in which he waved two glowing tubes activated by a Tesla coil held in his opposite hand.) Despite *Green Shirt*'s unique place in Rauschenberg's production, it was born out of his typical collaborative practice—in this case, with Artkraft Strauss, a sign-manufacturing firm that fabricated neon. Over the years, some electrical elements have been replaced to make the sculpture safer and more energy-efficient, though present-day neon specialists still comment on the elegance of the original wiring.

Unlike Rauschenberg, whose artistic identity cleaved to technological innovation, Dan Flavin insisted on the low-tech nature of his works, which were composed entirely of prefabricated fluorescent lights. Flavin's aesthetic repurposing of factory floor lighting alters the viewer's perception of architectural space, with the intention of activating fundamental emotions. He experimented with multidirectional installations, such as "*monument*" on the survival of Mrs. Reppin (1966), a triangular arrangement of three warm white tubes and one red, installed in a corner at roughly eye level. The collision of red and white does not play well with other light sources, and Flavin intended the work to be viewed in isolation. Mrs. Reppin was part of Flavin's enigmatic "*monuments*" series, in which he used specific colors to commemorate the stories of historical figures and personal connections—in this case, the harrowing experiences

of one Mrs. Reppin, a friend's mother-in-law, during World War II. The medium of electric light, however, creates an ironic twist—what good is a monument that will endure only for the lifespan of a fluorescent lamp?

The multimedia artist known as Jess (born Burgess Collins), had a complicated relationship with the fundamentals of matter, beginning as a chemistry student at the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena, and then as a plutonium engineer for the Manhattan Project, which created the world's first atomic weapons. His anxiety about the rise of nuclear power led him to change careers and turn to art, which he saw as “an antidote to the scientific method.” Jess occasionally used incandescent light bulbs as a way of activating the past lives of salvaged objects. *Assembly Lamp Eight* (1966), one of a series, is a maximalist arrangement of glass lantern slides with images of families, landscapes, workshops and harbor scenes, decoupage with magazine clippings and lit from within by electric candle lights. The lamp is both an unnerving lightbox revealing histories that are not wholly interpretable, and a gentle source of illumination suitable for a living room. Familiar yet uncomfortable, *Assembly Lamp* invites imaginative looking and irresolvable curiosity, which Jess saw as a strength of art, liberated from “objective” scientific thinking.

Plugged In: Art and Electric Light is organized by Maggie Bell, Associate Curator at the Norton Simon Museum. In conjunction with the exhibition, the Museum is organizing several related events, including a two-day symposium co-organized with the California Institute of Technology that considers the rich intersections between art and electric light (Oct 11-12); a film series organized by Brian R. Jacobson, Professor of Visual Culture in the Division of the Humanities and Social Sciences at Caltech, that explores Hollywood's enduring fascination with electricity (Nov. 8-29); and an opening weekend celebration that includes tours, live music and art-making for all ages (Sept. 21). Details for these events and others can be found at nortonsimon.org/events.

Conservation Note: Where possible, LEDs have been installed in place of original incandescent lightbulbs with the permission of the artist or artist's estate. Electrical components, such as transformers, have also been replaced with newer models to reduce power draw and increase the safety and longevity of these works.

About the Norton Simon Museum

The Norton Simon Museum is known around the world as one of the most remarkable private art collections ever assembled. Over a 30-year period, industrialist Norton Simon (1907–1993) amassed an astonishing collection of European art from the Renaissance to the 20th century, and a stellar collection of South and Southeast Asian art spanning 2,000 years. Modern and Contemporary Art from Europe and the United States, acquired by the former Pasadena Art Museum, also occupies an important place in the Museum’s collections. The Museum houses more than 12,000 objects, roughly 1,000 of which are on view in the galleries and gardens.

Location: The Norton Simon Museum is located at 411 W. Colorado Blvd. at Orange Grove Boulevard in Pasadena, Calif., at the intersection of the Foothill (210) and Ventura (134) freeways. For general Museum information, please call (626) 449-6840 or visit nortonsimon.org. **Hours:** The Museum is open Thursday through Monday, 12 p.m. to 5 p.m. (Fridays and Saturday to 7 p.m.). It is closed on Tuesday and Wednesday. **Admission:** General admission is \$20 for adults and \$15 for seniors. Members, students with I.D., and patrons age 18 and under are admitted free of charge. The Museum provides free admission to all from 4-7 p.m. on the first Friday of each month. The Museum is wheelchair accessible. **Parking:** Parking is free but limited, and no reservations are necessary. **Public Transportation:** Pasadena Transit stops directly in front of the Museum. Please visit <http://pasadenatransit.net> for schedules. The MTA bus line #180/181 stops in front of the Museum. The Memorial Park Station on the MTA Gold Line, the closest Metro Rail station to the Museum, is located at 125 E. Holly St. at Arroyo Parkway. Please visit www.metro.net for schedules. **Planning your Visit:** For up-to-date information on our guidelines and protocols, please visit nortonsimon.org/visit.