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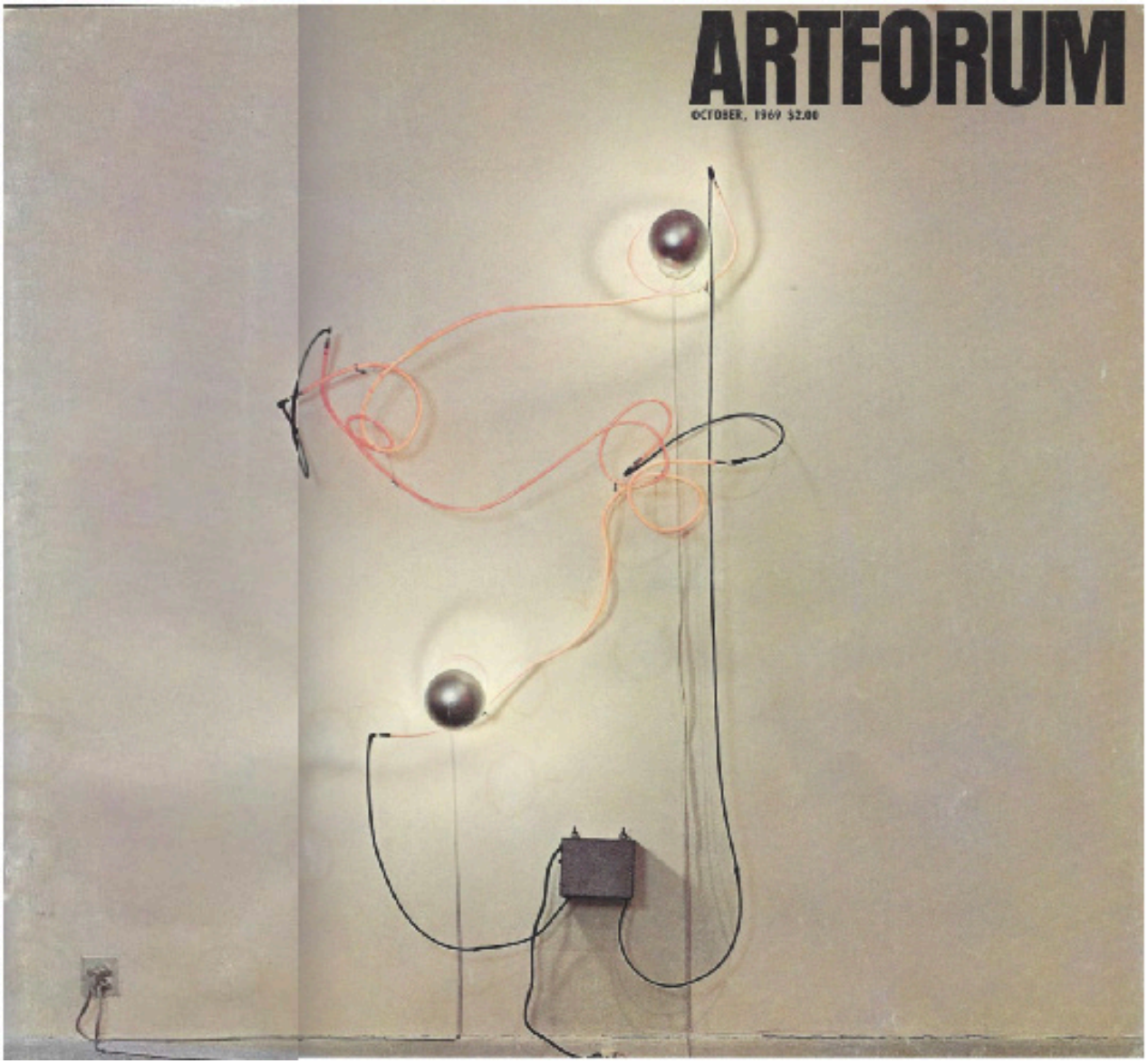
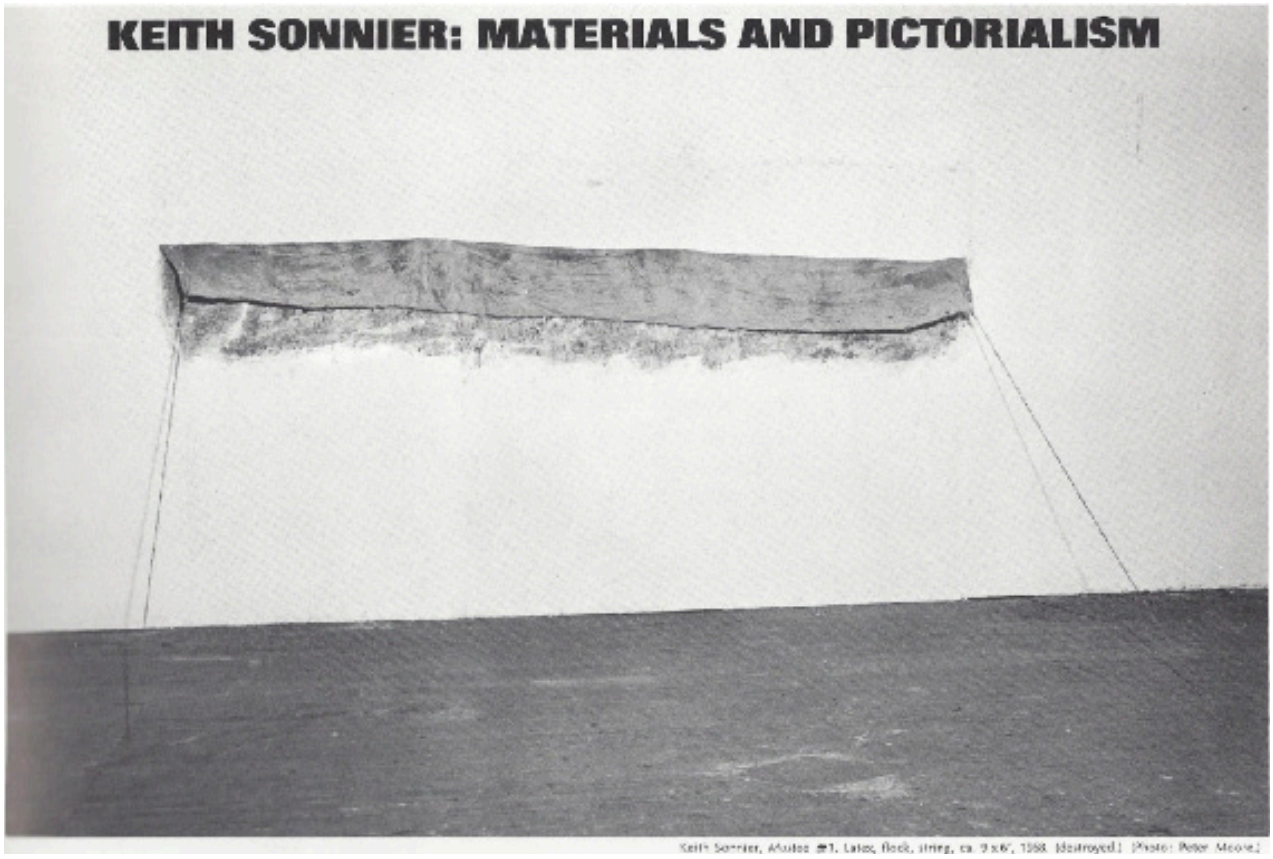


