

# BRIGITTE KOWANZ

LIGHT IS WHAT WE SEE



# Exhibition facts

Duration	18 July – 9 November 2025
Opening	17 July 2025   6.30 p.m.
Venue	Bastion Hall   The ALBERTINA Museum
Curator	Angela Stief
Co-Curator	Adrian Kowanz
Assistant Curator	Melissa Lumbroso
Works	88
Catalogue	Available for EUR 32,90 (English & German) onsite at the Museum Shop as well as via <a href="https://shop.albertina.at/en/">https://shop.albertina.at/en/</a>
Contact	Albertinaplatz 1   1010 Vienna T +43 (0)1 534 83 0   <a href="mailto:presse@albertina.at">presse@albertina.at</a> <a href="http://www.albertina.at">www.albertina.at</a>
Opening Hours	Daily 10 a.m. – 6 p.m. Except Wednesday and Friday 10 a.m. – 9 p.m.
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# BRIGITTE KOWANZ

## Light is what we see

18 July until 9 November 2025

*»Light is energetic and infinitely multilayered; it is omnipresent yet intangible. Light makes things visible but is itself transparent, it draws you in and is inseparably bound to space. My interest is in creating ways for light to show itself in its numerous manifestations and facets.«*

Brigitte Kowanz, 2010

The ALBERTINA Museum presents the first major solo exhibition of Brigitte Kowanz (1957–2022) since her passing.

Light is both image and message in the work of internationally acclaimed artist. For her, light is a universal code—and a metaphor for life. In many of her works, the medium itself comes to the forefront: it becomes transparent, visible, and simultaneously reflects on itself. “The medium is the message,” stated media theorist Marshall McLuhan. Kowanz brings this idea to life in striking ways. In her work, light is not merely a medium—it becomes a space of perception, an immaterial code for the visible and invisible aspects of our present time.

### **From Everyday Materials to Immersive Spatial Experiences**

Already at the beginning of her career in the 1980s, Kowanz engaged with everyday experiences and drew on artistic concepts pioneered by figures such as Marcel Duchamp in the early 20th century. She transitioned to wall and spatial objects by using neon tubes and bottles filled with fluorescent and phosphorescent substances. She incorporated elements of underground culture—from new wave music and hallucinogenic experiences to a rebellious punk attitude—that at the time intersected with experimental film, video art, and the growing interest in virtuality.

Throughout her life, Kowanz was drawn to states that resist fixed categorization—to transitions, in-between spaces, and ambivalences. Her work, she once said, was about “the transformation of cognitive and emotional energy.” Breaking away from classical media and reflecting on new ones, expanding into three-dimensionality, creating immersive installations, and exploring the relationship between light, language, codes, space, and time became hallmarks of her visionary art.

## **Infinity and Beyond**

At the heart of her practice is an exploration of light and the speed of light—linking real and virtual realities through mirrors and touching on the concept of infinity: *Infinity and Beyond* was the title of her installation in the Austrian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2017. Using stylistic devices such as reflective surfaces, she directly addresses the viewer, making them an integral part of the artwork. The result is unstable, fleeting, and moving images that serve as spaces of possibility—inviting us to better understand a hybrid reality and an accelerated present.

Language and image play a central role in the oeuvre of this pioneer of media art. Her interest in language and in both old and new systems of signs is evident in many of her works using Morse code, where she transmits messages through light. Morse code represents an early binary system that enabled information to be transmitted via the speed of light over long distances for the first time. In the rhythm of dots and dashes, on and off, in the interplay of presence and absence, and the simultaneity of sending and receiving, information is transmitted. Morse code thus forms the foundation of today’s digital information society—and of its accelerated reality. Works such as *Email 02.08.1984 03.08.1984*, referencing the first transmitted email, *www 12.03.1989 06.08.1991*, or *Wikipedia 15.01.2001* represent artistic reflections on the telecommunication revolutions of our time and their far-reaching impact across generations worldwide—insights that Kowanz anticipated and illuminated through her work with light. The exhibition reaches a literally radiant climax in its exploration of virtual, digital, and imaginary spaces: luminous objects unfold their full impact, spreading their intensity throughout the exhibition halls and making a new reality palpable.

