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 **Electric Light as a Medium in the Visual Fine Arts: A Memoir**

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The author states that, although he is a reluctant prophet, he would not be surprised if a wide acceptance of kinetic art with electric light must await the passage of several more decades.

ELECTRIC LIGHT AS A MEDIUM IN THE VISUAL FINE ARTS: A MEMOIR

Frank J. Malina*

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I.

Electricity for providing light began to be used broadly in industrial countries at the beginning of this century. Although electric light sources were quickly adopted for photographic lighting and for cinema projection, it was accepted in a limited way as a fine art medium only in the 1950's [1–4]. The first generation of pioneers in the application of electric light in art at the beginning of the 20th century developed methods for producing light images in motion and with changing colors mainly as spectacles for presentation to theater and cinema audiences. The second generation of pioneers in the 1920's and 1930's began to construct art objects incorporating electric light for individual contemplation. However, it was not until the third generation arrived on the scene after World War II that objects of this kind began to be shown in numerous museums and to be sold in galleries.

I began working with electric light towards the end of 1954 without being aware of what artists had already done with the medium. Serendipity gave rise to my interest in it. Between 10–25 June 1954, I exhibited at the Arsenal Gallery in Paris a group of pictures incorporating the moiré effect produced by means of superposed layers of wire mesh (Fig. 1). They would now be called examples of Op art. To increase the contrast between a moiré pattern and its background or support, I tried various ways of painting the mesh and the support,

only to find that none of them was effective enough. In frustration, I held an electric lamp of about 50W in back of the layers of mesh. What I saw gave me that feeling of ecstasy that one experiences on making a personal discovery—one could use electric light as an art medium!

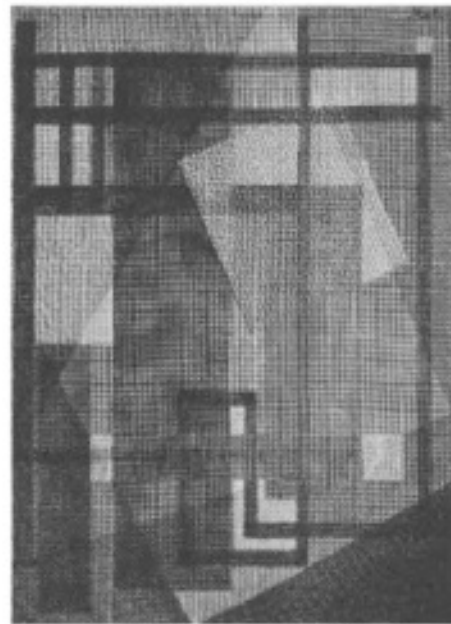


Fig. 1. 'Deep Shadings', No. 708/1954, Op art piece, painted wire mesh and wood, 71 x 54 cm., 1954. (Collection of Museum of Modern Art of the City of Paris, France.)

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