Howard Jones’s experimental light and sound work *Solo Two* (1966) consists of a life-size silhouette of the artist painted on a mustard yellow wood panel, which is covered by a grid of orange lightbulbs (7½ watt) in porcelain sockets typically used for commercial signage. A mirror is hinged to the top of the panel to reflect the light from the bulbs as well as the image of viewers as they stand in front of the piece. The entire structure is plugged into an electrical box with an amp meter and a series of toggle switches that control the programmed sequences of lights and sounds that fill the gallery space. The programs are multiple and vary depending on which switches are turned on and which ones are left off. One sequence begins, for instance, with all of the lights randomly flickering while a low electronic chirping sound resonates from the bulbs. Then, suddenly, all of the lights go dark except for those around the head of the figure, which blink swiftly while one lone bulb in the chest area slowly pulses, like a thumping heart. The low chirping sound concurrently transforms into a loud, rapid clicking noise before diminishing, leaving only the faint buzz of the electrical box audible. At this point, all of the lights go out except for the light in the chest, which rhythmically beats on and off. After a few seconds, a single light in the groin area begins to throb, and shortly thereafter the lights resume their frenzied dance across the surface of the piece, returning us to the start of the sequence.

Jones was one of numerous artists working in the United States and in Europe engaged in the exploration of light, motion, sound, and technology as aesthetic media.¹ The fascination with kinetic and light art reached a high point in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as evidenced by a plethora of exhibitions.

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¹ Artists such as Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Gyorgy Kepes, and Thomas Wilfred experimented with light and movement in the early twentieth century, yet it was the 1960s that witnessed a marked surge in the use of natural and electric light among artists. For an overview of light art throughout the twentieth century and into the realm of contemporary art, see Peter Wiebel and Gregor Jansen, eds., *Light Art from Artificial Light: Light as a Medium in 20th and 21st Century Art* (Karlsruhe, Germany: ZKM, 2006). See also Jack Burnham, *Beyond Modern Sculpture: The Effects of Science and Technology on the Sculpture of This Century* (New York: George Braziller, 1968).
devoted to the topic appearing across the US and abroad.² Robert Doty, curator of the exhibition *Light: Object and Image* at the Whitney Museum in 1968, in which Jones participated, described the widespread artistic interest in the subject: “Artificial light, and its allied technical fields, is the fastest growing area in the arts today. Discoveries in theoretical and applied science seem to be limitless, and the artist will try to use whatever information and materials the scientist can produce.”³ In Europe, artist collectives such as Zero in Germany, the Groupe de Recherche d’Art Visuel (GRAV) in France, and Gruppo N and Gruppo T in Italy defined themselves through their experimental work integrating movement, light, and technological methods to create dynamic, often interactive, works of art.⁴ In the United States, E.A.T. (Experiments in Art and Technology, Inc.) notably attempted to bring together art and technology. Founded in 1967, the organization acted as a matching agency, connecting artists and engineers early in the creative process in order to explore how technology could play a role in the development of an artist’s ideas.⁵

Jones’s work is a direct product of this experimental environment. His efforts to pursue the relationship between human experience and man-made materials and tools were largely motivated by the conviction that in an electronic age artists must actively apply the products of technology in order to address philosophical and moral questions raised by the rapid development of these technologies. The mustard yellow color covering the background of Jones’s “plugged-in painting”⁶ in combination with the programmed electrical lights, the thick electrical cords hanging off the right side of the piece, and the prominent display of hardware infuse the work with a now dated yet distinctly futuristic sensibility befitting the Space Age. The mirror atop the structure multiplies the staccato rhythm of the flashing

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⁴ These artist groups were collectively known as “La Nouvelle Tendance” (New Tendency).


⁶ Nan R. Piene, “Light Art,” *Art in America* 55, no. 3 (May–June 1967): 30–32. Piene describes “plugged-in painting” as one variation of light art in which artists make works with predetermined perimeters, usually rectangular, which the viewer is intended to look at frontally. This is in distinction from other categories, including “light-receiving and light-giving sculptures” and “environments and performances.”
lights and directly implicates the spectator standing below in the sensory experience of the work. The effect of dynamic light displays and the associated gesture toward interactivity as evidenced in a work such as *Solo Two*, which can be turned on and off, were often criticized as gimmicky, “more suitable to amusement parks or department store displays than for galleries or museums,” and were accused by some as being closer to an exercise in mechanical engineering than a compelling work of art. ⁷ For Jones, however, the greater aspiration was to expand the viewer’s perception of the technologically altered conditions of the self.

Recognizing the techno-euphoria inherent in Jones’s work from this period, critic Robert Pincus-Witten labeled the artist “an ardent McLuhanite” in reference to the influential media theorist Marshall McLuhan. ⁸ In his 1964 publication, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, McLuhan maintained that the technologies of the media of communication, covering the globe like nature itself, were far more influential than any specific content in their ability to alter both our sensibilities and our means of perception. “The medium,” he famously declared, “is the message”: “The ‘message’ of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs.” ⁹

As extensions of the human body, technologies thus irrevocably alter human perceptual capabilities. A sense of ambivalence runs throughout McLuhan’s writings between suspicious and mystical attitudes about media and between pessimistic visions of technological control and sanguine fantasies of an interconnected “global village.” In *Solo Two*, Jones appears to have literalized the manner in which media technologies wash over us, both physically and psychically, to change our awareness and experience of the world in which we live. The silhouette, in this reading, becomes an everyman, someone with whom we might identify and through whom media communication is literally radiated. While the programmed sequence of lights and sounds can be changed with the flip of a switch, the greatest emphasis is always placed on the head, the heart, and the groin, the most vital centers of the body. Rather than simply being dominated by electromechanical systems, *Solo Two* presents an integrated response to the new realities of a technologically advanced society, providing a model for how art and technology can interact as catalysts for aesthetic and intellectual development.

⁸ Robert Pincus-Witten, review in *Artforum* 4, no. 10 (June 1966): 55.