KEITH SONNIER: MATERIALS AND PICTORIALISM



Keith Sonnier, *Mulas #1*, Latex, flock, string, ca. 9'x6', 1968. (destroyed.) (Photo: Peter Moore.)

ROBERT PINCUS-WITTEN

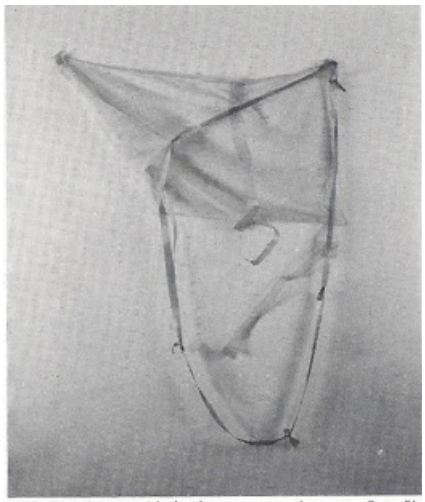
Keith Sonnier is 28 and was born in Mamou, a French-and-English-speaking town in Louisiana. The unassimilated Frenchness of Sonnier's background — he speaks with no Southern accent — partly made for an unregretted childhood, and one which was open to the arts; at least it was not hostile to personal eccentricity. His father ran an hardware and electrical supply store. At 12 he drove. He went to Mamou High between 1955 and 1959. Nothing deeply disrupted this Southern rural picture except when, at 15, he had an inkling that "there had to be something else."

