

HYPERALLERGIC

ART

Art Between Form and Anti-Form

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Richard Kalina August 8, 2018



Keith Sonnier, installation view, the Dan Flavin Art Institute, Bridgehampton, New York (© Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, photo by Bill Jacobson Studio, New York)

SOUTHHAMPTON and BRIDGEHAMPTON, Ny — Two exhibitions opening simultaneously at the Parrish Art Museum in Southampton, NY ([*Keith Sonnier: Until Today*](#)), and the Dia Art Foundation/Dan Flavin Art Institute in nearby Bridgehampton ([*Keith Sonnier: Dis-Play II*](#)), allow viewers to explore a wide range of sculptural and installation works, along with early video and sound

pieces by one of the most influential artists of his generation.

Keith Sonnier was associated with a group of sculptors gathered loosely in the late 1960s under the headings of Postminimalism and anti-form. Those artists, virtually all of who remain productive today, challenged accepted norms of traditional abstract sculpture, as well as the premises of the nearly contemporaneous Minimalists — whose serially monolithic “specific objects,” as

Donald Judd referred to them, also posed a threat (at least for a while) to established taste. Sonnier, along with Lynda Benglis, Eva Hesse, Bruce Nauman, Jackie Winsor, Barry Le Va, and Richard Tuttle, among others, pushed back against certain givens: hard, permanent, expensive (or expensive looking) materials; fixed configurations; standard push-pull Bauhaus composition; and monumentality. Rejecting these conventions — laden with the implications of straight male power and entitlement — they opted instead for the soft, the variable, the modest in scale, the temporary, and the materially banal and unexceptional: the crummy, yet evocative stuff of ordinary life rather than welded or machined steel, stone or bronze. Process was to be emphasized; the look of the offhand, playful, and casual was cultivated, and associations with life and the world welcomed. These premises might seem common and self-evident now, but they weren't 40 or 50 years ago, even if there were collateral sculptural stirrings in the work of Fluxus and the Italian Arte Povera artists.



Installation view of Keith Sonnier:
Until Today, Parrish Art Museum,
Water Mill, New York (photo by Gary
Mamay)



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Sonnier is best known for his work with neon tubing, a material typically found in signage, but under-used in fine arts. Despite its general air of commercial chintziness, it lends itself remarkably well to expressive and aesthetically engaging ends. As opposed to rigid forms, as in the fluorescent bulbs favored by Dan Flavin, neon is extraordinarily malleable, a versatile means for drawing in space. Although it is spatially bounded by its glass tubing, its chromatic quality is ever-shifting as it casts a gradually diffusing aura of color; this color is composed of pure light rather than pigment and can thus add to and intermix with the glow of nearby tubes of a different hue. Neon tubing is a powerful visual form-maker — and, with its ready adaptation to text, a potential linguistic channel. As opposed to the planes and volumes of most sculptural materials, its fine lines

consume little actual space, which allows it to stand alone or be combined with other materials without crowding them.



Installation view of *Keith Sonnier: Until Today*, Parrish Art Museum, Water Mill, New York (photo by Gary Mamay)

The Parrish show includes works that juxtapose neon with a variety of other forms and objects: incandescent bulbs and fixtures (“Neon Wrapping Incandescent II,” 1968); glass sheets (“Ba-O-Ba I,” 1969); aluminum plates (“Cycladic Extrusion I,” 1988); found objects (“USA: War of the Worlds,” 2004 and “Los La Butte,” 1990); and sinister, vaguely threatening electronic gear (“Syzygy Transmitter,” 1992).

Invariably Sonnier gives a prominent place to the connectors, transformers, and, especially, black electric wires that control the lights — all loose and floppy things that hang and fall where they may, each elegant in their offhandedness.



Keith Sonnier, “Ganesh” (from the *India Series*) (1981), bamboo, holi color, and enamel, 36 x 27 x 12 inches (collection of the artist, photo © Caterina Verde)

While Sonnier has worked with neon throughout his career, his interests have been wide-ranging, and the Parrish and Dia exhibitions provide a well-rounded sampling of his production. (Examples of his fluent work in drawing are currently on view at the [Tripoli Gallery](#) in Southampton.) He attended graduate school in the mid-’60s at Rutgers — then home bases for Pop Artists such as Roy Lichtenstein and George Segal, as well as key members of the Fluxus Group, and, importantly, Allan Kaprow, the pioneer of installation, performance art and happenings. Sonnier has lived ever since in New York City and on the east end of Long Island. Yet, key to his overall approach to art and life is his upbringing in Cajun Louisiana and his

ongoing connection to it its very distinct culture: French speaking, Catholic (of

