

NGV TEMPORARY CLOSURE

From our team here at NGV, we're sending our best wishes to our community during this challenging time.

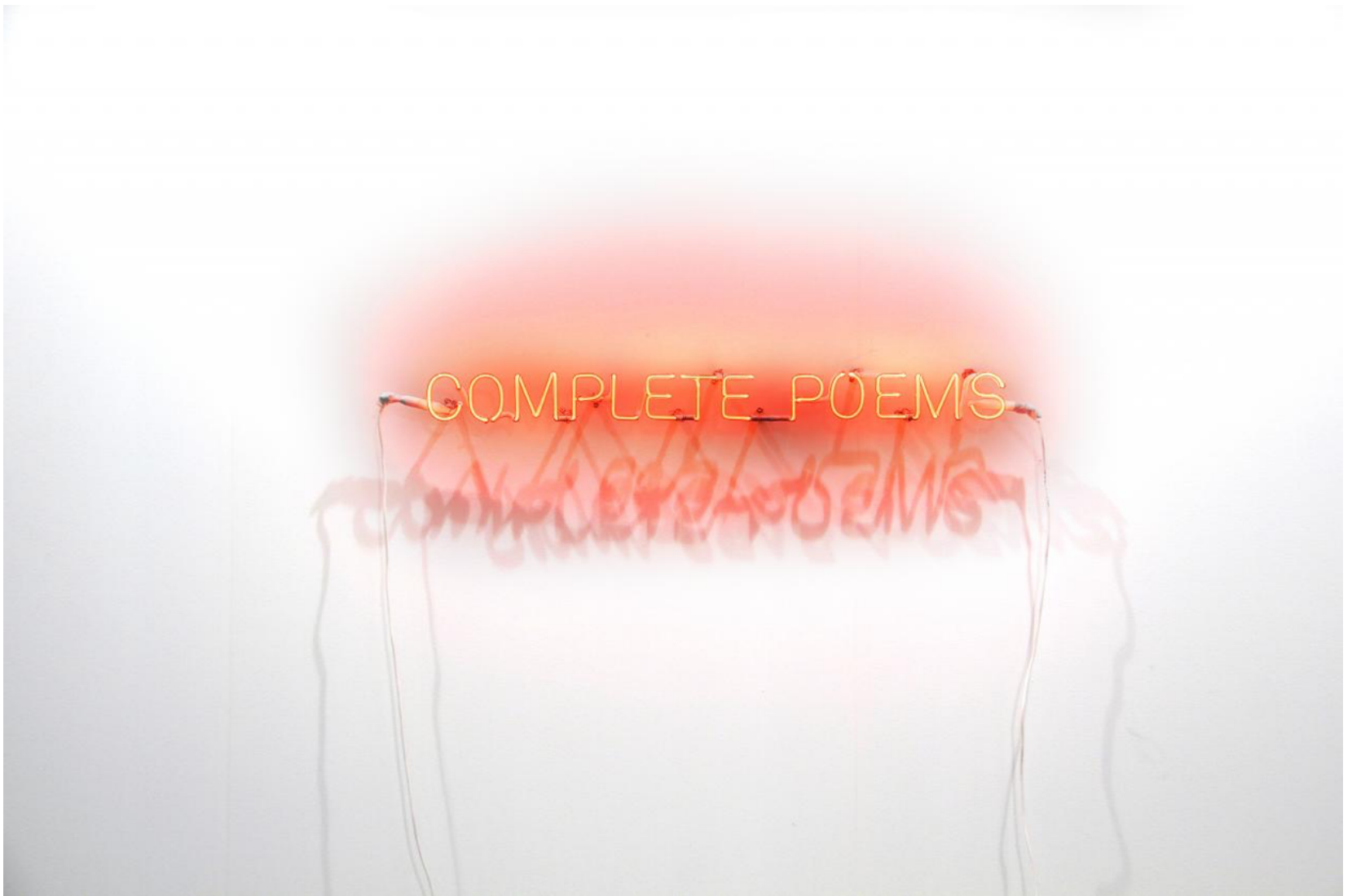
Following the latest public health directions from the Victorian Government, the NGV is temporarily closed to the public.

We encourage you to visit our website and follow our social media for updates.

We are grateful for the loyalty and understanding of the NGV community and hope to welcome you back soon.

