

#keepsharingart #onlineart

#galleriafumagalliwithyou

Since February 2018 **Galleria Fumagalli** has the pleasure to represent in Italy American artist **Keith Sonnier**, among the first and most significant representatives of a generation that pioneered a radical approach to art.

We wish to pay homage to him with a **focus on his work** featuring extracts from selected texts and archival images kindly shared by the Studio Sonnier and coming from the gallery's archive.

At the end of this focus, you will find the link to access the excerpt of the **video *Positive-Negative***, filmed in 1970 in the **Medical Studio at the University of California, San Diego**.

## KEITH SONNIER



Keith Sonnier, 2013. Ph. Caterina Verde. Courtesy Keith Sonnier Studio

Keith Sonnier was born in Mamou, Louisiana, in 1941. He lives and works in New York City and Bridgehampton, New York. After graduating with a B.A. from the University of Southwestern Louisiana, Lafayette in 1963, and receiving an M.F.A. from Rutgers University in 1966, **he began experimenting with industrial and ephemeral materials ranging from latex and satin, to found objects, transmitters and video. In 1968 he began creating sculptures using incandescent light and then including neon, which quickly became a defining element of his work, with the aim of giving new form to light and new meaning to the material.**

Sonnier often works in series, some of which he has continued to develop over the course of his career. Elements of the first experimental works are often recognisable in subsequent sculptures and architectural interventions.

Keith Sonnier's work has been exhibited in important institutions worldwide. Among the most recent solo shows: NOMA, New Orleans (2019), DIA/Dan Flavin Art Institute, Bridgehampton NY and Parrish Art Museum, Water Mill NY (2018), Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford (2017), Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain, Nice (2015), BMW Museum, Munich (2012), Louisiana Art and Science Museum, Baton Rouge (2010), Rathausgalerie, Munich and Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin (2002). The artist took part in over 360 group exhibitions: among them it is worth mentioning the participations in the Venice Biennale (1982,

1976, 1972) and Documenta, Kassel (1972).

In 1969 the artist was part of the iconic exhibition *Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form* at the Kunsthalle Bern, curated by Harald Szeemann who brought together 69 European and American artists, such as Carl Andre, Joseph Beuys, Marinus Boezem, Jannis Kounellis, Sol LeWitt, Richard Long, Mario Merz, Bruce Nauman, Dennis Oppenheim, Gilberto Zorio, and many more pioneers of contemporary art. The landmark show, which went down in history for the curator's radical approach to exhibition practice conceived as a linguistic medium, marked the beginning of many new approaches and researches in the art field that have characterised artistic production up to today: Body Art, Minimalism, Land Art, Arte Povera, Conceptualism.



Exhibition view of *Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form*, curated by Harald Szeemann, Kunsthalle Bern, 1969. Courtesy Keith Sonnier Studio

## EARLY EPHEMERAL WORK

Since the beginning of his career Keith Sonnier has abandoned conventional sculptural materials in favour of those that offered a more immediate sensorial experience.

In the mid-60s he began experimenting with industrial and ephemeral materials to create untraditional compositions. Using cloth, satin, cheesecloth and a variety of different kinds of inexpensive materials, Sonnier, along with his contemporaries, Eva Hesse, Barry Le Va, Bruce Nauman, Richard Serra, Joel Shapiro, Richard Tuttle, and Jackie Winsor, called all previous concepts of sculpture into question.



Keith Sonnier, *Untitled, (Cloth Floor Series)*, 1967 ca, satin, cheesecloth, wood. Courtesy Keith Sonnier Studio

His manipulation of materials appealed to touch as much as to sight. The early series of constructed objects solicited the body's perception of volume, depth, and especially, layering.

«Before I was making work based on light and technology, I was really making work based on the five senses; on how things felt; how things smelled; how things could be heard.» K.S.



Keith Sonnier, *Mustee II*, (*Cloth Series*), 1968, latex, flocking, string. Courtesy Keith Sonnier Studio

## EARLY STUDIO ENVIRONMENTS

Besides investigating unconventional materials, Keith Sonnier was also interested in the way people physically interacted with the artwork and perceive the space, given extreme lighting conditions.

He created environmental installations of foam rubber, fluorescent powder, strobe light, black light, and neon, where the viewer became part of the work: while walking around the darkened space between the glowing foam elements, their perception of colour, space and body changes by the effect of the black light combined with the fluorescent powder.