From high school, Sonnier went to the University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1959 to 1963, where he became the central figure of a small body of art majors.[1]

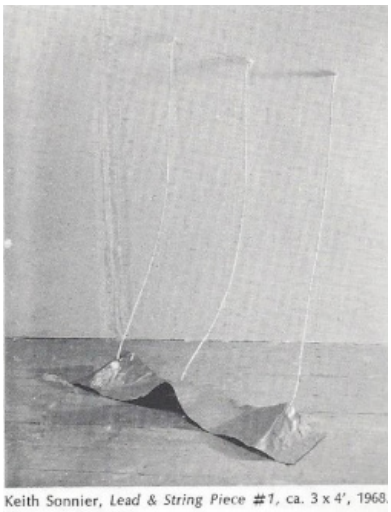
Color slides of Sonnier's student works indicate that they were paintings of high quality revealing an awareness of the 20th-century European tradition. They are marked by a heady sensuality and the easy, natural color of a native painter who was early in control of his color and medium. These canvases of female nudes, half drawn, half painted, are lyrical and shift in a Soutine-like way from wet impastoes to thin washes of a generally muted, dank tonality.

In 1963, Sonnier went to France, starting out in Normandy — "just another peasant culture, no communication" — and then to Paris, ending in the working class district of Clignancourt in the *rue du Poteau*. He continued to paint between 1963-65 in an erotic "mystical" way, but saw his work slowly transform into something that was "considerably more abstract."

After working in isolation in France he acted on impulse and communicated with the Rutgers University Art Department, where he was offered a teaching assistantship beginning in 1966. The return was critical. Among his colleagues there were Robert Morris, Robert Watts and Gary Kuehn. Through them, Sonnier was introduced into the New York art world, as part of the "Rutgers Group." His medium shifted from paint to vinyl and other prefabricated plastic substances such as vacuum cleaner coils. These materials tended to be comparatively soft. They adopted forms of a loose geometry—hollow rectangular forms, cones, pyramids, supported on the inside by hidden air blowers. Often such forms were set into tables and surfaces that toppled slightly. The change in the medium was more radical than the shift in the metaphor, which remained sexual in its connotations. The central figure, for better or worse, was Oldenburg, who, at the time, had engendered a wide range of funky, soft sculpture, though Sonnier's pieces were not necessarily imitative of the



Keith Sonnier, untitled, dacron screening, ca. 3 x 5', 1968. (The artist.)



Keith Sonnier, *Lead & String Piece #1*, ca. 3 x 4', 1968. (Y. Lambert, Paris.)

Keith Sonnier, untitled, screening, ca. 10' x 8'', 1967 (destroyed.)

Pop sources of Oldenburg's imagery.

In the fall of 1966, Lucy Lippard introduced the work of Keith Sonnier in a group show held at the Fischbach Gallery, called "Eccentric Abstraction." It also included the work of Bruce Nauman, Gary Kuehn, Eva Hesse, Frank Lincoln Viner and several other artists who had assembled earlier in the year at the Graham Gallery under the banner of "Abstract Inflationists and Stuffed Expressionists." Lucy Lippard's early essay touched on many serious features of these young artists who were already attracted by a new range of sensibility — one connected both with the idea of procedure ("process art") and ideation ("conceptual art"). Such options as were taken by these artists seemed particularly laughable at that moment, for so much of what was being taken seriously in art was still vitally Minimalist in character. It seems a commendable critical feat that Miss Lippard should have observed that these works were "non-sculptural"; that they presented "indirect affinities with the incongruity and often sexual content of Surrealism"; that the "increased influence and participation of painters has undermined sculptural tradition, producing a non-sculptural or object idiom that looks to formalist painting rather than to previous sculpture for its precedents." Of Sonnier, she observed that he "presents two apparently contradictory states as parts of a single phenomenon. A boxy but soft form slowly inflates and deflates in comparison to its hard, inert counterpart. The rhythm is mechanical and voluptuous, barely active, offering change and subsequent return to the first state until the two become one physical sensation."[2] Works of this nature were also shown at Douglass College, Rutgers University, in 1966.