the easygoing and flexible variety), humorous, and musical — imbued with a love of dancing, parades, spicy, tasty food, and good times. Sonnier's parents were progressive, and, like many Cajuns, friendly with people in the black community. (His mother, for example, knew the great zydeco musician Clifton Chenier, and would ask him to play at the local dances.) This open-mindedness inspired in Sonnier a love of travel and a desire to immerse himself in other cultures, leading to extended stays in Europe, Asia, and South America. The Parrish show includes fine examples of his bamboo sculptures made in India ("Sarasvasti" and "Ganesh," both 1981), as well as carved, painted, and slotted wooden sculptures inspired by visits to Japan and Indonesia ("Aizen-Myoo," "Suku-Na-Biko," and "Yamoto," all 1984), and a painted and stained bamboo and timber piece ("Ktut," 1983).



Keith Sonnier, "KTUT" (from the *Ubud Series*) (1983), timber, bamboo, and oil-based plant, 47 x 40 x 20 inches (collection of the artist, photo © Caterina Verde)



Keith Sonnier, "Yamoto" (from the *Tokobashira Series*) (1984), camphor, Chinese quince, cedar, azalea, pigment, and wax, 49 x 84 x 32 inches (courtesy of the artist and the National Exemplar)

Gallery, New York, photo © Caterina Verde)

Sonnier, who is comfortable with fabrication and advanced technology explored interactive video and sound work early on, and has regularly produced complex public artworks in neon. But he is just as conversant in the humble and handmade: flocking pulled off the wall; flimsy string and rubber pieces; and, in one of the Parrish show's most subtly striking pieces, the floor-based "Untitled" (1967), a length of silvery satin (salvaged from one of his mother's dresses) stretched into a narrow 10-foot length of repeated identical loaf-shaped forms. Installation work has formed an important part of his output from the beginning. Some of it is fixed and architectural, but other works are much looser, performative, random, and dizzily playful. *Dis-Play II* (1970), a large, darkened, psychedelically-tinged installation at Dia, features a nicely disorienting array of black lights and flickering strobes, neon, and scattered fluorescent Day-Glo pigments; as well as foam rubber, glass, and plywood — all made even more complex by a looping presentation of jumpy videos.



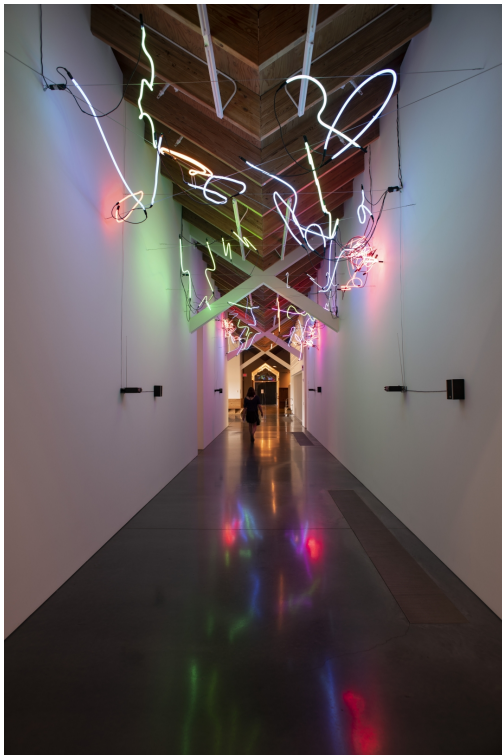
Keith Sonnier, "Untitled" (from the *File Series*) (1967), satin over foam rubber on wood with felt, 120 x 4 x 5 inches (The Museum of Modern Art, New York; gift of Philip Johnson, 526.1970)

As these exhibitions make abundantly clear, Keith Sonnier is an artist of true verve and vitality — engaged and highly productive for over 50 years. While no artist can do everything, know everybody and be everywhere, Sonnier has given it a shot, and in the process, he has managed to shine a light into some of the most interesting artistic corners of his times.

Keith Sonnier: Until Today continues at the Parrish Art Museum (279 Montauk Highway, Water Mill, New York) through

January 27, 2019.

Keith Sonnier: Dis-Play II continues at the Dia Foundation's Dan Flavin Art Institute (23 Corwith Avenue, Bridgehampton, New York) through May 26, 2019.



Installation view of *Keith Sonnier: Until Today*, Parrish Art Museum, Water Mill, New York (photo by Gary Mamay)



Keith Sonnier, "Dis-Play II" (1970/2018), installation at the Dan Flavin Art Institute, Bridgehampton, New York (© Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, photo by Bill Jacobson Studio, New York)

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