The light upon which this exhibition focuses is above all a unifying agent. All painting, and certainly all artificial light constructions, can be said to employ light in one way or another, but many subjugate it to other qualities — a dramatic or expressionist chiaroscuro, anecdotal effects, salient form and volume, paint substance, and so on. An independent light, on the other hand, wholly integrated with paint and color, attracts so much attention to its own unique properties that it is a prime organ of "art for art's sake." A single transcendent light is a vehicle of totality and ultimately of abstraction.

From Turner and Monet to Albers, Reinhardt, Rothko and Flavin, a unified light has enabled the artist to overcome compositional balancing, local color, story-telling. Their common aim appears to be the transformation of surface, volume and subject matter by light. Form is dissolved either by a strong, flat clarifying light; broken, shattering, glittering light; or a diffused atmospheric light. Structure has not necessarily been sacrificed, but the emphasis has been on a near-monochromatic or a near-monotonal surface rather than one distinguished by sharp color and shape divisions. For the most part, formal differentiation gives way to a luminous autonomy.

Landscape is clearly the most suitable subject for such an approach, in which subject is only an excuse and tonal distinctions are at a minimum. In the fall of 1865, Courbet, Whistler, Monet and Daubigny were together at Trouville, painting seascapes: and all of them have employed the sort of light Monet described as "the 'enveloppe,' the same light spreading everywhere," distributed equally over the surface of the canvas. Water and air are, as Turner pointed out, the two prime vehicles of light; a great many artists have been particularly obsessed by the sea and by London's dense fogs, which blur outlines and negate contrasts.

Light and water are media of both energy and tranquility. John Marin once wrote from his house in Maine: "Here the Sea is so damned insisted that houses and land things won't appear much in my pictures." His sea was lit by movement and highlighted by the white sparkle and glow intrinsic to the watercolor medium, his but his shattered forms retain a near-geometric structure that divorces them from the single atmosphere of Impressionism. Milton Avery's late landscapes employ a total, flat light closer to that of Matisse, but his refined, pale colors do not ignore contours and often intensify the sensation of strong sensuous form. Avery was an early influence on Rothko, whose large floating rectangles achieve a controlled ambiguity between surface and atmosphere, and a good many younger non-objective artists have carried aspects of color-light into the formalist realm without entirely relinquishing nuance. Among them are Morris Louis with his streamers of translucent color; Larry Poons in his complex, precisely rippling color surfaces; Frank Stella with his shimmering metallic planes; Robert Mangold in his hard, thin masonite planes contradicted by a nearly invisible haze of warm color, and Ralph Humphrey with his clear bars of light in a close-valued luminescent field. It is not impossible to find associations with landscape in such works, though such associations generally have no part in the artists' initial conceptions.

Courbet, Corot, Hopper, among others, have employed a hard monochromatic light that is more opaque than transparent, lending substance and volume to the forms it envelops. Bonnard and Vuillard, whose styles developed from Impressionism, both drew extraordinary light, or gloom, from heavy or matte paint surfaces. The paintings here represent two poles — the Bonnard flooded with fresh color and sunlight, the Vuillard wine-dark and weighty with equally close-valued color.

Edward Hopper has said that he is not very interested in color harmonies though he enjoys them
in nature. He is more concerned with light than with color, as was Albert Ryder, who unified his atmosphere not for realism, but with a quasi-mystical end in mind. When asked if a painting depicted night or day, Ryder replied that he had not thought about it. His “light that never was on sea or land” has affinities with Mondrian’s symbolist Sheepshed in Twente. Blakelock’s pearlescent Moonlit Lake, and the absolute silence of Magritte’s impossibly poised boulder in a grey-blue setting of piercing clarity (La Cieé de Verre). Even Morandi’s frieze of perfectly ordinary ordinary bottles is led by its monochromatic scheme into a mood of anticipatory quiet. For a monochromatic light can imply intimacy as well as grandeur. Renoir’s figures, dappled by homogenous paint strokes and color light that makes skin or clothing seem part of the immediate environment, achieve a cheerful counterpart of such stillness. [A friend of his once remarked that the only prerequisite of a cook in Renoir’s house was that she have a skin which looks well in the light.] George Segal’s Dry Cleaning Store is comparable in the way the light of the neon sign transforms an ordinary subject and dapples the silver plaster-figure with color.

