A sight to dwell upon and never forget[1]

As a child, I was mesmerised by storms. Sitting at my window for hours watching lightning bolts strike, it seemed as if they split the sky in two. At night I would lie in bed with my curtains open so that my bedroom would be violently illuminated in sporadic flashes. Storms are capricious and difficult to capture as images; photographs of major weather events make the news. We are struck by the way that they render landscapes momentarily cataclysmic, almost extra-terrestrial. The people who capture these images are often known as storm chasers. Storm chasers map storms for weeks, driving at great speed along the precipice of extreme weather events to capture ever more astounding skyscapes.

For *Making the Invisible Visible,* artist Julien Comer-Kleine has constructed a series of hand-bent neon lights that mimic the jagged composition of lightning bolts. The installation *Resonant Luminosity* hangs suspended from the gallery's ceiling: warped neon forms stretch across planes of Perspex, evoking a tempestuous horizon line. At proximity, the fierce light emitted stings my retinae: stand back and it casts a trembling, diffused glow about the room.

These flickering forms recall the mystical uses of electricity during Industrialisation and the dawn of the twentieth century. In the early nineteenth century, popular imagination was captured by the phenomena of 'galvanism', in which electrical currents might animate or resurrect inert flesh.[2]Author Mary Shelley conjured the most renowned image of galvanism's anticipated potential in her 1818 novel *Frankenstein: or the Modern Prometheus*[3]. Electricity is conceived as a life-giving force, which Dr Frankenstein describes as having the capacity to: "infuse a spark of being" into lifeless things.[4] Decades later and the image of electricity continued to fascinate, with photographs published in 1899 of Nikola Tesla sitting in his laboratory taking furtive notes, dwarfed by a magnificent, colossal shower of electrical bolts that arc above him.[5] For *Making the Invisible Visible*, Comer-Kleine's neon apparitions conjure a remembrance of the otherworldly and mesmerising power of these early experiments.

Comer-Kleine considers the materiality of neon itself. A neon light consists of an electrified glass tube in which rarefied[6] neon gas circulates. When the electric current passes through the electrodes at either end of the tube, the gas becomes ionised[7] and emits a coloured light. The glass tubes in standardised neon lights used for signage are constructed with a uniform circumference, ensuring their lurid glow provides consistent illumination. For *Resonant*

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[1] "the blaze of crimson light from the tube told its own story and was a sight to dwell upon and never forget." This was a remark made by 1898 British scientists William Ramsay and Morris W. Travers when they succeeded in isolating neon gas from the atmosphere and first subject it to electrical charge. Weeks, Mary Elvira, *Discovery of the Elements: Third Edition* (reprint) (Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing, 2003) p. 287.

[2]In the 1780s, Italian physician Luigi Galvani observed convulsions in the legs of amputated frogs that he had probed with metal rods, galvanised by the atmospheric electricity of lightning.[2] Wikipedia, s.v. accessed 28th July 2023, "Luigi Galvani" https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Galvanism

[3] Shelley, Mary, *Frankenstein: or the Modern Prometheus* (London: Penguin, 2018).

[4] Shelley, *Frankenstein,* p.114.

[5] Alley, Dickinson, *Nikola Tesla, with his equipment,* 1899, photograph, published in Tesla, Nikola, "The Problem of Increasing Human Energy", *Century Magazine*, 1900, fig. 8

[6] The term 'rarefied' is defined as "of air, especially that at high altitudes) of lower pressure than usual; thin." H.W. Fowler and F.G. Fowler, ed., *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English,* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974).

[7] The term ionise refers to the process of converting "(an atom, molecule, or substance) into an ion or ions, typically by removing one or more electrons." H.W. Fowler and F.G. Fowler, ed., *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English,* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974).

Luminosity, Comer-Kleine has manipulated the glass, creating structures that are gnarled with forks and aberrations – these 'pinch points' affect the nature of the light emitted.[8] The current's trajectory is interrupted; the neon fluctuates between brilliance and shadow in frenetic patterns. Peer closer to the interior of the glass vessels and it is possible to discern what appears to be multiple skeins of the neon plasma[9]: undulating, twisting around one another and dissipating like strange ghostly presences.

Alongside Comer-Kleine's body of neon work is *Blue Hour Chorus*. Installed as a two-meter-high column of LED screens, illuminated pixels display monochromatic footage of waves breaking along a shoreline. The footage emits a series of crackling pops and whistles reminiscent of radio static. In our conversations, Comer-Kleine tells me that these sounds come from a Very Low-Frequency Radio Receiver (VLF)[10]. This technology, developed by NASA, can pick up on distant electrical activity from natural phenomena such as storms and even other electromagnetic events like the Northern Lights. Comer-Kleine sourced one such receiver and proceeded to undertake field recordings in vast, open expanses of land where signals can be detected most strongly.

Many of the exhibited sonic emissions were recorded at beaches across the Mornington Peninsula. Due to the elliptical shape of the earth's electromagnetic field[11], the signals captured by the receiver are not from local weather patterns but from corresponding electromagnetic zones – distant atmospheric events at locations on the other side of the globe. The clearest signal can be found at dawn and dusk: the moment approaching darkness reaches out to grasp at the periphery of daylight. *Blue Hour Chorus* presents us with another horizon line at daybreak that forms a spatiotemporal boundary. Microcosmic and macrocosmic forces collide, and space and time expand and contract as the receiver corresponds with faraway places. The waves shudder and fall. If I let my gaze slip out of focus, the gallery wall seems to pulse, cascading marine foam ruptures its smooth plane as if its painted surface might cleave open and create a monumental fissure.

Comer-Kleine's previous research has long been located within ideas of place; site-specific works that question how a place might be embodied or how a site might communicate beyond the limits of human perception. Structures of metal or glass are constructed in dialogue with one another, creating almost symbiotic material relationships. In exhibitions, these materials respond to their environment, building new material ecologies. Comer-Kleine's varied investigations have long been informed by the notion of "material autonomy" in which the process of making is led by the agency of media.[12] Careful focus is placed on a material's individual qualities, giving voice to hidden mechanisms that, left uninterrupted, may unravel as time passes. Steel corrodes, wood is worn down, light dissipates.

Indeed, components within this body of work correspond with one another in a constant state of flux. Dappled staccato sequences of light create a networked sensory environment that

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[8] Julien Comer-Kleine, in conversation with the author, August 8, 2023.
[9] Plasma is defined as "an ionized gas consisting of positive ions and free electrons in proportions resulting in more or less no overall electric charge, typically at low pressures (as in the upper atmosphere and in fluorescent lamps) or at very high temperatures (as in stars and nuclear fusion reactors)" H.W. Fowler and F.G. Fowler, ed., *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English,* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974).
[10] Comer-Kleine, 2023.
[11] WGBH Educational Foundation, *Visualising Magnetic Fields,* 2023, digital diagram, https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/teachers/activities/3016_magnetic_01.html
[12] Comer-Kleine, 2023.

stretches across the gallery space. *Blue Hour Chorus* and *Resonant Luminosity* act as both celestial and terrestrial timekeepers. They provide us with a poetic and atmospheric contemplation of the power and immense scale of the unseen forces that construct and perpetuate the world around us.

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