Keith Sonnier, *Dis-Play II*, 1970, installation view at the Dan Flavin Art Institute, Bridgehampton, New York, 2018-2019. Ph. Caterina Verde. Courtesy Keith Sonnier Studio

In this kind of installation the artist also involved television to record different aspects of the work in different lighting conditions, and most of all to film people moving through sculpture, as a natural extension of the work.

He also used mirrors facing each other, to create an "infinity chamber": it was a way to show how the body interacted with that channel of infinite space.



Keith Sonnier, *Early Studio Set (Infinity Channel)*, 1969, mirrors, strobe light, incandescent light, environmental dimensions. Ph. Richard Landry. Courtesy Keith Sonnier Studio

## NEON WORK

In 1968 Keith Sonnier began creating wall sculptures using incandescent light and then experimenting with neon. Using copper tubing as a template, Sonnier began sketching lines, arches and curves ultimately realised in glass tubing enclosed neon. The linear quality of this chemical element allowed him to draw in space with light and colour that interacted with the surrounding architecture.

«I was always very interested in colour, and [light] was a way for me to create in colour sculpture that was not painted, not "polychrome" sculpture, in other words. I began to create a form of light with true colour that was not applied and so I was naturally very drawn to neon because it was a gas, a trapped gas, which in almost Duchampian terms, is very interesting.»  
K.S.



Exhibition view of Keith Sonnier. *Light Works. 1968 to 2017*, Galleria Fumagalli, Milano, 2018.  
Ph. Antonio Maniscalco. Courtesy Galleria Fumagalli

«As a material, it was psychologically very loaded and erotic and sexy in a way, and this sensual aspect of it interested me too. In contrast, Bruce Nauman was involved in the calligraphic aspects of working with neon which I was never drawn to. I did do a series of work that was based on Chinese calligraphy, but my interest was in the gestural quality of it, not in the physical signage itself.» K.S.



Exhibition view of *Keith Sonnier. Light Works. 1968 to 2017*, Galleria Fumagalli, Milano, 2018.  
Ph. Antonio Maniscalco. Courtesy Galleria Fumagalli

«Just as Carl Andre eliminated the base and made the floor the sculpture, I think that I eliminated the wall. I created the volumetric three-dimensional colour space as a sculpture without a wall and without a base, [making] a gaseous, electrically charged volume... treating light as a volume, as a solid instead of just an atmospheric condition.» K.S.



Exhibition views of *Keith Sonnier: Until Today*, Parrish Art Museum, Water Mill, NY, 2018.  
Ph. courtesy Galleria Fumagalli

## ARCHITECTURAL INTERVENTIONS

Over the years, Sonnier has explored the possibilities of neon also creating large-scale architectural projects.

In 2002 he made a temporary installation for the exterior of Mies van der Rohe's Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin, entitled *Ba-O-Ba Berlin*. Drawing its name from a colloquial term of the Cajun dialect – meaning "moonlight" or "bathed in light" – the project was part of the *Ba-O-Ba* series, begun in 1969 and continuing in various guises to this day.

The clear triad of red, yellow and blue light played on the translucency of Mies van der Rohe's architecture, spreading across the interior and exterior of the building. Light flowed freely through spaces, following the grid of the rectangular architectural complex, and producing – especially at dusk – a fascinating dialogue between the pure steel architecture and the brilliant glowing neon colours.



Keith Sonnier, *Ba-O-Ba Berlin*, 2002, site-specific installation, Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin, 2002-2003.  
Ph. Christian Gahl. Courtesy Keith Sonnier Studio

Among the several architectural interventions, it is worth mentioning also Sonnier's first public commission for a religious patron. In the glazed tower of the chapel of St. Franciscus in Steyr-Resthof (Austria), the artist placed twelve neon loops in three different colours to span the glass cube, like free-floating, luminous tracks of a drawing in the air.

The architectural light installation evoked a subtle sense of openness and spirituality and at the same time, became a recognisable landmark, a monument.



Keith Sonnier, *Tears for St. Francis*, 2002, the new Catholic Church of St. Francis, Steyr-Resthof. Ph. Florian Holzherr. Courtesy Keith Sonnier Studio



## DRAWINGS

In his practice, Sonnier always begins with a small concept drawing on paper, then reproducing it on the computer to see an actual simulation that puts the art directly in the context of the architecture.