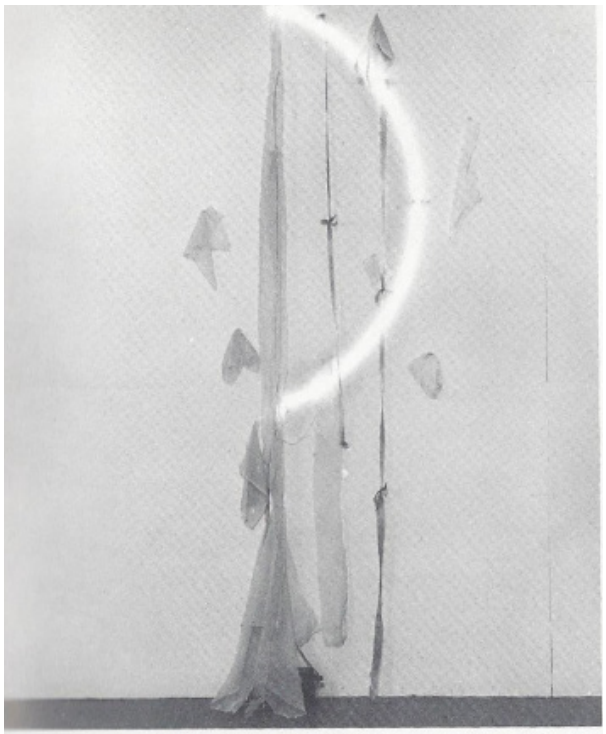
At this time, Sonnier began to be handled independently by Richard Bellamy of the Goldowsky Gallery. As has been the case with each successive wave of new sensibility, especially since the triumph of Rauschenberg in 1963, the more daring German dealers have endorsed young American artists by creating platforms for them, often long before their being widely shown in this country. In 1967 Rolf Ricke of Cologne gave Keith Sonnier his first one-man show, which was sold out, two works entering German museums.

It is not my intention here to describe Sonnier's career in terms of a "suite of triumphs." What interests me much more is that Sonnier's work is central to a broad shift in sensibility, which was marked in the period of 1967-69, and which by the spring of this year had become so pronounced as to be virtually recognized as a distinct new style —yet one so disparate as to defy a single specific cognomen like Pop or Minimalism.

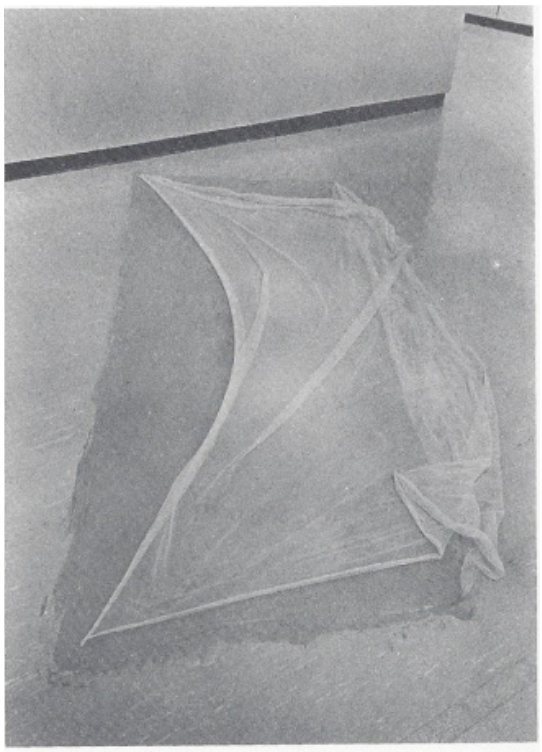
Since formalist art tended to be grounded in geometric appearances and permutations (it was an art which stressed "formal" rather than "contentual" values), an anti-geometric bias became visible and endemic in the new sensibility. Of necessity, formalist criticism, which tended to focus on determining the nature of geometric relationships through Aristotelian description, had to have been placed in jeopardy. These rejections, both on the part of artists and critics, were, of course, carried out in many quarters in a vindictive spirit occasioned by the false belief that formalist criticism had become the exclusive mouthpiece of Minimalism. What was overlooked in the new attack on formalism is that formalism as a visual and critical tool had arisen in the late 1930s in the social criticism of Clement Greenberg out of a need to expunge literary issues from the arts — those issues which were either politically slanted or Surrealistically biased. In short, formalist criticism arose out of a need to rid art of the debasing features of late Surrealist poetics and die-hard Stalinist polemics. To achieve this end, Greenberg placed new emphasis on those problems which were immediately bound to artistic procedure and the nature of the medium. He viewed successful solutions to these problems as "formal" and distinguishable from those issues which were either a hangover personality charade or those which had been tied to a deplorable and hypocritical social ethic.

