

Neon and On: Marianne Nicolson's *Oh, How I Long for Home* through the Method of Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*

Simranpreet Anand



Marianne Nicolson, *Oh, How I Long for Home*, installation view at Teck Gallery, 2016. Photo: Blaine Campbell
<http://www.sfu.ca/galleries/teck-gallery/Marianne-NicolsonOhHowLongForHome.html>

In 1940s Vancouver, the use of neon signage lining the streets and advertising local businesses was overwhelming. Fast-forward to 2018, and one would have a similar encounter with the re-emergence of neon advertising in Vancouver. Simultaneously, neon has become a popular medium for artists to work with, shifting the context of the material. Many local artists including Ken Lum, Paul Wong, Marianne Nicolson, and even Matthew Ballantyne—who is profiled in this issue of *UJAH*—have increasingly worked with neon in their artistic practices. Marianne Nicolson's *Oh, How I Long for Home* (2016), installed for one year at Simon Fraser University's Teck Gallery, for example, includes sixteen photographs and a red neon sign. This work will be the focus of this text in an attempt to understand neon's history and current usage in Vancouver.

The link between Nicolson's work and the specific history of Vancouver motivates an application of Walter Benjamin's method in his *Arcades Project* (1927–40), which analyzes the architecture of the Parisian Arcades and its effect on the social landscape of Paris at the turn of the nineteenth century.¹ The fragmentary nature of the text is due to Benjamin's death in 1940, as the text was compiled posthumously from a series of his manuscripts, notes, quotes, and sketches. His method involves extensive research about the Parisian Arcades that reveals the unfortunate impact of

incipient capitalism: poor and working-class citizens were pushed out of the city as a result of the technological advances that precipitated the development of the Arcades.² The construction of the Arcades allowed for social changes to occur; plants began to line the indoor cobbled streets and glass ceilings brought in the sky, creating a facade of the outdoors while legislating one's ability to be there.³ The Arcades were glass-enclosed sunlit bazaars where one could stroll indoor streets and linger in boutiques and high-end specialty shops. Benjamin references the architecture of the Arcades and their construction from iron and glass, which allowed for the emancipation of the structure over the style.^{4, 5} The demolition of old and crowded buildings, the introduction of regulations, and the restructuring of Paris pushed the working class out of the city. Factories, manufacturing, and industry were moved to the city outskirts and replaced by the Arcades. Gone were the days of cramped alleyways, posteried street corners, and loiterers. Instead, the Arcades were an industrial luxury for the bourgeois. Similar to the innovations of the nineteenth century in Paris, the emergence of neon had a considerable impact on the capitalist structures and movement of people in the twentieth century in Vancouver.

Nicolson's work references the site-specific history of



neon in Vancouver through her usage of the medium, along with the archival photographs that document Vancouver's neon past. Vancouver's neon age offers a coextensive history, where technological advancement and commercialization of the city allowed for Westernization that displaced the existing Indigenous communities. A phenomenological historical approach, similar to that of Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, will be used to analyze Marianne Nicolson's neon in *Oh, How I Long for Home*, and neon's co-existent historical placement and socio-political commentary. In both cases, technological advancements ultimately had an effect on marginalized communities through physical and social restructuring that gentrified neighbourhoods. In Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, as well as in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1935), he comments on the introduction of new technologies and their impact on social structures. Benjamin uses a phenomenological approach that brings research surrounding the Arcades to understand underlying influences to concurrent social changes. Benjamin's method allows a reading of the complexities of neon's emergence as a new technology and its relation to visual and material culture.