## **An Oeuvre Between Emancipation and Magic**

Kowanz’s retrospective at the ALBERTINA Museum includes mirrored spaces and works that reflect into infinity. The exhibition presents a dialectical body of work—one that unites the seemingly incompatible and oscillates between polarities: materiality and immateriality, enlightenment and mysticism, emancipation and magic. In a blacklight room reminiscent of club culture, her

phosphorescent and fluorescent works come into full effect. The result is a series of space-within-space constructions. A gallery of early works features pieces such as Polaroid photographs—shown for the first time—and rediscovered modular objects created in collaboration (1979–1984) with her partner Franz Graf.

Brigitte Kowanz's exceptional oeuvre revolves around the dematerialization of the art object and the visualization of immateriality, transience, and the boundlessness of light. At the heart of her work—which carries a distinct signal quality—lies a question that is as simple as it is radical: What is light? *Light is what we see*, the artist responded. This guiding principle points to a central paradox: light makes everything visible—yet remains invisible itself. Kowanz masterfully brings this invisible force to the fore and renders it strikingly present in her work.

Curators: Angela Stief and Adrian Kowanz

# Biography

## 1957

Brigitte Kowanz is born in Vienna on 13 April.

## 1971–1975

Kowanz's artistic talent becomes apparent, and she wins her first awards while enrolled at a secondary school with a musical and artistic focus.

## 1975–1980

Kowanz studies at the University of Applied Arts Vienna, where her installations and media works sometimes meet with a lack of understanding.

Throughout this period, the painter and sculptor Oswald Oberhuber is an important mentor.

Her first exhibitions take place during her studies, which she concludes with a diploma project that garners considerable attention: under the title *3 Spatial Situations. Attempt to Capture the Feeling of the Philosophy of a Chameleon (unlike in the desert, where one nearly dies of thirst when it rains in the car windshield wipers)*, she translates video images into paintings that in turn become part of a whole-room installation.

## 1979–1984

In the class of Oswald Oberhuber, Kowanz meets Franz Graf—with whom she then spends several years living and working.

Kowanz takes part in important exhibitions such as the Triennale di Milano, *heute, Westkunst*, and the Paris Biennale.

The contribution by Kowanz and Graf to the Venice Biennale in 1984 marks a peak in their work together and is simultaneously their final joint project.

## 1985

After separating from Franz Graf, Kowanz concentrates on investigating how space, light, language, codes, and time interrelate.

## From 1986

With her introduction of neon tubes and bottles, Kowanz transitions to the creation of wall and spatial objects.

She continues to participate regularly in international exhibitions. She represents Austria at the São Paulo Art Biennial in 1987.

## 1989

Kowanz develops the first work in her series *Speed of Light*, which poses elementary questions about the nature of light as such. This sets the stage for central aspects of her later work such as Morse code, communication, and digitization.

## 1990–1995

The artist works increasingly with light's space-altering qualities.

## 1990

Kowanz shows an installation at the Biennale of Sydney. This year also witnesses the creation of her *Light Steps*. By virtue of its modular form, this work can be adapted to various architectural parameters. Kowanz shows it at venues including the Hayward Gallery in London, the Auckland Art Gallery, and the Sharjah Art Foundation.

## From 1992

Kowanz realizes over fifty permanent installations in public space.

## 1994

*Light is what we see* is created. For Kowanz, this group of works is of a manifesto-like character.

## 1995

At the Venice Biennale, Kowanz shows her first work to involve Morse code in a direct way, with the message "Light is what we see" written in Morse code and translated into light signals.

This same year, still prior to the Internet's arrival in broader society, she realizes the work *www*. From here on out, her engagement with digitization spreads throughout her artistic practice.

Her son Adrian is born.



## 1997/98

Kowanz is appointed head of the class for sculpture at the University of Applied Arts Vienna. The restructuring that she undertakes opens it up to media-related and performative approaches, and she goes on to become the mentor of an entire generation of young artists.

