

Keith Sonnier Dis-Play II

Keith Sonnier has long been interested in experiential art environments and the effects of artificial light. *Keith Sonnier: Dis-Play II* brings one of the artist's signature early environments together with his film and video works. The presentation includes both the immersive installation *Dis-Play II* (1970) and *Film and Videos 1968–1977*, a selection by the artist of moving-image work that charts his decade-long exploration into media and sound.

After graduating in 1966 from the MFA program at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, Sonnier relocated to New York. Together with his future wife and fellow artist, Jackie Winsor, he quickly entered a circle of artists willing to experiment with the reduction that Minimalist forms brought to bear on the expansiveness of nontraditional materials. In New York they encountered the work of Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, and Eva Hesse and became loosely connected with explorations of alternative materials. These relationships allowed Sonnier to utilize the methodology of Minimalism within the greater frame of temporal installations and ephemeral art. Looking back over his career, he described his peers at that time as making art “that was defined by its defiance of the traditional idea of what could be considered art.”¹ Though Sonnier has not explicitly defined his practice within the rubric of Postminimalism, his work reverberates with Robert Rauschenberg's sense of the movement as a chronological and typological shift away from Minimalism toward a way of making that was more concerned with the conceptual, informational, and pictorial. This may explain Sonnier's inclusion in *9 at Leo Castelli* in 1968. Organized by his former professor Robert Morris and held at dealer Leo Castelli's warehouse space on Manhattan's Upper West Side, Morris used the exhibition to explore one of his key concepts: anti-form.² For Morris and the artists on view, anti-form took on a Postminimalist stance by considering the advocacy of material chance as opposed to its restriction. Sonnier was represented in the exhibition by three works from that same year—*Musteé*, *Rat-Tail Exercise*, and *Untitled*, a work in neon and cloth.

Though Sonnier's work bears a passing similarity to artists working contemporaneously with found and industrial materials, he reached beyond those categories to pursue materials that he called “psychologically loaded,” a reference to their psychic relationship to his childhood memories of rural, postwar Louisiana.³ His earliest works utilized materials notable not only for their ephemerality, but also for their strong connections to the quotidian—rendered invisible until brought to the fore as tactile instruments of sculpture. Cloth, flocking, latex, neon, and satin are mainstays in Sonnier's installations, yet are also commonplace fragments scattered about the home and the built environment. As he later recalled, “it was almost as if I was violating a

minimalistic principle: I was allowing the psychology, or the persona, to enter into the making.”⁴

Dis-Play II embraces the formal complexities of Sonnier's practice. It is a room-sized installation containing foam, glass, and plywood dispersed throughout. Sonnier scattered Day-Glo blue, green, orange, pink, and yellow pigment over these elements, the floor beneath, and the walls that surround them to create an experience of total immersion for the viewer and an index of the artist's manipulation of the space. The darkened gallery is punctuated by various types of electric light—such as black lights, strobe lights, and neon—distributed among the pigments on the floor and illuminating the space in unexpected ways.

Prior to 1970, Sonnier used pigments that were only visible with the presence of black light. In that year, he switched to Day-Glo pigments for the installation of *Fluorescent Room* at the Stedelijk van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, the Netherlands. The Day-Glo pigments that he has used since that time were first developed in the early 1940s and extensively utilized by the United States military during World War II in situations where calculated visibility was a life-or-death matter. Since then, fluorescent paint has been a medium often associated with the art of psychedelic counterculture and nightlife rather than either the military or avant-garde aesthetics. While other artists were using similar materials at this time—John Chamberlain experimented with foam for a body of sculptures beginning in the late 1960s, Barry Le Va shared an interest in scattered materials and undifferentiated forms, and Day-Glo-type colors can be seen in the work of numerous artists such as Lynda Benglis and Mary Heilmann—Sonnier's comprehensive use of these materials in combination with one another disorients and challenges the viewer.

Neon became an early and integral element of Sonnier's practice. During the mid-1960s, artists as diverse as Stephen Antonakos, Chryssa, Flavin, Lucio Fontana, François Morellet, and Martial Raysse were all beginning to work with artificial light and neon. Sonnier initiated his experiments with neon and argon lights in 1968. Unlike the commercially available fluorescent lights that Flavin sourced from local hardware stores, Sonnier sought out craftspeople and factory owners who allowed him to sketch out the individual trajectory of each work, which he then produced in Europe. The curving, looping, and swirling works that resulted were frequently paired with linear tubes and single bulbs to generate his signature illuminated style.

Sonnier's studio served as an important focal point for this work, as many of the installations that he made at this time originated in the studio as sets for films and

videos. By living in and working with these environments for an extended period of time, a reciprocal relationship developed between the film and sculptural work. The foam rubber shapes, glass, and mirrors that inhabited his studio in the late 1960s form the core vocabulary for the installations *Dis-Play II*, *Fluorescent Room*, *Ba-O-Ba Fluorescent*, and *Ba-O-Ba VII* (all from 1970), as well as performances at Castelli Warehouse and Galerie Ricke in Cologne.

There is a fluidity among the differing media that Sonnier was engaging with from the late 1960s through the 1970s. The various disciplines of performance, sculpture, and video merge into each other in a way that makes their content almost indistinguishable. For Sonnier, performance was the main part of the work, and videotaping the movement of the performers provided insight into the inner workings and the process of making a work of art. Sculpture, as far as he was concerned, was a remnant of the collaborative process.⁵ By 1977 Sonnier realized that if he wanted to continue making film and video, it would necessarily shift his role toward that of a director or a producer. Instead he chose to move away from video, and the works included in *Film and Videos 1968–1977* represent the full trajectory of his engagement with the moving image.