Certainly the burgeoning knowledge of natural phenomena in the nineteenth century, accompanied by scientific discoveries in the field of color and light perception, was of the greatest importance in the development of a total light art. The increasing denial of illusionism and imitative realism, partially due to the invention and perfection of photography, were also significant in the modernist development of the painting as painting and not as illusion. In the early nineteenth century, despite the skilled employment of a pervasive light that goes back beyond Rembrandt, Guardi, Claude and others, luminous integration coexisted with, and was usually subjugated to, an illusion of depth. Constable and Turner, aided by Newton’s Optics, the researches of Goethe on color-physiology (published in English in 1840), and their own perceptual genius, were among the first “modern painters” to conceive of light as an over-all veil of atmosphere, bathing and transforming landscape until it was nearly unrecognizable. They painted what they saw rather than what they knew they saw.

The spectator’s perceptual faculties evolved apace. As palettes became lighter and lighter, the public, unused to seeing paintings without the “old master finish,” was appalled. Turner’s paintings looked like empty canvases. Monet’s colors seemed harsh and garish (just as Op Art in the early 60’s seemed impossibly vibrant). While the eye of the audience inevitably lags behind that of the painter, it gradually became accustomed to a natural rather than an artificial or studio light as painters began to work “sur le motif,” or “on the spot,” in the landscape. Predicting Impressionist and Post-Impressionist developments, Constable described his landscapes as “an inquiry into the laws of nature . . . a branch of natural philosophy.” Prior to a visit from a collector he complained, “Had I better not grime the canvas down with slime and soot: as he is a connoisseur and perhaps prefers filth and dirt to freshness and beauty?” Yet a Constable seems dark when compared to a Turner, and a Turner, when compared to a nearly invisible, grey Mangold of 1966 seems relatively descriptive. The development since the nineteenth century of a small but devoted audience sensitive to extreme visual subtleties is a factor in the success of today’s so-called “minimal art,” represented here by works of Reinhardt, Stella, Mangold, Pettet, Flavin and others.

Turner was the first major artist to make color diagrams. and they were dominated by yellow and white, the “aerial colors,” as opposed to the “dense material colors.” “Light is therefore colour, and shadow the privation of it,” he wrote. “White is the union or compound light.” From the
writings of the Swiss romantic Heinrich Fuseli, he had absorbed the concept that "one color has a greater power than a combination of two...a mixture of three impairs that power still more."

The Impressionists approached light and color on a largely intuitive basis, but the fusion of scientific and esthetic accomplishment reached a new climax in George Seurat's Neo-Impressionism, or "chromoluminarism," as he preferred to call it.

Cézanne called Monet "only an eye, but what an eye!" while Seurat set out with the aid of contemporary studies in color theory by Chevreul, Roed, Helmholtz and particularly Charles Henry, whose ideas involved a "cinematic geometry," which he also applied to music. Moving from Chevreul's premise that complementary colors are simultaneously mixed by optical juxtaposition which would be destroyed by actual mixture of pigments, Seurat evolved his own "achromatization" based on a systematic synthesis of pigment and light. The result is a cool, close-valued, silent light that has affinities to the hard white light of Sheeler or the dream-like clarity of Surrealism. A similarly frozen calm imprisons Philip Pearlstein's nude models, Tanguy's desolate plains, and de Chirico's constant "three o'clock in the afternoon." Josef Albers is the most distinguished recent artist-theorist in the field of color-light, and his painting in this exhibition has the same cool beauty as a Seurat landscape. In another context, Pointillist techniques become wholly non-representational fields of light in the recent abstractions of Tobey, Dubuffet, Poussette-Dart, Drummond and Pettet.

After Impressionism and Neo-Impressionism, and the bolder but related art of the Fauves, the Futurists stressed light and color to an extent rare in Cubism. Their dynamic transcendentalism departed from divisionist techniques, and light and atmosphere as implicit in speed and movement was a main concern. They were involved with progress and speed, with "modern life," and as such were predecessors of the Pop artists. Severini's Spherical Expansions of Light have been described as the "plastic absolute of light itself," exploding into a shattering over-all experience of color, while in Boccioni's Elasticity the figures of man and horse are dissolved into space and shifting, light-filled planes.

