



James Clar  
False Awakenings

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JANE LOMBARD GALLERY

## Introduction

by Max Weintraub

For more than one hundred years artists have used light in their art as a way to represent the experience of changing social and cultural conditions. At the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth, artificial light was a quintessential hallmark of modernity; its representation in paintings embodied the industrial revolution, technological innovation and rapid social change. By the latter half of the twentieth century neon tubes and then fluorescent lighting functioned in art as, among other things, symbols of the consumerism and commodity culture of an increasingly postindustrial society.

But how might an artist living and working in the twenty-first century employ light, an artist living, that is, in the new millennium wherein light is not so much a symbol but a symptom of and indeed an instrument for the high-tech information age in which we live? How can an artist make manifest the abstractions of our contemporary everyday world—a technologized, globalized world in which vast data systems and diffuse communication networks are distilled to light emitting diodes (LEDs) and pixels on our computer screens and hand-held devices?

Enter James Clar, an artist who has for more than a decade used light to give form to those complex phenomena and vertiginous forces of our technologically integrated world that often remain invisible and overlooked. Indeed, Clar takes as the subject of his art technology itself in order to incisively explore its ubiquity in and dissociative effects on contemporary life. Consider his mixed-media sculpture *Lawnmower Man* (2016), for example, in which a video projection of a light switch toggling off and on appears to control the operation of an actual light bulb located on the wall nearby. Through the beguilingly simple act of having a simulated switch controlling a physical object, *Lawnmower Man*—which is named after the eponymous 1992 cult film about the transformational effects of virtual reality and computer-augmented intelligence on our consciousness—situates an ordinary, everyday event on a precarious fault line between the real and the virtual in a way that challenges our basic understanding of cause and effect. In doing so, Clar offers viewers a succinct commentary on the blurring of the distinction between simulated and real phenomena at a moment in history when computer-generated realities are becoming ever more deeply a part

of—and less distinguishable from—our day-to-day existence and experiences.

*Seek* (2014) is another work in which Clar, who studied film and animation as an undergraduate at New York University before attending NYU's Interactive Telecommunication's Program, explores the ways in which physical realities are becoming increasingly mediated by computer-generated ones. In *Seek* the artist has placed a contact microphone onto the hard drive of a personal computer. The attached microphone picks up the sounds made by the hard drive as it seeks and retrieves data recorded on its disk. These noises are then rerouted back into the computer and rendered into visual form using sound-reactive software on the computer's display screen. By offering up a data visualization of a real-time, closed system in which a computer generates its own possibilities and outcomes, *Seek* becomes an apt metaphor for how the virtual increasingly governs the real in our hyper technologized and globalized world.

If *Lawnmower Man* and *Seek* are works that gesture to the colonization of our lives by technology, they do so as part of Clar's broader

meditation on the impact of technology on us in the twenty-first century. It may not be easy to fully articulate what that impact on contemporary experience is, but that is also the point: at a moment in history when the flow of data and the reach of networks of communication and control are easier to recognize than they are to understand, Clar uses light and technology as his artistic medium not to make abstract phenomena visible so much as to make visible the increasing abstraction of phenomena.

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