The clear manifestations of new sensibility during these past two years may be divided into three streams, a bifurcated progressive and formalist stream, and a reactionary literary one. The last stresses "poetical" values and deals with image/word transfer play, which, if it is not Dadaist in nature, is nothing else. This is the chief retrograde stream of new sensibility in which many figures of current note may be found. Its primary exponent and most vertiginous promoter is Bruce Nauman. The second stream is entirely Constructivist in character. It emphasizes elementary structural issues, that is, problems of joining, standing, raising up. It is clearly a sculptural and architectural style marked by an ambitious scale. Its primary exponent is Richard Serra. As counterpart to the Constructivist stream is a group centered about the issues of color. Their productions are marked by a desire to create forms related to and perhaps which more readily evolve out of painterly issues. Several young artists meet here — though they are yet of unclear positioning—Alan Saret, Bill Bollinger, David Novros and Eva Hesse. However, the chief figure in my view is Keith Sonnier.

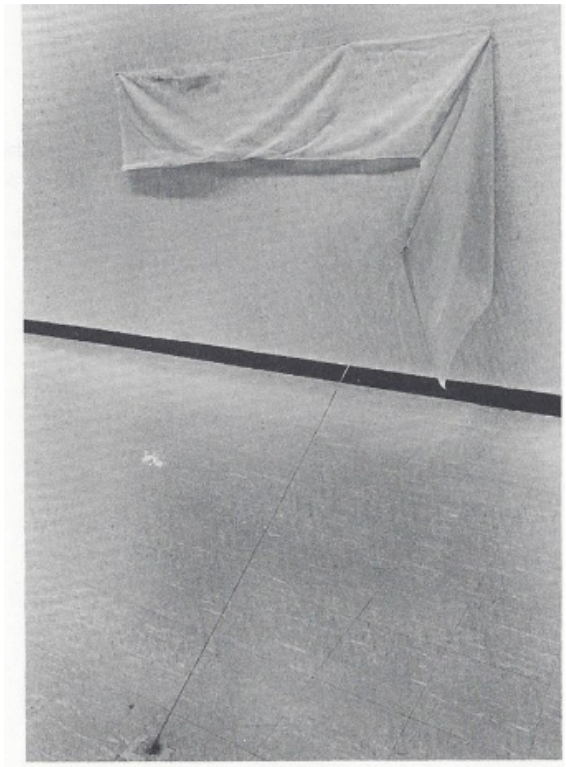
Throughout 1967 Sonnier was attracted by low-lying, floor-bound assemblages which — despite structural premises centered upon long, perverse beams and "links"—also spoke of a new breadth of sensitivity and suggestibility. Sonnier's critical piece along these lines took the form of a thin loaf. It is made of foam rubber padded over a wooden core. The rubber in turn has been covered with glistening pink satin which, because of a fairly equidistant set of "pullings" and "tightenings" formed a sequence of twenty-three units. The divisions were established "by feel" and not based on an *a priori* mathematical ratio. Other works by Sonnier of a similar and equally evocative nature were foam rubber "tubes" resembling satin-covered links, which were then laid over