The kinetic impulse of the Futurists found a natural outlet in actual light structures. The break-up of light into infinite patterns by means of projection has numerous historical precedents. In the 1920's a number of people experimented with real light: among them Hirschfeld-Mack, Raoul Hausmann, and particularly Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, whose Light-Space Modulator has an heir in Otto Piene's projecting drums — objects small in size producing light that can expand infinitely, depending upon the space it is given to transform. Thomas Wilfred's Lumia, the descendent of his early and much more unwieldy claviluxes (the first was constructed in 1919 as the result of some fifteen years of light-color research), has influenced a good many younger artists who have produced variations on his theme and have profited from the increase of available apparatus.

As the surface of the painting and the painting itself separated from its subject matter, a luminous reality was stressed over a spatial reality. Many younger artists who feel that painting is an exhausted medium have now turned to constructional modes of dealing with real light — neon, fluorescent, polarized, projected, programmed. In 1923 Willard Huntington Wright declared that a total change of emphasis from painting to the art of color, or real light, was imminent, and in 1939 Moholy-Nagy was still expecting that "very soon a transition will come, a transition from pigment to light." He saw a new color consciousness evolving which is now overdue. For a good
many younger artists today have still not sufficiently overcome the luminous medium's power as a technique nor learned to cope with the color peculiar to artificial light. Too often, the technically dazzling but esthetically derivative statements that emerge seem to imitate older painting styles. Despite its long if spasmodic history, artificial light as a fine art medium is still in an experimental phase. (A recent exhibition in Eindhoven, Holland, presented a broad survey of current activities in the field of artificial light, and Frank Popper's catalogue is recommended for its valuable commentary on the history of recent developments with emphasis on the scientific modes.)

Most light structures have an all-pervasive light if only for the simple reason that they are made of light, though many of them continue the changing light-form-transparency concepts originated on canvas by Kandinsky, Delaunay and the Synchronists. The current uses of light in sculpture can be broken down into three general stylistic categories, which, like all categories, break down in turn when confronted by the breadth of the artists' imaginations. All three are fundamentally empirical, but the first is more technologically sophisticated. At its least successful, this scientifically oriented view imitates theoretical illustration and exercise. Yet James Seawright's Scanner — an open, clear plastic form electronically activated by flickering lights — manipulates movement and illumination subtly and unpredictably, extending the research done by many earlier painters of broken, shattered light.

The second group would be Pop Art, where neon and ordinary electric light bulbs are used figuratively to heighten the reality and often the vulgarity of the urban environment, as in the work of Segal, Wesselmann and Watts. In addition, James Rosenquist has created in Tumbleweed, one of the freest and most abstract of neon works — a streak of lightning or a whisper of paint in three dimensions.

The third group might be called the structural luminsts. Ben Berns and Dan Flavin, for instance, use light in the context of advanced non-objective painting and sculpture. Flavin's impassive but mysterious fluorescent fixtures obliterate space while retaining their own rigorous structure. Marshall McLuhan has observed that "light is information without 'content'... a self-contained communication system in which the medium is the message... and it is this aspect that generally appeals to artists of the so-called "cool" persuasion, though they often have a problem in avoiding or overcoming the content of light, so rich in symbolic association. The successful pieces in this idiom are those that disregard such associations but at the same time control the materials sufficiently to neutralize their technological aspects.