## 2009

Kowanz becomes the second woman artist after Maria Lassnig to receive the Grand Austrian State Prize for Fine Arts. She is appointed to the Austrian Art Senate and devotes great energy to the promotion of women artists over the ensuing years.

## 2010

The mumok (Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien) devotes a comprehensive solo exhibition to Kowanz entitled *Now I See*.

## 2010/11

The artist creates *Beyond Recall*, a site-specific installation atop the bridgeheads of the State Bridge in Salzburg. It is dedicated to the countless prisoners of war and forced laborers who were used in this bridge's construction between 1941 and 1945.

At the Jewish Museum Vienna Kowanz realizes the work *Museion*, which deals with the visibility of Jewish life in the city.

## 2013

Kowanz is featured in the important exhibition *Light Show* at London's Hayward Gallery together with artists including Olafur Eliasson, Dan Flavin, and François Morellet.

## 2017

Kowanz represents Austria at the Venice Biennale together with Erwin Wurm.

## 2019

Kowanz takes part in the Cairo Biennale.

## 2020

The solo exhibition *Lost under the Surface* takes place at the Museum Haus Konstruktiv in Zurich.

## 2021

Kowanz realizes her final monumental work in public space: *ALWAYS A WAY ALWAYS AWAY*, situated atop a roof near the main railway station in Zürich.

## 2022

Brigitte Kowanz passes away in Vienna on 28 January.

*ISTR*, the final exhibition conceived by the artist, opens posthumously at the Schlossmuseum Linz.

ESTATE BRIGITTE KOWANZ was founded under the leadership of art historian Adrian Kowanz. At this point in time, the artist's son has already worked as his mother's studio manager for several years. Alongside other activities, ESTATE BRIGITTE KOWANZ engages with the artist's extensive oeuvre and devotes itself to the study and preservation of her art, archive, and library.

# Exhibition texts

## Introduction

The question “What is light?” is central to the oeuvre of Brigitte Kowanz (1957–2022). Her answer: “Light is what we see”—a maxim that refers to the paradox of how light makes everything visible but normally remains invisible itself. The present eponymously titled retrospective leads viewers through the body of work created by this renowned artist from the 1980s onward. Kowanz explores the construction of space through the employment of light and mirrors, works with projections of light and shadows, engages with the speed of light, and investigates light as a source of information and a medium of understanding. Light thereby becomes a vehicle for images and meaning as well as a transmitter of messages: the work *Email 02.08.1984 03.08.1984* (referring to the date of the first international transmission of an electronic message) and *www 12.03.1989 06.08.1997* (which describes the beginnings of the Internet) exemplify how she artistically addresses the telecommunication innovations of our era and their far-reaching effects on multiple generations. The emergence of virtual realms and the digitization of our present-day information society are lent luminous expression in radiant objects and poetic installations. And last but not least, light acts as a guarantor of truth and visibility. Also key to Kowanz’s work are themes such as language and codes, evident especially in her numerous works involving the Morse alphabet.

Kowanz not only engages with light, language, and media but also involves light sources such as neon and fluorescent tubes, light bulbs, LEDs, and monitors. Her early Polaroids, which lead one back to the beginnings of her artistic career and are being shown here for the first time, include depictions of candles, aureoles, and the play of light and shadows. Other important materials are glass bottles through which light is shone, multi-outlet power strips through which energy courses, and—above all—reflective surfaces. For the present exhibition, which makes use of spacious, open rooms, the installation of certain works in mirrored walls enables them to produce infinite reflections. Moreover, a room specially equipped with black lights allows fluorescent and phosphorescent works to achieve their full effect.

Kowanz’s outstanding oeuvre emphasizes aspects of the art object’s dematerialization as well as the visualization of immateriality, transparency, ephemerality, and light’s limitlessness.

