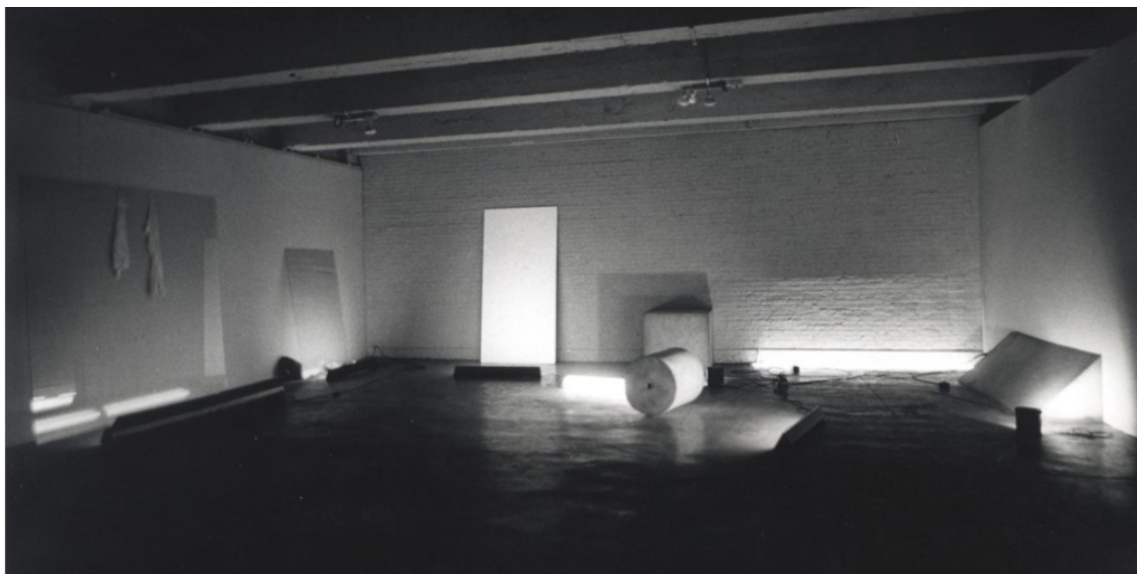


INTERVIEWS

KEITH SONNIER

July 10, 2018 • Keith Sonnier on his life, art, and shows in Long Island, New York



Keith Sonnier, *Dis-Play II*, 1970, mixed media, dimensions variable. Installation view, Leo Castelli Warehouse, New York, 1970. Photo: Peter Moore. Courtesy of Keith Sonnier Studio
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by Alex Bacon

This summer (and beyond), the East End of Long Island, New York, is a prime spot to experience the sculpture, installation, film, and drawing of Keith Sonnier. An extensive but not exhaustive survey, “Keith Sonnier: Until Today” at the Parrish Art Museum in Water Mill runs through January 27, 2019. Concurrently, the Dia Art Foundation’s Dan Flavin Art Institute in Bridgehampton has restaged, through May 29, 2019, Sonnier’s seminal environmental work *Dis-Play II*, 1970, which was first exhibited in the artist’s debut solo exhibition that year at the Leo Castelli Warehouse. Simultaneously, Tripoli Gallery in Southampton is exhibiting a selection of the artist’s recent work in “Keith Sonnier: Tragedy and Comedy” through July 29, 2018. Here, Sonnier gives some historical context for the various nodes that have comprised his diverse practice.

I WENT TO RUTGERS for my MFA in the mid-1960s and learned to make different kinds of work. I quickly transitioned from painting to sculpture. The first pieces I made were inflatable. I knew I could make these very eccentric, abstract boxes, and I wanted to connect them transparently, like Wonder Woman’s airplane. A fellow graduate student—Jackie Winsor—made the first ones for me. Jackie could make anything.

I ended up showing with Richard (Dick) Bellamy. We had shows at the Noah Goldowsky Gallery, where he had the back room. I showed there with Jo Baer, Lee Lozano, and Richard Serra, among others. I had already switched to making work out of flocking. Richard was casting lead against the wall, but I was doing floor-to-wall relationships with latex where I was casting the wall itself. I’d pull it off, and it was very seductive, like flesh. It looked like rat skin. That’s why I called one *Rat-Tail Exercise*. It had a very human, sort of anthropomorphic feel to it. So, although the shapes were very abstract, they looked very much like they belonged to the animal kingdom.

Dick said to me: "There's some interest in your work. You could show with Leo Castelli." When Leo decided to give me a show, quite frankly, the gallery uptown was just too small. I ended up in the warehouse space in Harlem on 108th Street. The pieces were made on-site. I built the whole "Ba-O-Ba" series, which was based on the golden section, there. I built seven of them also and did some of my first videotapes. Andy Warhol and Ileana Sonnabend bought the whole show. Some of that work is being restaged this summer at Dia's Dan Flavin Art Institute.

All of a sudden I had begun to identify with material and truly invent a form—language. When I made the pink satin piece, Philip Johnson bought it directly from Dick and, in the end, donated it to the Museum of Modern Art. He was quite fascinated by it and knew only he could donate it to MoMA and get away with it. They still haven't shown the piece. It's too delicate. In the end, thankfully, they loaned it for the Parrish show. I was known as a post-Minimalist, but I expanded the language for myself because I was open to other artists, and to European art. I met all these Europeans who came to New York. Blinky Palermo became a very good friend. I spent time in Germany as well. I attended Joseph Beuys's lectures, even though I couldn't understand a word.

I was very close to Liza Béar and Willoughby Sharp, and their magazine *Avalanche*. Liza and I did a satellite tape. We rented a NASA truck unit that we brought down near the World Trade Center, before it was built, to the beach. For a weekend we broadcast to the University of California, Davis and did interactive two-way videos we'd send and receive, and music and photography. It was very important to deal with technology, and I did a number of pieces like this, such as *Channel Mix*, which mixes what's actually being broadcast in real time. I remember doing another piece at MoMA PSI called *Quad Scan*, where the public phones were bugged and the audio was broadcast in the galleries. It was totally contraband stuff. Andy loved that piece and bought it. It's being shown in the Parrish show too.

I met Walter Hopps, and he sent me to India for the first time to participate in the 1971 triennial in New Delhi. I had another live sound piece that would record and broadcast the activity of the people walking past it and making comments on the show. I was fascinated by the public address systems in India, because they reminded me of my childhood in Louisiana when Huey P. Long was running for governor. He would drive around campaigning in old Cadillacs fitted with PA systems.

Eventually my career shifted toward doing work for foundations, hotels, and airports. I got a fabulous commission for the Munich airport, where the audience moves through the artwork because it was built along the escalators. It got me to begin to develop art where you would be encompassed by sound or color. You'd walk in front of the "Ba-O-Ba" works and see yourself reflected in the glass, so you were in the artwork. These are things I fed into the commissioned work. It benefitted me greatly and helped me introduce a different form—language: to think of color as a solid form.