During the last few decades, the use of artificial light as a medium in artwork has increased. This includes a range of different light sources such as halogen lights, fluorescent lights, light emitting diodes (LEDs) and neon lights. Out of these groups, neon lights differ from the rest, being one of the earliest technologies used to create light. Another point of difference is the manufacturing of neon lights are handmade, in contrast to the other mass-produced light sources. Neon tubes do not have filaments like incandescent lamps but uses rare gases to conduct the electric current. Neon belongs to the noble gases, a very stable group of elements, and their stability is that makes them suitable for use in lighting. The noble gases produce different colours when high voltage is applied. Pure neon produces a bright orange-red glow, whilst argon mixed with mercury gives blue and green. Helium gives a pinkish white, while krypton gives lilac, and xenon gives bright blue. When first invented, the colour options of neon were limited to the colours of the gases or mixtures of these. Nowadays however, a great variety of colours are possible using tinted glass or coloured fluorescent coatings inside the glass tubes. Examples from the NGV Collection are *Complete poems* by Jorge MÉNDEZ BLAKE where neon gas in clear tubes was used by the artist. Other works such as Reko Rennie's *Regalia* and Brook Andrew's work *Buuga-Buuga* on display in *Marking Time* show neon where argon gas is used with fluorescent coated tubes coloured in pink, yellow, red and blue.

Neon gas in clear glass tube



Argon and neon gas in coloured fluorescent tubes



Conservation perspective on Marking Time neon works

In *Regalia* Reko Rennie merges traditional symbols with contemporary technology. Here neon is used as the means to depict iconography of his Kamilaroi heritage, represented here by the diamond. Like most of his work, *Regalia* is autobiographical, with Rennie using neon to mimic his own hand-drawn designs, making the topic deeply personal. Reko Rennie's neon consist of three identical black Perspex boxes, each housing a bright pink neon tube shaped into the symbols: the crown, the diamond and the Aboriginal flag. In comparison to most neon works, installing *Regalia* in *Marking Time* was uncomplicated. The neon artwork is run using small transformers mounted to the back of the work, and can be hung on the wall in a similar manner to a painting. All the neon tubes are already connected and mounted, and the work can be plugged into mains power. The only additional requirements were digital timers to limit the running time and a wall cavity to hide the power cords. *Buuga-Buuga* by Brook Andrews on the other hand, was a complex installation and required multidisciplinary approach and thorough planning ahead of the display in *Marking Time*. In *Buuga-Buuga*, the artist uses animated neon clubs beating down to represent the enduring negative representation of Aboriginal people and culture. Andrew's works creates collision and subversion of cultures, combining text and images from Aboriginal culture with 'Western' neon lights. In animated neon works like *Buuga-Buuga*, multiple transformers are needed to turn different segments on and off sequentially. Most neon works operate using large high voltage transformers that can weight 5-10kg each. As separate transformers are needed for each of these sections, some artworks can have transformers with a total weight of 50kg or more. To house the electrical cables and transformers, a wall cavity with a lockable enclosure was required for the installation.

A neon specialist was brought in to assist with the install of *Buuga-Buuga*. With large works like this, pulling the cables through the wall can be challenging, as in this case, ten high voltage cables need to traverse the wall cavity to connect to the transformers. After the cables were in place, the neon holders and the neon tubes were mounted on the wall, before they were connected up to the aforesaid high voltage power cables. Being a functional item, maintenance of neon on display is necessary. During the exhibition, one of the yellow clubs in *Buuga-Buuga* started to look faint. This could either be caused by a fault with the transformer or the neon tube. As transformers have a certain life span, they can sometimes malfunction, however they can usually be replaced without much interruption to the display. In this case, the neon tube did not contain enough gas to light up and had to be taken to a neon fabricator for re-gassing. The electrode was removed, the glass heated to fuse the crack again before the neon was re-gassed. Several of the clubs have now been re-gassed, as the work is 20 years old. The conservation work to the neon does however not cause any visual change to the work as the technology stays the same. In comparison to other contemporary works which rely on mass produced elements, obsolescence of components is less of an issue. Skills shortage and availability of neon tubes in uncommon colours might be the biggest threat to the future of neon artworks. These are just some of the factors to consider when conserving any artworks, especially contemporary works, so they can illuminate for generations to come.



See some of our neon artworks in the *Marking Time: Indigenous Art from the NGV* virtual tour. ➤

Related exhibition

[Marking Time: Indigenous Art from the NGV ➤](#)