## Alphabet

*Alphabet*, set into a mirrored wall, is based upon Morse code—with visualizations of the individual encoded letters arranged in a clockwise sequence. The resulting geometric depiction of rays positioned around an empty center harnesses technology's rationalism to evoke transfigured aureoles of long-extinguished mythologies. In its vague allusions to matchsticks and suns, this work manifests a cold glow that plays upon the idea of fire and its transformation into artificial light. Brigitte Kowanz's light installations demonstratively interweave material and immaterial space. The bodies of the viewers inhabit the real realm, which is augmented by a virtual realm through the use of one-way and two-way mirrors as well as artificial light. This poetic conceptual approach visualizes the boundless.

## www

Light, language, and mirrors are the basic elements of the installation *www 12.03.1989 06.08.1991*, in which Kowanz devotes herself to the light speed of the Internet as a tool for communication. This work centers on a looping ribbon of light running atop two encoded series of numbers that refer to two key Internet milestones: the World Wide Web's initial proposal at CERN on 12 March 1989 and its global accessibility starting on 6 August 1991. The numbers that represent these dates are visualized as Morse characters, which themselves were the earliest standardized mode of language transmission based on binary base units and light speed. They thus represent the basis of all post-analog, digitized communication systems such as the Internet. This work hence conveys something like a biography of the World Wide Web in an enciphered form that encapsulates its very origin.

## Infinity and Beyond

The aspect of the infinite, which manifests itself in the dissolution of boundaries and the employment of light and mirrors, is deeply anchored in Brigitte Kowanz's oeuvre. In 2017, Kowanz presented her work in the Austrian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. *Infinity and Beyond* was the title of her contribution, which marked a peak moment in her engagement with virtuality and the spatial. Kowanz's visionary works such as *www 12.03.1989 06.08.1991*, *Google 15.09.1997*, *Wikipedia 15.01.2001*, and *iPhone 09.01.2007* point to communication technology achievements of the past few decades that catalyzed rapid societal change and now wield a strong influence over our everyday lives. In her installations, Kowanz makes it possible to experience that new sort of simultaneity, which philosopher Marshall McLuhan described as the signature of the electronic age.

## Cubes

In works such as her “cubes,” display cases, and “infinity boxes,” Brigitte Kowanz created hybrid spaces in which real bodies, digital codes, mirror images, and information merge. The artist wrote neon texts here by hand, lending these works a graphic element. Reflections reinforce this drawn dynamic and produce imaginary neon lesenes, structuring elements in which the linear transforms to become three-dimensional. Cryptograms arise, forming codes that reflect upon language and visibility. The work becomes a place where various media coalesce, an interface between physical and virtual reality where viewers become part of the overall system. These neon works translate information into light, with their material becoming the bearer of immaterial data. They hence resist any definitive attribution and communicate by taking on form.

## Morse Alphabet

Systems of signs and notation both old and new—such as Morse code and the digital (i.e., binary) coding employed in computer technology—play a significant role in the oeuvre of Brigitte Kowanz. The Morse alphabet is a central motif with which Kowanz worked for multiple decades. It consists of rudimentary base units: on – off, short – long, dot – dash. These can be realized as light signals, acoustic signals, or graphic elements—and in the intermediate space formed by their presence and absence, information arises. Morse code is an early binary encoding method that made it possible for the first time to transmit information over long distances at the speed of light. Transmission and reception are effectively simultaneous. This sign system hence became a foundational element of our present-day digital society and the resulting acceleration of our lived reality.

## The Encrypted Message

The structuralist understanding of language as a universally valid code of our perception—the idea that language, culture, and society are defined and organized by underlying structures—manifests itself in works such as those whose titles begin with *The Encrypted Message...* Here, the respective language becomes the work’s encoding system and defines its form. In the French version of *The Encrypted Message...*, for example, the neon line bends to the left at every “g” (for *gauche*) and to the right at every “d” (for *droit*). The crisis of linearity described by media philosopher and communication scholar Vilém Flusser—namely the supplanting of alphanumeric codes and sign sequences by more vividly visual modes of representation such as photography, film, and television as well as a reality beyond writing are likewise the themes of numerous works by Kowanz. The artist viewed light itself as a universal code.