Drawings are the most sincere proof of the initial concept and show a unique poetic in their refined organic, curving forms, which Sonnier favours also in sculpture.



Keith Sonnier, *Atchafalaya* (*Cat Doucet Series*), 1996, charcoal, coloured flocking on rag paper, 216x153 cm. Courtesy Keith Sonnier Studio and Galleria Fumagalli



Keith Sonnier, *Okalouza* (*Cat Doucet Series*), 1996, charcoal, coloured flocking on rag paper, 216x153 cm. Courtesy Keith Sonnier Studio and Galleria Fumagalli

The drawings from the *Cat Doucet* series (from which he derived a series of neon sculptures) were inspired by the moniker of a legendary sheriff of Saint Landry Parish who was Sonnier's father's contemporary. For his re-election campaign of 1952 Doucet traveled the parish in a station wagon with four large speakers mounted on its roof along with a cut-out figure of a cat, dark against outlining, sporting a cartoonish grin and long curving tail.

As in other cases, the work is imbued with the Franco-American, but also Caribbean culture of Mamou, Sonnier's birthplace in Louisiana, inhabited by a bilingual community that speaks the Cajun dialect of early Acadian French, along with American English.

«I had a very different sense of America, because although I was an American, my Acadian (Cajun) heritage left me a little on the outside; and I saw America from a different perspective.» K.S.



Keith Sonnier, *Cat Doucet Drawing X (Cat Doucet Series)*, 1995, marker on graph paper, 40,5x23 cm.  
 Courtesy Keith Sonnier Studio and Galleria Fumagalli

## NEW WORK

In the 2010s Keith Sonnier has resumed materials like foam rubber, wood and flocking that he had already used in his very early ephemeral work.

Among the most recent works, the *Wood and Encaustic Series* shows solid blocks of colour made from flocking and encaustic paint on singular or multiple, cut-out, organic, wooden shapes, which bring to mind natural, animalistic and anthropomorphic associations.

The wooden components are either joined together with hinges or stacked in part to form animated organic shapes that sometimes lay flat on the surface of the wall and sometimes extend out in butterfly fashion.



Keith Sonnier, *Turbo (Wood and Encaustic Series)*, 2019, cedar, encaustic and flocking, 84x70x7 cm.  
 Courtesy Keith Sonnier Studio



Keith Sonnier, *Tad Pole (Wood and Encaustic Series)*, 2019, cedar, encaustic and flocking, 74x46x3 cm.  
 Courtesy Keith Sonnier Studio



## STREAMING

On the occasion of this focus, Galleria Fumagalli shares an excerpt of the video *Positive-Negative*, filmed in 1970 in the Medical Studio at the University of California, San Diego, and projected during alive performance in the Art Department there.

It was the first tape Sonnier shot in a television studio with the help of technicians and elaborate mixing equipment. Two large studio cameras frame the performer's head rotating full circle so that complementary views of it are seen simultaneously, on each half of the split screen, one in positive and the other in negative. As the performer turns, the cameras independently pick up her face and the back of her head, or her left right profiles, so that a constant binary relationship is maintained. Camera solarisation causes image disintegration and, at the end, superimpositions alter figure-ground relations.

The video had been never shown in Italy until January 2019, when the Fondazione Converso presented it in Milan on the ground floor of the iconic location of the Torre Velasca, along with other six early videos by Sonnier.



[WATCH THE VIDEO →](#)

*Positive-Negative (2 minute excerpt)*  
1970  
b&w, 12 min., silent  
Courtesy Keith Sonnier Studio

---

To learn more about the artist's work, visit [Galleria Fumagalli's website](#) and [Keith Sonnier's website](#).

Texts partially drawn from the conversation between Keith Sonnier and Alexander Pühringer included in the catalog *Keith Sonnier. Environmental Works 1968-99*, published on the occasion of the artist's solo exhibition held at Kunsthau Bregenz (2 October - 28 November 1999), Kunsthau Bregenz, 1999; from the text *In the Cosmos of Colors. Keith Sonnier in conversation with Joachim Jäger* included in the catalog for the Light-Installation *Ba-O-Ba Berlin* by Keith Sonnier at the Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin (21 November 2002 - 16 February 2003), SMB-DuMont, 2002; from the text *Wet* by Richard Shiff included in the catalog of the exhibition *Keith Sonnier. Elysian Plain + Early Works* held at Pace Gallery, New York (24 January - 22 February 2014).

---