The ubiquity of electricity has greatly impacted built and natural environments as well as the rhythm of our days and our experience of darkness. Although we often take electricity for granted until we are temporarily without it, photographers have long been attentive to its effects, capturing both excitement and concern about the electrical forces that energize our lives. Drawn from the Getty Museum’s permanent collection, this exhibition highlights historic photographs that register the allure of artificial illumination and more recent photographs that express unease about life tethered to the grid.
In the sky above great cities, on clear nights, is a pale, wide-spreading glow. From a distance of many miles it may be seen. . . . It is the reflection of millions of small lights—the glow of the city’s contest with darkness. . . . It is not until the centers of the city’s night life are reached, that you find the real triumphs of the lights. Here they have routed night.


Photographers have frequently been entranced by artificial illumination. Early photographers marveled at the vistas made visible by electric light. Nadar dragged a rudimentary battery below the streets of Paris to document the catacombs, while others became enamored of the radiance of electric streetlights that began to replace the yellow flicker of gas lamps in urban centers. Many modern artists pictured widespread access to electricity as a beacon of progress. Contemporary photographers such as Robert Adams, however, have made images that convey wariness about the encroachment of light pollution in the landscape.
1. **The Catacombs of Paris**  
   1861  
   Nadar (Gaspard Félix Tournachon)  
   French, 1820–1910  
   Albumen silver print  
   84.XM.436.468

2. **The Glow of Night—New York**  
   1897  
   Alfred Stieglitz  
   American, 1864–1946  
   Photogravure  
   84.XM.5236.2

3. **Theatre at Night, New York City**  
   1909  
   Paul B. Haviland  
   American, 1880–1950  
   Gelatin silver print  
   84.XM.187.7

4. **Neon Signs**  
   1930s  
   Jaromír Funke  
   Czech, 1896–1945  
   Gelatin silver print  
   84.XM.148.70

5. **A Night View of Broadway Looking North from 45th Street**  
   1923  
   New York Edison Company Photographic Bureau  
   American, active 1901–36  
   Gelatin silver print  
   84.XM.230.18

6. **Paris Street at Night**  
   1925–26  
   André Kertész  
   American, born Hungary, 1894–1985  
   Gelatin silver print  
   84.XM.706.15

7. **Stockholm**  
   1937  
   Andreas Feininger  
   American, born France, 1906–1999  
   Gelatin silver print  
   Gift of the Estate of Gertrud E. (Wysse) Feininger  
   2011.42.5

8. **Blackout in London, Street in a Bombed Area**  
   1941  
   Bill Brandt  
   British, 1904–1983  
   Gelatin silver print  
   84.XM.208.54

9. **New York**  
   1949  
   Val Telberg  
   American, born Russia, 1910–1995  
   Gelatin silver print  
   84.XM.228.17

10. **Boulder County, Colorado**  
    1984  
    Robert Adams  
    American, born 1937  
    Gelatin silver print  
    2003.462.8
LIGHTBULB MOMENTS

The impossibilities of yesterday become the accepted facts of today.

—L. Frank Baum, *The Master Key: An Electrical Fairy Tale* (Bowen-Merrill, 1901)

Lightbulbs are often emblematic of innovation. Indeed, the jolt of a great idea is sometimes symbolized by a glowing bulb above a character’s head. The recent phasing out of incandescent lighting in favor of new designs has brought greater attention to the types of illumination that are commonplace in our lives. Similarly, electrical inventions of the twentieth century prompted photographers of that era to document lighting they regularly or unexpectedly encountered. Some, such as Václav Chochola and Jaroslav Rössler, made intimate images of the lamps that played a crucial role in their profession.
1. **110th Street Station, Twilight, New York City**  
   1911  
   Karl F. Struss  
   American, 1886–1981  
   Platinum print  
   84.XM.168.3

2. **Light Fixture**  
   About 1925  
   Jaromír Funke  
   Czech, 1896–1945  
   Gelatin silver print  
   84.XM.148.86

3. **Lightbulb**  
   About 1930  
   Květoslav Trojna  
   Czech, active 1930s  
   Gelatin silver print  
   84.XP.147.24

4. **Sundown**  
   1935–40  
   Osamu Shiihara  
   Japanese, 1905–1974  
   Gelatin silver print  
   2008.56.1

5. **Pure Energy and Neurotic Man**  
   1940–41  
   Barbara Morgan  
   American, 1900–1992  
   Gelatin silver print  
   85.XM.75.1

6. **Reflector III**  
   1947  
   Václav Chochola  
   Czech, 1923–2005  
   Gelatin silver print  
   2009.98

7. **Lightbulbs**  
   About 1938  
   Fred G. Korth  
   American, born Germany, 1902–1983  
   Gelatin silver print  
   84.XM.15.13

8. **Self-Portrait, Paris**  
   About 1931–32  
   Jaroslav Rössler  
   Czech, 1902–1990  
   Gelatin silver print  
   84.XM.145.17
HARDWIRED

What are we going to do with our wires? This is a question that every thoughtful man has asked himself.