## Reflections

The series *Reflections* illustrates Kowanz's equally experimental and rigorous approach in keeping with the idea of "aesthetic research." In both the Morse alphabet and her own handwriting, she writes: *a (light never stays), b (knows no place), c (is continually changing), d (with its environment)*. This four-part series is convincing not just for its descriptive and analytical character, but also for the sensory impression it makes, for its materiality and the properties of its surface. The artist even spoke of a painterly process—here, as well, originating a mode of "dematerialized painting" that does entirely without paint. The technique of *Reflections* is based on the use of a transparent coating whose physical characteristics the artist uses to good effect: Depending on the viewer's position and the location of the light source, the painting appears to glow.

## Light Steps

In the tradition of minimalist artists of the 1960s such as Dan Flavin, Brigitte Kowanz employed fluorescent tubes as her material here. *Light Steps* is a work that structures space with light much like the artist's "imaginary spaces" do. The concept for it arose in 1990, at a time when Kowanz was working primarily within the existing parameters of space and the orthogonal coordinate system. Instead of filling her exhibition space with objects, installations, or paintings, she altered the lighting present in the gallery such that a stairway was formed by suspended fluorescent tubes. This resulted in a room-within-a-room, where Kowanz made the stairway lead quite literally to nowhere.

## 1 × 8

Tubes and bottles filled with colorful self-luminous substances populate Brigitte Kowanz's efforts to advance painting's spatialization and dematerialization. 1988 witnessed the creation of *1x8*, a square assemblage consisting of eight bottles, each filled with fluorescent and phosphorescent pigments and arranged at equal distances around an empty center. When exposed to a black light, they glow blue and red. These alienated, auratically charged everyday objects recall Marcel Duchamp's famous readymades, especially his early 20th-century *Bottle Rack*. Installations like these testify to an analytical deconstruction of painting into its components of light, pigment, and support. This work appears sober and mundane in plain daylight, and its self-referential title lays out the mathematical definition of its formal configuration.

## Black Light

Black light creates an aura of sorts around a space and the objects therein. Black light—or, more precisely, its reflection—causes colors to pop out of the image support and expand into the space. Kowanz was interested in how one might transfer cinematic visual perceptions to large spatial images and experiences, for which reason one can make out a connection to the club scene, punk, and new wave even in her early works. At the same time, these immersive environments permit the audience experiences of a mythological, psychedelic, and/or transcendent quality. Running throughout Kowanz's oeuvre like a golden thread is a new, integrative relationship between work, space, and viewers. And from the turn of the millennium onward, this aspect was reinforced by her combination of light, space, and mirrors, addressing the viewers in an even more immediate way.

## Light Speed

Brigitte Kowanz's works pertaining to the speed of light possess the character of a manifesto. They are linear, scaled objects, and the indications of their lengths are combined with mentions of the time that light requires to travel the corresponding distances. Even the title, *Speed of Light sec/4m*, serves to help point out how light spreads near-infinitely fast. The enormously high speed at issue, however, is difficult to render visible. Kowanz solves this problem by specifying the fraction of a second that light needs in order to travel a distance of four meters, which equals the breadth of this work. Works like this one capture the unimaginable in clear and precise forms.

## Polaroids

In contrast to a great many women artists of her generation, Kowanz paid barely any attention to the role of women in society. She largely refrained from self-reflection in portraits and bodily depictions and hence from posing questions pertaining to her own identity. She is rarely to be seen in her works; there is just lettering where she renders her own handwriting in neon, in one such case writing her name more or less legibly. A few early Polaroid photos show self-portraits of the artist in her early twenties. The photos that Adrian Kowanz discovered amongst his mother's estate bear witness to her experimental and painterly engagement with the medium. These Polaroids also feature glass bottles, candles, gas flames, lenses, a moth in the light, a television, and other light- and media-related phenomena that foreshadow many of her artistic ideas.

