

The New York Times  
1 August 2018  
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The New York Times

## Stripes and Tangles of Neon, Under the Hamptons Sun



Keith Sonnier's "Dis-Play II" (1970/2018). The installation, at the Dan Flavin Art Institute, involves illumination by five colored neons — and by black lights and strobes.

2018 Keith Sonnier/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Photo: Bill Jacobson

by Jason Farago

WATER MILL, N.Y. — Light is a thing of ungraspable nature, sometimes a particle, sometimes a wave. And for artists of the 1960s, light became a third thing: a material. Dan Flavin began making sculptures with commercial fluorescent bulbs in 1963, and spent three decades lighting galleries, warehouses, even a church. In '60s West Germany, artists of the Zero group produced spotlit installations of spinning discs or suspended mirrors; in France, François Morellet and his colleagues at the Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel staged participatory events with neons or strobe lights; and in California, James Turrell, Robert Irwin and other artists loosely grouped into a Light and Space movement crafted immersive environments illuminated with soft, even pinks and blues.

The New York artist Keith Sonnier, 77, is another pioneer — of a new, luminescent art, though where Flavin and Mr. Turrell preferred pared-down simplicity, Mr. Sonnier favors conjunctions of neon with panes of glass, found objects and technological instruments. He appeared in "When Attitudes Become Form," Harald Szeemann's famed 1969 exhibition of postminimal and conceptual art, as well as the epochal Documenta of 1972, and he has not stopped exhibiting since, though attention from American museums has been a few shreds thinner than for some other 1960s pioneers. Many of his most visible works of recent decades have been public commissions. (If you have ever been stuck waiting for your luggage at the Fort Lauderdale, Fla., baggage claim, you will know Mr. Sonnier's neon curves and straightaways.)



Now Mr. Sonnier is basking in the neon glow of a season devoted to his art on the East End of Long Island. "Keith Sonnier: Until Today," at the Parrish Art Museum here in Water Mill, is his first American museum retrospective, with more than three dozen works (all that can fit in the museum's difficult gallery spaces and central hallway), including not just neon works but intriguing sculptures in satin, rubber and bamboo. A few minutes away in Bridgehampton, the Dan Flavin Art Institute — a permanent installation administered by the Dia Art Foundation — has been supplemented with one of Mr. Sonnier's most significant early works, uniting light, glass, objects and video-documented performance. Both are on view until next year, long after the Hamptons social scenesters will have decamped to New York or continued to Aspen.

Mr. Sonnier was born in 1941 in Mamou, La., the heart of Cajun country. After college in Louisiana he came north to do an M.F.A. at Rutgers University, where his professors included the sculptor Robert Morris. Soon he moved to New York, where he and his future wife, the artist Jackie Winsor, encountered Flavin's light works, but also a whole group of younger artists pushing back against minimalism. In late 1968, Mr. Morris invited him to appear in an exhibition at Leo Castelli Gallery that was one of the first attempts to synthesize what would variously be called "anti-form" or "postminimal" sculpture.

Alongside Bruce Nauman, Eva Hesse and Richard Serra, Mr. Sonnier's contribution was "Rat Tail Exercise" (1968), one of the earliest works at the Parrish. It comprises two horizontal strings, about eight feet long, pinned to the wall and affixed at regular intervals with suspended vertical cords of rubber or latex, as well as two longer strings extending diagonally from the supports to the floor. Its humble materials, shaped largely by gravity, challenge the conception of the artist as supreme maker, and lightly flocked fibers on the strings give it an organic character quite unlike the chilly perfection of his Minimalist forebears.



**Keith Sonnier's "Ba-O-Ba I (Ba-O-Ba Series)," (1969), at the Parrish Art Museum. Mr. Sonnier first used neon in 1968, and by 1969 it had become his key compositional tool.**

2018 Keith Sonnier/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Maccarone Gallery

Mr. Sonnier first used neon in 1968, and by 1969 it had become his key compositional tool — glowing but only faintly radiant, and counterbalanced by glass or aluminum panels (often), or by mirrors or wire meshes (occasionally). In his “Ba-O-Ba” series of sculptures, one of which is here at the Parrish, linear neons of red, yellow, purple or teal traverse panes of glass, casting a soft light on the surface, like a heavily inked brush stroke that diffuses into calligraphy paper. Quite unlike Flavin’s reliance on standard neon bulbs acquired at any old hardware store, Mr. Sonnier insisted on custom neons, often crafted in Europe. They are daintier and far spindlier, and also have a sensual character: As early as 1912, Marcel Duchamp wrote of “illuminating gas” as the lubricant of his magnum opus “The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even.”

The stimulating room-sized installation “Dis-Play II,” made in 1970 and restaged at the Dia’s Flavin Institute, unites light and sculptures into a psychedelic environment far, far removed from the Apollonian extremes of minimal art. Mr. Sonnier slathered a cylinder, a cube, a triangular prism, and panes of glass and plywood in Day-Glo fluorescent paints, and the luminescent pigments of blue, orange and hot pink stain the environment and clump where the solids meet the floor. They are illuminated not only by five colored neons but by black lights and strobes.

If you imagine this groovy environment as a stage for Vietnam protests or a ketamine trip, think again. As you’ll see in a video projection here, “Dis-Play II” and other installations were stages for Mr. Sonnier’s performances with colleagues and friends, who would jump or plié in front of the illuminated solids, or raise and lower the Day-Glo-slicked panels like a seesaw. The videos are fascinating documents that reveal an unknown side of Mr. Sonnier, though the pounding strobe lights will make it hard to watch more than a few minutes of the two-hour loop.

Mr. Sonnier went on to make wall-mounted sculptures of painted bamboo, whose symmetric arrangements of diagonal rods were inspired partly by a long stay in India in 1980-81. They seem to have set the stage for his later free-standing sculptures in aluminum, such as the excellent “Trois Pattes” (1984), a nine-foot construction of aluminum tubes that resembles a simplified praying mantis, souped up with a radio that, when I beheld it, was twittering the chorus of U2’s “Pride (In the Name of Love).” The ambient sound affirms that for Mr. Sonnier, what matters principally is not illumination but transmission: whether of light from the neon spindles, of performers’ dance moves in the videos, or else of information, as in a readymade assemblage, from 1975, of ham radios that crackle in the Parrish’s central hallway.

Mr. Sonnier grew too enamored of assemblage as he got older, and several flat-footed works from the 1990s and 2000s, in which neons entangle found objects like a tomato cage or a plastic canister of Murphy Oil, appear as gaudy Rauschenberg reboots. Neon continues to grip him, and one appeal of his works in light today, when many younger artists have gone for full-out theatricality, is their ad hoc, unassuming spirit. At the Parrish, skeins of neon in lavender or sea-foam green weave among the building’s wooden rafters. And in the show’s largest work, “Rectangle Diptych” (2013), neons commune benevolently with the Parrish’s massive south-facing picture window.

The work was not made for this location, but Mr. Sonnier’s art fits in easily wherever you place it. It is now completed by your own faint reflection, plus that of the everlasting traffic on Route 27.