—Nelson W. Perry, “What are we going to do with our wires?” Electricity: A Popular Electrical and Financial Journal (February 1892)

As reliance on electricity expanded, so did the wiring needed to maintain the flow of current. Cities became overrun with cables crisscrossing the sky. Although darkness was no longer an impediment to nightlife, the capacity for constant illumination also gave rise to longer working hours and environmental concerns. Many photographers in the twentieth century began to focus more intensively on the elements and impact of electrical infrastructure. Several of the photographs on this wall call attention to the human and industrial costs of an increasingly wired society. In contrast, Man Ray’s 1931 image of a light-switch cord encircling the globe was commissioned by a French electric company as part of a promotional campaign to convince consumers to invest in electricity for home use.
1. Heart of the Turbine
   Negative, 1920s; print, 1930
   Lewis W. Hine
   American, 1874–1940
   Gelatin silver print
   84.XM.470.8

2. Mt. Fuji from a Train, Near Fujinomiya
   1955
   Gen Otsuka
   Japanese, 1912–1992
   Gelatin silver print
   Gift of Masako Otsuka
   2014.91.8

3. Electric Company Basement
   1930s
   André Kertész
   American, born Hungary, 1894–1985
   Gelatin silver print
   84.XM.706.23

4. Telephone Wires, Prague
   1922–23
   Jaroslav Rössler
   Czech, 1902–1990
   Gelatin silver print
   84.XM.146.13

5. High Voltage, Berlin
   1930s
   Martin Munkácsi
   American, born Hungary, 1896–1963
   Gelatin silver print
   84.XM.203.26

6. The World
   1931
   From the portfolio Électricité
   Man Ray
   (Emmanuel Radnitsky)
   American, 1890–1976
   Photogravure
   84.XM.1000.104

7. Switches and Sockets, Munich
   1933
   Willy Zielke
   Polish, 1902–1989
   Gelatin silver print
   84.XM.307.37

8. disCONNEXION #a5
   2005
   Danwen Xing
   Chinese, born 1967
   Chromogenic print
   2010.29.2

9. Park City, Utah
   1979
   Lewis Baltz
   American, 1945–2014
   Gelatin silver print
   Gift of Professors Joseph and Elaine Monsen
   92.XM.55.3
ELECTRICAL EXPERIMENTATION

Great are the powers of electricity. . . . It makes millionaires. . . . It hides in the air. It creeps into every living thing. . . . Energy begets energy.

—“Magnificent Power Celebration Banquet,” Buffalo Morning Express (January 1897)

Scientists experimented with electricity long before it was harnessed for everyday use. By the 1840s, electrical tests were conducted by researchers engaged in photographic investigations. Some scientific uses of electricity have been provocative, as in the case of Guillaume-Benjamin Duchenne’s experiments administering electric shocks to elicit a variety of facial expressions in his subjects. Other applications—such as the use of electrically generated flash photography to capture instantaneous action—furthered scientific discovery.

Many electrical devices made their public debut at world’s fairs. The Electrical Building at the 1893 Columbian Exposition showcased generators of all sorts, household appliances run on electricity, and General Electric’s “Tower of Light,” visible in the center of the photograph included here. The eighty-two-foot-high structure mesmerized visitors with eighteen thousand flashing bulbs.
1. And Then There Was Sound  
   1920s  
   George Watson  
   American, 1892–1977  
   Gelatin silver print  
   2001.65.15  

2. Study on How Men Walk, Man Wired with Lights, Walter Reed Hospital, Washington, D.C.  
   1946  
   Gjon Mili  
   American, born Albania, 1904–1984  
   Gelatin silver print  
   Gift of Nina and Leo Pircher  
   2009.138.9  

3. Testing Synchronized Flash Powder  
   1920  
   George Watson  
   American, 1892–1977  
   Gelatin silver print  
   2001.65.1  

4. Rubber Balloon Broken by a Bullet  
   1960  
   Harold Edgerton  
   American, 1903–1990  
   Gelatin silver print  
   Gift of Gus and Arlette Kayafas  
   93.XM.3.2  

5. Lightning Show  
   1895  
   Unknown Maker  
   Gelatin silver print  
   84.XM.452.4  

6. Vying with the Aurora Borealis—Spectacular Electrical Display, Panama-Pacific International Exposition, San Francisco  
   1915  
   Keystone View Company  
   Active 1890s–1940s  
   Gelatin silver print  
   B4.XC.729.153  

7. View of Electric Building, World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago  
   1893  
   Unknown Maker  
   Albumen silver print  
   B4.XM.1473.36  

8. Plate from the Book Mécanisme de la Physionomie Humaine (The Mechanism of Human Physiognomy)  
   1876 edition  
   Guillaume-Benjamin Duchenne  
   French, 1806–1875  
   Albumen silver print  
   B4.XB.1242.2.34
After Electric Dress

A Positive 4

Negatives, 2001; prints, 2002

Kunié Sugiura
Japanese, born 1942

Gelatin silver prints, toned

*After Electric Dress* reenacts a 1956 performance by the Japanese avant-garde artist Atsuko Tanaka. The lightbulbs strung together in the original event evoked the energy of technological advance even as they buzzed with the potential shock of close contact. Whereas the earlier performance used industrial lights, Sugiura wrapped her model in bulbs more commonly used as household decoration. Yet her image similarly renders electricity as a force of both empowerment and annihilation.

Purchased with funds provided by the Photographs Council

2015.3

LEFT TO RIGHT:

Maquettes/Light #4913
Maquettes/Light #5121
Maquettes/Light #5806
Prints, 1995; light boxes produced later

Naoya Hatakeyama
Japanese, born 1958

Gelatin silver prints in light boxes

2011.16.1–3
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