### Light is what we see

Language causes reality to arise or constructs it. It makes reality visible just like light does, says Brigitte Kowanz. The artist also points out here how these two phenomena, which are so important to her work, illuminate one another. The work *Light is what we see* exists in various different implementations, languages, and materials. The iterations of the 1990s featuring multi-outlet power strips use orange lighting elements to express this common title in various languages. Light describing itself makes simultaneous reference to the act of perception. The viewers are addressed directly while also being indirectly called upon to observe themselves. The visible flow of words is owed to the flow of electrical power and hence to an external source of energy.

### Early Works

Brigitte Kowanz hit upon light's use as an artistic medium through her engagement with new media such as photography, film, and video. Following graduation from her studies in 1980, the artist began experimenting with transparent supports and self-luminous pigments. Together with the artist Franz Graf, with whom she collaborated from 1979 to 1984, she painted canvases and paper on both sides. Their final project together produced painted wooden objects representing mythological tropes such as the archer, the fiddler, and the sphinx in a vein not unlike that of other artistic movements of the time (such as Transavanguardia). Characteristic of these modular structures are perspectival breaks, leaps of perception, reversible figures, and dimensional interplay. Kowanz then experimented even more intensively with phosphorescent colors and fluorescent materials in her early light objects, which glow when light is shone on them—disrupting the stability and hermetic quality of classic images.

### Indirect Transparency

What is light? What is transparency? What is indirect transparency? These are questions posed by Brigitte Kowanz's oeuvre. *Indirect Transparency*, like many of her works, takes up earlier ideas and revises existing output. Light's role as a medium of information has been clear to us since the advent of Morse Code, at the very latest. But screens, too, are based on light—and new media such as the Internet rely upon transmission via light impulses, as happens in fiber-optic cables. In *Indirect Transparency*, Kowanz gives rise to the illusion of a lightbulb glowing in front of a CNN video showing news from all over the world. She thereby references today's information glut and the enormous acceleration caused by new communication technologies as well as a novel degree of confusing complexity and the dangers posed by fake news.



## Transilluminations

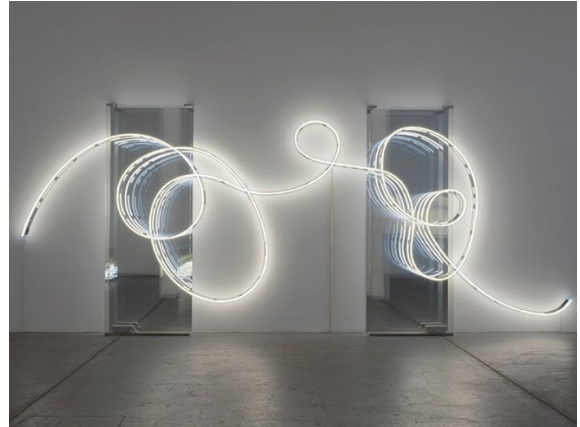
In the series *Durchleuchtungen* (Transilluminations, 1987–1989), Brigitte Kowanz turned once again to bottles. These works transfigure the mundane in their dysfunctional employment of glassware originally used for pharmaceuticals. Such imbuelement of everyday objects with their own aura recalls Marcel Duchamp's readymades. Beyond being "filled" with light, these bottles are also used as light-refracting transmission media. The clear-as-glass calculation behind this concept and the unpredictable refractions of light owed to the material's consistency give rise to an intriguing scenario of guided coincidences. In the process, the hardness of the bottles seems to be virtually dissolved by the light. Their ephemeral character manifests itself in phantom-like light drawings, with the wall transformed into a rear projection surface.