In Marianne Nicolson's *Oh, How I Long for Home* the neon text reads 'Wa'laşan xwalsa kan ne'nakwe', which translates as *Oh, How I Long for Home* in Kwak'wala. Kwak'wala is the language of the Dzawada'enuxw of the Kwakwaka'wakw First Nations, from which Nicolson has ancestry.⁶ This text refers "to a 'return,' as well as to the cycle of the sun rising,"⁷ indicating a double meaning of the stolen territory of the Indigenous people and the home settlers seek on the unceded lands of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh nations. The gallery is designed as an open and multipurpose space, as viewers encounter students in the gallery sitting on the couches, studying as they look out the harbourfront window at Vancouver's landmark Waterfront Station. The two walls of the gallery, facing one another, sit at both sides of a window that overlooks a bustling Gastown street. Below Nicolson's neon sign are images presenting four of Vancouver's remaining historic neon signs located on Hastings Street. On the second wall across from the neon sign hang photographs of people from Nicolson's community, dating back to the 1940s and 1950s—Vancouver's neon age.

According to Rudi Stern in his 1979 book, *Let there be Neon*, neon "echoed the thirties' demand for the smooth, the swift, the streamlined and the spectacular," and "echoed a reverence for speed and technology."⁸ Benjamin's project made clear those same motivations with the introduction of iron and glass into Paris in the nineteenth century, allowing for commercialization and the development of readymade goods. He comments on the department store La Chaussée-d'Antin in the *Arcades Project*, outlining how advertising and capitalism allowed for the store to be the largest in the country and make the claim of being the largest in the universe.⁹ Upon its introduction, neon was aligned with the modern and new; it amplified crass commercialism,

artificiality, and illusion. "In 1925, André Citroën actually rented the Eiffel Tower and had the Citroën brand name embellished across it using 250,000 lights."¹⁰ In the nineteenth century iron was a marvel of engineering and technology: the Eiffel tower is a monument to this history, standing at 984 feet tall it remained the world's tallest building for almost four decades.¹¹ The Citroën neon "was recorded in the Guinness Book of Records as the world's largest advertisement."¹² This example shows how both of these materials were signifiers of technological advancement and commercial progress. Citroën's advertisement illustrates the importance of the introduction of iron in the nineteenth century, with the construction of the Eiffel Tower, and the emergence of neon as development in advertising technology.

Oh, How I Long for Home is situated within Vancouver's own history of neon, not only as an integral part of the commercial landscape of the 1940s and 1950s, but also an unpleasant indicator of both commercialism and dislocation of the Indigenous people. For instance, "[in] 1953, Neon Products boasted there were 19,000 neon signs in the city of Vancouver—one for every eighteen residents. No more. Times changed, neon faded in popularity, and was even derided as a 'sleazy light source' by anti-blight crusaders."¹³ In the 1960s, strict bylaws were put into place to prohibit new neon signage from going up around Vancouver. Nicolson's installation engages directly with this neon history through its inclusion of twelve photographs of her relations in Vancouver during the city's neon age. The people in the photographs wear Westernized clothing and are depicted on the various streets of Vancouver with neon signage evident in the background. These photographs and their juxtaposition with the sign that states 'Wa'laşan xwalsa kan ne'nakwe' signify the loss of Indigenous culture due to the commercialization of the city. The post-World War II years were economically prosperous in Vancouver in part due to British Columbia's commercial salmon fishing industry.¹⁴ Indigenous peoples worked alongside white settlers, but they did not have equal rights due to the Indian Act. The Indian Act prohibited Indigenous people from buying or consuming alcohol, performing potlatch ceremonies, voting, and doing many other things that were acceptable if one were white. This loss of Indigenous culture is most palpable with the acknowledgement of the residential schools that operated as a method of forcing Indigenous people to assimilate to Western values through a devastating and purposeful erasure of Indigenous tradition, language, and cultural identity.¹⁵ Given that the installation is sited overlooking the streets of Gastown, Waterfront Station, the railway tracks, and the harbour, the blazing red neon sheds light on the unjust displacement, discrimination, and forced assimilation of Indigenous people that went hand in hand with the cycles of capitalism within the city.