Music, as the abstract art par excellence, has always been associated with color and light. The first experiments with projected light were made in the form of "color organs." As early as the eighteenth century, Jean Jacques Rousseau saw a harpsichord that produced color instead of sound. Scriabin's Poeme du Feu combined colored light and music and was performed in 1915 and 1916. Rimski-Korsakov was also interested in such theories. (Though they agreed in assigning a golden brown to D major, Scriabin saw E flat as red-purple, while Rimski-Korsakov saw it as blue.) When abstract art came to the fore, ideas associating music, mathematics and color-light were freed to become dominant in the oeuvre of artists as outwardly dissimilar as Kandinsky and Mondrian, both of whom applied musical structure to their work, as did the young American Larry Poons early in his painting career. Delaunay's post-Cubist art of non-objective color harmonies was called Orphism, and the Synchronists took their name from the words symphony and chromatics.
The particular relationship between music and the total light discussed here is their sequential and serial aspects: minute variations of tone and light can be endlessly varied and explored. From Turner's studies of fog and mist, Jongkind's landscape studies based on light change, Whistler's Nocturnes and Compositions, Monet's Haystacks and other series, Kandinsky's Improvisations, Albers' Homage to the Square, Reinhardt's identically structured and almost identically colored "black paintings" to the programmed alternations of Antonakis', Chryssa's or Seawright's light sculptures and Crosby's musically controlled patterns, a preoccupation with serial development is evident. "Vibration," writes Pieme, "is the activity of the nuance, which outlaws contrast, shames tragedy and dismisses drama." An over-all light which gradually reveals interior rhythms, forms, and colors, like music, exists in time as well as in an unrestricted space.

When Kandinsky first saw one of Monet's Haystacks, at an 1895 exhibition in Moscow, he experienced "a total lack of recognition... I had a muffled sense that the object was lacking in this picture... painting took on a fabulous strength and splendor. And at the same time, unconsciously, the object was discarded as an indispensable element of the picture." The same de-emphasis of the object was already noted around 1854 by Boudin, Monet's mentor, who observed "the charm of light that plays everywhere... The objects are drowned. There are nothing but tones everywhere." The Synchronist Morgan Russell, who called Monet his "master of light" though his own paintings were more Cubist than Impressionist, wrote a fellow artist in 1911: "What one sees is a multitude of tints grading and contrasting in an infinity of directions. One does not see ‘solidity’ and one does not paint ‘solidity,’ one paints chromatic light... Your business as a painter is to organize these apparently confused sensations in such a way that they take on a life of their own."

This realization that light alone could be the subject of a painting, and that at the same time painting itself, as a two-dimensional plane, has an autonomous importance apart from what it depicts, has been a classic force in the evolution of non-objective art — most of which is an art for the sake of art. Whistler, a friend of Wilde's, (at a trial during which he defended himself against Ruskin's accusation that he had flung "a pot of paint in the public's face") described his Nocturnes as follows:

I have perhaps meant rather to indicate an artistic interest alone in my work, divesting the picture from any outside sort of interest which might have been otherwise attached to it. It is an arrangement of line, form and color first, and I make use of any incident of it which shall bring about a symmetrical result. Among my works are some night pieces, and I have chosen the word Nocturne because it generalizes and simplifies the whole set of them.

Monet said that he wanted to see the world like a blind man who had suddenly regained his sight — a pattern of unidentified color patches. Objects were constantly dissolved in light until the impetus to describe nature dissolved as well. With the advent of abstraction, with Kandinsky, Delaunay and others, an art was born that was independent of pictorial reality. An over-all light that called more attention to itself than to the composition was a perfect means to this end.
With Mondrian, whose early researches in light and continuous preoccupation with music and geometry are extremely relevant, painting became painting alone. But Turner too. "in the heyday of the Romantic engrossment in nature, had no doubt that art was founded on art... (The late paintings replaced artifice) with the natural symmetry of light. Many of his pictures after 1840 are balanced on an incandescent central axis," (Lawrence Gowing). It would seem that as an amorphous natural light threatens to take over the act of painting, structure becomes more important to the artist. Like Turner's. Monet's late paintings were far more geometrically oriented than his early ones. The anti-picturesque quality of a total, all-enveloping light reappears in Ad Reinhart's art. He disavows the mystical properties many viewers see in his work and divides the glowing black surfaces (which present gloom rather than the absence of light) into equal symmetrical parts. Rothko also fuses geometry and light. Both of these paintings seem to confirm Ruskin's prediction that "here and there, once in a couple of centuries, one man will rise past clearness and become dark with the excess of light." Turner was accused of painting "pictures of nothing, and very like". Reinhartt considers Nothing the ultimate goal: "The one thing to say about art is its breathlessness, lifelessness, deathlessness, contentlessness, formlessness. spacelessness, and timelessness. This is always the end of art."

Lucy R. Lippard