Keith Sonnier: Dis-Play II is presented on the first floor of Dia's Dan Flavin Art Institute, directly underneath a permanent installation of Flavin's iconic works in fluorescent light. Connecting Minimal and Postminimal practices through their material basis, the pairing of these two artists, both so associated with artificial light, brings new energy to the medium and displays a surprising range of outcomes.

notes

1. Keith Sonnier, “Keith Sonnier Interview with Barbara Bertozzi Castelli” (November 11, 2014), in *Keith Sonnier: Castelli Warehouse 1970/Castelli Gallery 2015* (New York: Castelli Gallery, 2015), p. 18.
2. See Robert Morris, “Anti Form,” *Artforum* 6, no. 8 (April 1968), pp. 33–35.
3. Sonnier, “Keith Sonnier Interview with Barbara Bertozzi Castelli,” p. 16.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
5. E-mail from the artist's studio, May 24, 2018.

Keith Sonnier was born in Mamou, Louisiana, in 1941. He graduated with a BA from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette in 1963 and received an MFA from Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, in 1966. Among Sonnier's professors at Rutgers were Roy Lichtenstein, Robert Morris, and many members of the Fluxus Group such as Allan Kaprow, Geoffrey Hendricks, and Robert Watts. In 1968 Morris included Sonnier in the brief-but-infamous exhibition *9 at Leo Castelli*. His practice has been the subject of solo exhibitions at prominent international venues including the Parrish Art Museum in Water Mill, New York (2018–19), Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin (2002–03), Kunsthau Bregenz in Austria (1999), Sprengel Museum in Hannover (1993), Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, DC (1989), Chrysler Museum of Art in Norfolk, Virginia (1988), Museum of Modern Art in New York (1971), and Stedelijk van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, Netherlands (1970). Sonnier lives and works in New York City and Bridgehampton, New York.

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checklist

Dis-Play II, 1970
Foam rubber, fluorescent powder, strobe light, black light, neon, and glass
Courtesy the artist

Film and Videos 1968–1977

Ju-Ju, 1968
Filmed performance, 12 min.

Performance and Formal Light and Color Studies, 1969–1973

Dis-Play, 1969
Black-and-white video, with sound, 10 min., 6 sec.

Blow, 1969
Color 16-mm film, with sound, 6-min. excerpt (10-min. total)

Painted Foot: Black Light, 1970
Black-and-white kinescope, with sound, 11-min. excerpt (16-min. total)

Rubdown, 1970
Black-and-white video, with sound, 11 min.

Positive-Negative, 1970
Black-and-white 16-mm film, silent, 10-min. excerpt (13-min. total)

Light Bulb and Fire, 1970
Black-and-white 16-mm film, with sound, 11-min., 54-sec. excerpt (20-min. total)

Negative, 1971
Black-and-white 16-mm film, with sound, 10 min.

Color Wipe, 1973
Color video, with sound, 12-min., 40-sec. excerpt (30-min. total)

The TV Hybrids, 1971

T-Hybrid-V-I, 1971
Color and black-and-white 16-mm film, with sound, 13 min.

T-Hybrid-V-II, 1971
Color and black-and-white 16-mm film, with sound, 3-min., 20-sec. excerpt (11-min. total)

T-Hybrid-V-III, 1971
Color and black-and-white 16-mm film, with sound, 3-min., 58-sec. excerpt (9-min. total)

T-Hybrid-V-IV, 1971
Color and black-and-white 16-mm film, with sound, 6-min., 27-sec. excerpt (12-min. total)

TV/Radio/Satellite Communication, 1972–1977

Mat Key and Radio Track, 1972
Color video, with sound, 12 min.

TV In and TV Out, 1972
Color video, with sound, 12 min.

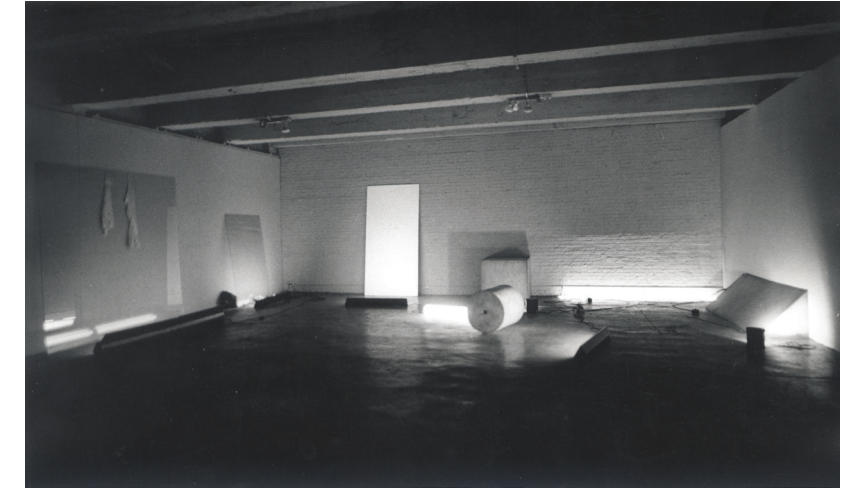
Animation I, 1973
Color video, with sound, 6-min., 49-sec. excerpt (14-min. total)

Animation II, 1974
Color video, with sound, 4-min. excerpt (25-min. total)

Send/Receive Satellite Network: Phase I, 1977
In collaboration with Liza Béar
Color video, with sound, 6-min., 36-sec. excerpt (25-min. total)

Send/Receive Satellite Network: Phase II, 1977
In collaboration with Liza Béar
Color video, with sound, 7-min., 2-sec. excerpt (30-min. total)

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