A mere 350 metres away sits Gastown's own iconic red neon, a large red *W* that sits atop a replica of the Eiffel Tower. Similar to *Oh, How I Long for Home*, this sign has a lineage to both



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the neon era of Vancouver's past and the contentious situations of the present. The Woodward's *W* was installed in 1944 as a part of the family department store and shone with bright lights and red neon for years until it was officially turned off in the 1960s. In recent years, a replica has been installed and now, once again, it revolves atop the building. The photographs in Nicolson's piece refer to a similar time in Vancouver, when neon was the flashing signage that illuminated the streets and went hand in hand with the city's supposed development and progress. The sign remains atop the building as a signifier of both its history and its contemporary usage as a commercialized space. Additionally, the Woodward's *W* operated in a similar manner to that of the Citroën neon on the Eiffel tower; both cities include an iron tower-like structure that became a landmark for the city, both were used for advertising, and both create a brightly lit spectacle for

tourists and visitors—an indicator of technological advancement and development. The Woodward's department store is a perfect example of how neon's technological advancements went hand in hand with commercialization and gentrification. The popularity and success of the Woodward's department store provided an allure for other businesses to open up in the area.

Nicolson's neon installation engages with the prior histories of the medium and references the formal and conceptual components of precursors while simultaneously confronting the limitations of systems within which the work is viewed and contextualized. Both the commercialization of Vancouver and Marianne Nicolson's site-specific work takes place on the unceded territories of the First Nations people. While neon was an indicator of progress and development, this progress is and was markedly Western, colonial, and commercial. *Oh, How I Long for Home* refers

to the supposed progress indicated by neon signage in Vancouver along with its failures—the development of the city led to a departure from and loss of traditional Indigenous values. Nicolson's choice of red neon, a familiar medium within Vancouver's history of advertising, is ironic, considering the unintelligibility of the Kwak'waka text to a majority of viewers. The metaphoric potential of neon signage is compounded by the Kwak'waka text and usage of irony as a form of institutional critique. The statement of a longing for home outlines the inability of recovering the home that once belonged to the Indigenous people and remains traditional, ancestral, and unceded. The sign itself sits on unceded Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh land as well as what used to be Spencer's department store. For many years the biggest rival of Woodward's was Spencer's; a department store that was housed where SFU's Harbour Centre campus now exists, a reminder of the

contentious history surrounding this site-specific piece.

Discussions surrounding Vancouver's Downtown Eastside and Gastown today are often surrounded by the contentions between high-end retailers, restaurant owners, and developers against residents who have been the victims of displacement, racism, and multi-generational oppression. Remnants of the technological advancements of the mid-twentieth century paint Gastown as the historic centre of Vancouver, and monuments such as the Gassy Jack statue, the Steam Clock, and the old Woodward's *W* stand are positioned alongside trendy cafes, boutiques, restaurants, and dispensaries, which are increasingly retrofitted with sleek neon signage. An example of Gastown's most recent neon signage includes a neon sign that reads, "Time Is Precious" written in large white text on the side of a building on Water Street. Although this neon seems like a public artwork, it was

fully funded by John James Wilson, founder of the Vancouver-born high-end retailer Kit and Ace. Unsurprisingly, the phrase is used on marketing and branding material for Kit and Ace stores across the country. Just blocks away, the Rennie Collection's Wing Sang building bears a white Martin Creed neon that states "Everything Is Going to Be Alright." The neon is owned by Bob Rennie, known colloquially as the "condo king," and makes up part of his private art collection. Both of these neons, along with many others in the area, are indexical of the area's commercialism. The current widespread usage of neon by privatized investors exemplifies that this technological advancement is tied to power and privilege, and continues to push forth the agenda of gentrification. Nicolson's *Oh, How I Long for Home* shows an awareness of the historical context that the work is placed in through the use of archival photographs and the site-specific usage of neon. Her usage of the Kwak'wala language for the neon sign centres indigeneity, bringing to the surface contentions surrounding commercialization and neon's history in Vancouver.