## Press images

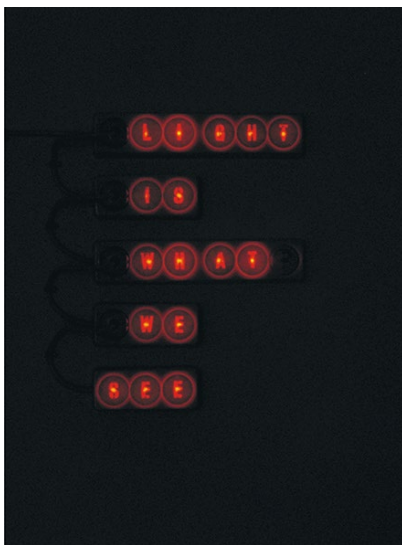
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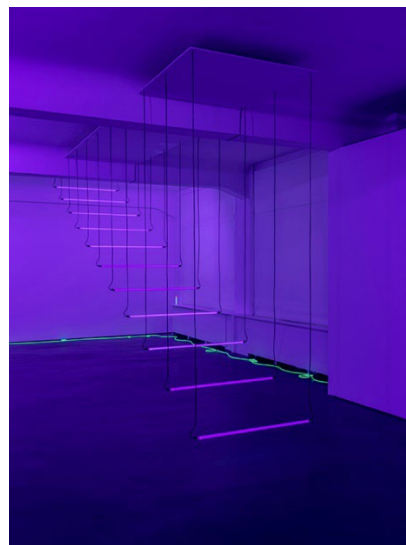
Brigitte Kowanz  
Alphabet, 1998/2010  
Neon, mirror  
245 × 320 × 45 cm  
The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna – The Haselsteiner  
Family Collection  
© ESTATE BRIGITTE KOWANZ / Bildrecht, Vienna 2025,  
Photo: Rainer Iglar



Brigitte Kowanz  
www 12.03.1989 06.08.1991, 2017  
Neon, mirror, aluminium, enamel paint  
270 × 670 × 20 cm  
The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna – Donation Adrian  
Kowanz 2025  
© ESTATE BRIGITTE KOWANZ / Bildrecht, Vienna  
2025, Photo: Stefan Altenburger



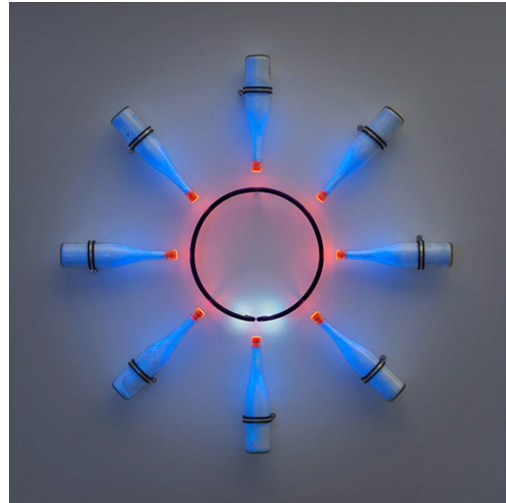
Brigitte Kowanz  
Light is what we see, 1994/2007  
Glow lamps, power strips, plexiglass, stainless steel  
120 × 50 × 10 cm  
ESTATE BRIGITTE KOWANZ  
© ESTATE BRIGITTE KOWANZ / Bildrecht, Vienna, 2025,  
Photo: Matthias Herrmann



Brigitte Kowanz  
Light Steps, 1990  
Fluorescent tubes  
Dimensions variable  
ESTATE BRIGITTE KOWANZ  
© ESTATE BRIGITTE KOWANZ / Bildrecht, Vienna  
2025, Photo: Marjorie Brunet Plaza



Brigitte Kowanz  
Matter of Time, 2019  
Neon, mirror  
70 × 70 × 70 cm  
ESTATE BRIGITTE KOWANZ  
© ESTATE BRIGITTE KOWANZ / Bildrecht, Vienna 2025,  
Photo: Stefan Altenburger



Brigitte Kowanz  
1 × 8, 1988/2019  
Neon, fluorescent paint, pigment, glass, wood  
150 × 150 × 15 cm  
The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna – The Haselsteiner  
Family Collection  
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Photo: Stefan Altenburger



Brigitte Kowanz  
Untitled, 1985  
Phosphorescent and fluorescent paint on wood, plaster  
30 × 30 × 10 cm  
ESTATE BRIGITTE KOWANZ  
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Photo: Peter Hoiss



Brigitte Kowanz  
Untitled, 1991  
Halogen light, plexiglass, steel  
Dimensions variable  
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Photo: Ulrich Ghezzi



Portrait  
Brigitte Kowanz, 2020  
© Photo: Mato Johannik