

Ulster Television

Bending Glass
3—6 March 2022

Welcome to Havelock House

Today you will be visiting UTV's former studio spaces and exploring the use of neon lighting in its shows, as well as seeing neon artworks responding to and complementing their revival thanks to Northern Ireland Screen's Digital Film Archive.

For some of you, this will be a nostalgic trip down memory lane. For others, you'll be learning something brand new about the history of this place. By place, we firstly refer to Havelock House, the former home of Ulster Television/UTV, and currently of Flax Art Studios. But we also mean Northern Ireland and Ulster, for these neon works you're about to encounter are part of its lesser-known histories, and combine the region/province's industriousness with its vibrant creativity, here brought to the fore.

As you may be aware, Havelock House may in the coming years be demolished, and *Bending Glass* could be the last opportunity for the public to visit. How fitting, then, to feature an art that could soon fade, not because it is obsolete—far from it—but because the skills involved in its construction and care are so niche, the material so fragile, and its components so rare, that cheaper (but not more sustainable) approaches to commercial signage have been steadily outperforming neon in sales since the 1960s.

Here, today, you can relive the glamour of being a studio audience member basking in those neon signs and colourful strip lighting. We'll also guide you through contemporary light-based artworks, many of which were produced by AM Light, the company established in 1973 by master glass bender Adrian McNevison who made the neons for UTV's studio-based shows recorded in this building.

While you wait to enter the studios, why not sit back, relax, and watch the tube? Enjoy the show!

Studio 1

Kevin Killen, neons

Stuart Calvin, *N.D.E* (2012), neon and wood

Michael Hanna, *Computers!*, 2019, neon sign

Susan Hughes, *EYES LIKE CATS*, 2022, perspex lightbox

Havelock House became part of television history when it opened as Ulster Television's headquarters in 1959. For almost sixty years, it was home to live television and radio broadcasts while providing full production services for preformatted shows of many kinds. It is due to Northern Ireland Screen and PRONI that many of those programmes and the history of this place are preserved, enabled by what was in 1959 the future technology of computers, certainly as we understand them in the 2020s, and as exclaimed by Michael Hanna's installation.

Presented in Microsoft Word's default font Calibri, *Computers!* from Hanna's 2019 *Looking Backwards* exhibition at PS² evokes disrupted utopian fictions, the anticipation of promised/promising futures and technologies, deliberate mistakes and language degradation. Neon signs, like the live broadcasts made in Havelock House, were once at the

cutting edge of technological possibility and have steadily been replaced by increasingly ubiquitous digital technologies, the beginning of which is seen in *This is Ulster Television* from 1980. The exclamation point on *Computers!*, we hope, will send you on the rest of this tour with the sense of possibility that came in the early years of these media, and enough curiosity to wonder what may come in the future.

As shown in Kevin Killen's practice, neon is malleable and reusable as well as durable with the appropriate maintenance. He is an example of an artist trained in glass bending. While neon may be fading in the commercial realm, artists, particularly in the United States where Killen trained, are claiming the medium. This work by Killen has been carefully rearranged and installed by Johanna Leech, Stuart Calvin and Chris McNevison in response to the arts programme *Spectrum* (1972—1991). The explosion of colours complement the array of neons found in the UTV archive and appear to break down their uniformity. The television test pattern stripes have gone awry. The electromagnetic colour spectrum flouts the laws of physics. What was once contained has broken loose and every aspect goes its own way.

If you crane up beyond the lighting rigs, Susan Hughes's *EYES LIKE CATS* (2022) brings a shock of pink to proceedings. Designed to overlook a conference room, it references a Donegal man's description of people's ability to see in the dark before the urban spread of light pollution and their sensitivity to bioluminescence in the boglands and sea. On the red part of the colour spectrum, Hughes's chosen shade positioned high above could also put us in mind of 'recording in progress' signs.

Flax studio-holder Stuart Calvin's sculpture *N.D.E* (2012) features a halo-like white neon ring attached to a vertically mounted railway sleeper. Its placing in the show preempts the geometric shapes and symmetry of the set design we suggest you look out for in the archive footage in Studio 2 and the stills in the corridors. Calvin's work delves into the mystical and the mythological—quite fitting with television's own brand of reality that was once created in these rooms. As the sculpture's own lore goes, the wood was salvaged close to a convent. The shape also evokes the lowercase Greek letter Phi (ϕ or φ) that is sometimes used to represent magnetic flow in physics and the golden ratio in maths, art and architecture.

Projection Room

Bending Glass, 2022, video

Johanna Leech, *Guns & Gold*, 2019, neon sign

Exposed wires, Havelock found items

While the finished, wired, positioned and lit shape of a neon sign is undoubtedly a work of art, let your attention fix on their making and consider the elements of performance involved: the precision of Adrian McNevison's hands, their bareness, his movements, the turning and bending, the unguarded flames, the redness of the hot glass, its simultaneous strength and fragility, the knowledge of the design, and its abstractness while it takes form. It is this specialist craft that produced Johanna Leech's vivid yellow *Guns & Gold* (2019), the work whose production set Leech on this research journey concerning neon at Havelock House.