Nicolson's usage of neon affirms the use of Benjamin's method as she has commented on the current and past usage of the medium in the city and its relationship to the Indigenous community. Similarly, Benjamin comments on the introduction of new technology and its effects on the social fabric of Paris in the early twentieth century. Neon has come to have a specific history within the context of Vancouver, akin to the history of iron and glass in Benjamin's *Arcades Project*.¹⁶ Marianne Nicolson has effectively used this history within the discourse of Vancouver to create a work that is critical of development driven by new technology, and its effects on Indigenous communities. The Parisian Arcades drew the bourgeoisie into the city and pushed the poor and working class out. Similarly, the allure of neon was a development that led to the displacement of the Indigenous people who once resided on the violently stolen site-specific unceded territory where *Oh, How I Long for Home* is installed.

Notes

¹ Benjamin, Walter, and Rolf Tiedemann. 1999. *The Arcades Project*. Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press.

² Lerner, Jillian. "Walter Benjamin's Arcades Project for Art Historians." Lecture, Art History 300: Methods and Approaches, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, March 14, 2017.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Benjamin, Walter. Excerpts from *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Belknap Press, 1999), Selections from Convolute F: "Iron Construction," 150–70

⁵ Benjamin, Walter. Excerpts from *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Belknap Press, 1999), Selections from Convolute G: "Exhibitions, Advertising, Grandville," 171–82 and 195–97.

⁶ "Marianne Nicolson: Cliff Painting." Cliff Painting | Marianne Nicolson | The Medicine Project. May 15, 2008. Accessed April 10, 2017. <http://www.themedicineproject.com/marianne-nicolson.html>.

⁷ O'Brian, Melanie. "Marianne Nicolson: Oh, How I Long for Home." Teck Gallery, Simon Fraser University. Accessed April 10, 2017. <https://www.sfu.ca/galleries/teck-gallery/Marianne-NicholsonOhHowLongForHome.html>.

⁸ Stern, Rudi. 1979. *Let there be neon*. New York: Abrams. 31, 125.

⁹ Benjamin, Walter. Excerpts from *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Belknap Press, 1999), Selections from Convolute G: "Exhibitions, Advertising, Grandville," 174–75.

¹⁰ "How Citroen turned the Eiffel Tower into a huge advert in 1925—for 9 years." Arnold Clark

Newsroom. Accessed April 10, 2017. <https://www.arnoldclark.com/newsroom/275-how-citroen-turned-the-eiffel-tower-in-to-a-huge-advert-in-1925-for-9-years>.

¹¹ Duffy, Kaylie. 2015. Today in engineering history: Eiffel tower opens in Paris. *Product Design & Development*.

¹² "How Citroen turned the Eiffel Tower into a huge advert in 1925—for 9 years." Arnold Clark Newsroom. Accessed April 10, 2017.

¹³ Mackie, John. "Bright lights, old city: Remembering Vancouver's neon glory." *Vancouver Sun*. Accessed April 10, 2017. <http://www.vancouversun.com/Bright-lights-city-Remembering-Vancouver-neon-glory/2221273/story.html>.

¹⁴ Culhane, Dara. "Dara Culhane in conversation with Marianne Nicolson's, Oh, How I Long for Home (2016)." Lecture, Unpacking Art: Lunchtime Talks on Works

in the SFU Art Collection, Simon Fraser University Gallery, Burnaby, February 21, 2018.

¹⁵ Florence, Melanie. 2016. *Residential schools: The devastating impact on Canada's indigenous peoples and the truth and reconciliation commission's findings and calls for action*. Toronto: James Lorimer & Company.

It is important to note that residential schools began operating with the Gradual Civilization Act in 1857 and the last residential school closed in 1996. For more information on residential schools in Canada at the time, this book is a valuable resource in understanding the timeline of the schools and their impact on indigenous communities.

¹⁶ Benjamin, Walter. Excerpts from *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Belknap Press, 1999), "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century [Exposé of 1935]," 3–13.

In his essay "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century," Benjamin explains the importance of the introduction of iron as a technological advancement. This includes its usage in the building of the arcades, exhibition halls, and railway stations.