Artist Sinéad Bhreathnach-Cashell has been working in Havelock on behalf of Northern Ireland Screen in partnership with PRONI and ITV to curate UTV footage from the Digital Film Archive. The consistency of neon throughout footage from a range of shows gives the UTV archive particular distinction. Upon finding that AM Light made their neons as well as her own, Leech, along with Stuart Calvin, recorded the interview with Adrian and Chris McNevison screened here to learn more. It was via this documenting of oral history that Adrian's necessary role in perfecting the precise shaping of the lettering in *Guns & Gold* emerged. A replica of a pawn shop sign photographed in Kingston, New York state, *Guns & Gold* shown in Belfast cannot help but evoke the violent years during which the UTV broadcasts re-presented in this exhibition were providing entertainment, glamour and special interest programming.

Experiments with neon for use in the transmission of information were in motion in the early 1900s after the rare gas was discovered in 1898 by Sir William Ramsey. The apparatus in which to achieve stable luminous tube lighting, as it is more accurately called, was developed by Georges Claude in Paris in 1910. However, neon's subsequent history is largely told from a US perspective, where it became popular in the 1920s, reaching its peak in advertising signage in the 1940s.

Adrian McNevison began his apprenticeship with Neon Signs Ulster in 1958, then in the 1960s honed his craft while working for Taylor Signs in Dublin where he was inspired by the city's most memorable animated neon advertisements. The *Bending Glass* film includes an animated drawing by Fionnuala Doran commissioned to illustrate McNevison's and the 'Dublin Down Memory Lane' Facebook Group's memories of the Donnelly's Sausages sign on the Regent Hotel on D'Olier Street. This was aided by the one photograph of it known to exist that was taken, we think, in the 1960s.

As cheaper and more durable plastic-based alternatives emerged around this time, neon's popularity waned, but experienced a renaissance during the 1970s in Las Vegas where its use to accentuate architecture and advertisements remains distinctive in the 2020s. McNevison notes this distinction in the video when comparing a vibrant Castle Junction in the 1970s to Nevada's Desert Oasis, making Belfast at that time seem unrecognisable to those who remember the city centre as dark and drained of life.

Corridor/Room

Susan Hughes, *The Dark*, 2021, perspex lightbox

Not neon, but a perspex lightbox made for Susan Hughes's 2021 MFA installation *Here/Not Here* and shown later that year at her *Lost Not Lost* exhibition, *The Dark* appearing in this different context invites us to notice the spectral traces of removed lightboxes over the studio doors, to think about cities before and after neon, and to consider archives and what they hold. Itself a replica of a lightbox that had featured in a restaurant window on the Ormeau Road in the 1970s, *The Dark* shares neon's history of light-based siren calls for venues.

Like the themes in Hughes's work, much of the footage screened in *Bending Glass* is itself lost and not lost, here and not here, as is Havelock House and its prior functions. We still have them, but they are not as they were, and never can be again. The line of text, 'THE

DARK HAD COME AGAIN' in capitalised bold sans serif against the yellow light inside a translucent red-orange box on the floor, reminds us of the inevitability that what is light will become dark time and again. It is a poignant reminder that the studio lights in Havelock House went out for the last time in 2018 as UTV moved to Clarendon Docks in the reindustrialised Titanic Quarter and the building's function once again changed, this time with a precarious future. The dark had come before in Havelock House, and now we wait to see if it will come for the final time.

Studio 2

Screenings of *Kelly* courtesy ITV

Studio installation by Stuart Calvin and Johanna Leech

The chat and variety show *Kelly* (1989—2005) provided a meeting place for the neon of host Gerry Kelly's distinctive signature and glitzy studio decoration and the cathode-ray tubes in our late-twentieth-century box-monitor television sets that transmitted the entertainment; both, to put it simply, are tube-shaped systems that produce coloured light powered by a box of electronics. Preserved by Northern Ireland Screen's Digital Film Archive—itsself providing an alternative way of restoring the neons as well as the programme—screened in Studio 2 are excerpts from live recordings of *Kelly*. The low-resolution digitised videos become ghostly shadows of what once happened in this space replaying time and again for you, a live and not live audience. Imagine yourself going back in time and soaking up the atmosphere of a myriad of performances against the glamorous backdrop of the bright neons accentuating the set. Media history was made in these rooms, and now you are part of it, too.

Neon is one of many alternative histories of Belfast in the late twentieth century, as both an industrial practice and as part of the city's visual culture. With some resurgence of neon signs, if only to preserve and remember their place as familiar elements of cityscapes, the restoration and replication of neons complements Northern Ireland Screen's Digital Film Archive and PRONI's work in its care for moving image artefacts. We thank you for sharing in these efforts and we would love to hear about your own memories of neons and UTV at Havelock.

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Footage of *AM Light* filmed and edited by Stuart Calvin. Interview by Johanna Leech.
Studio 2 installation by Johanna Leech and Stuart Calvin.

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Guide text by P. E. A. Blair, 2022.