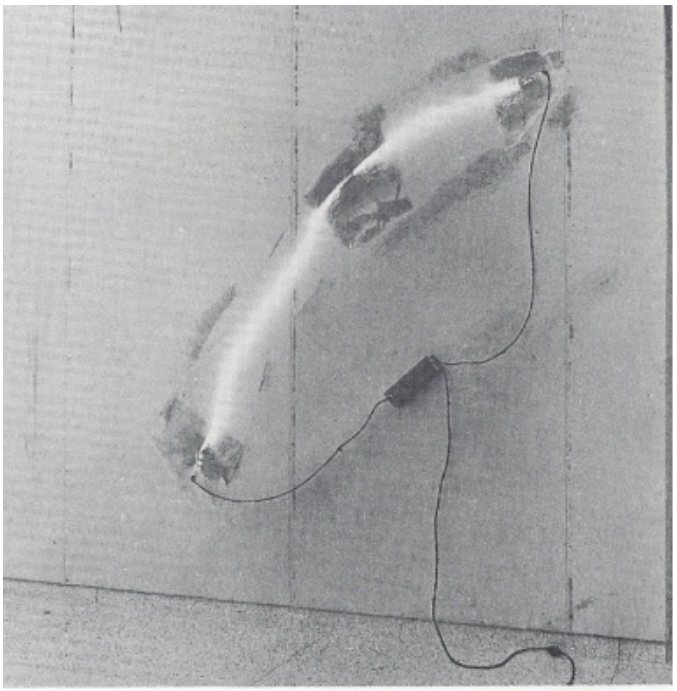
Keith Sonnier, *Neon and Cloth*, dacron, neon, ca. 9 x 5', 1968. (Coll. Bonning, Cologne.)



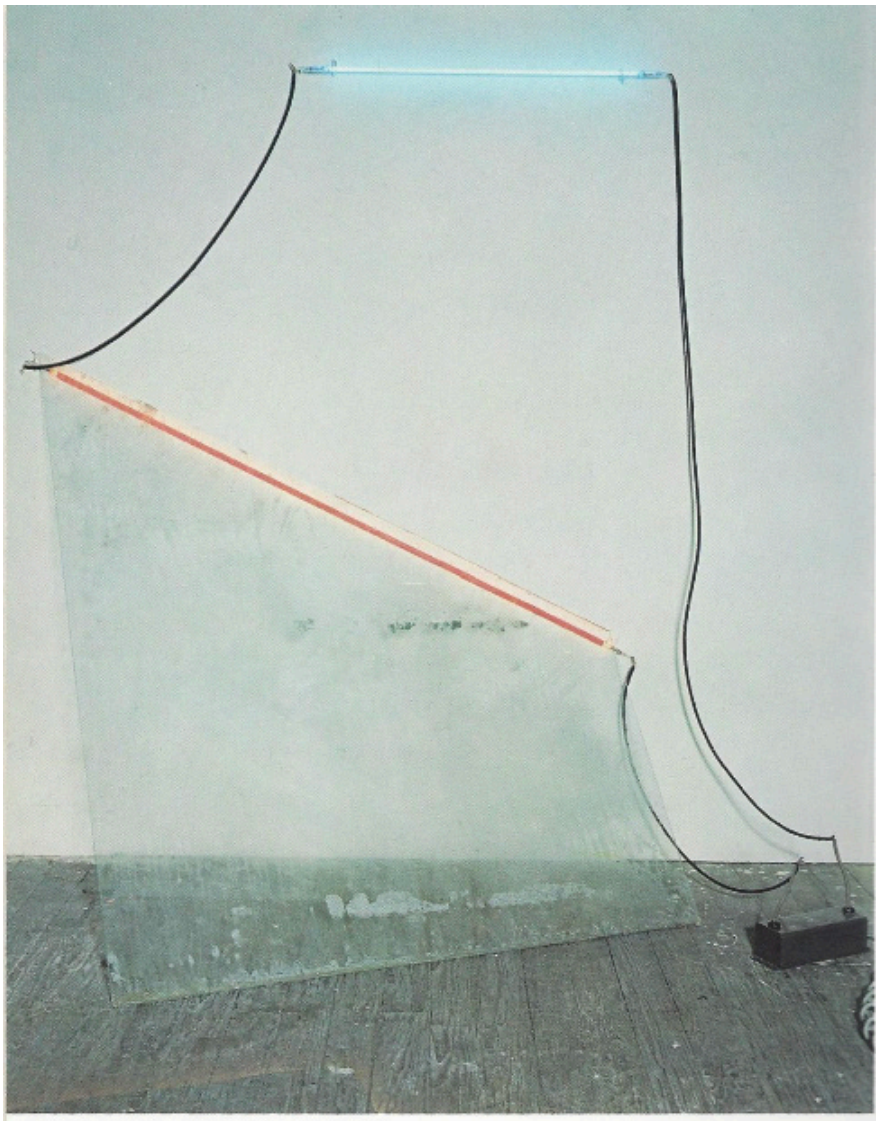
Keith Sonnier, untitled floor piece, dacron, latex, flock, 1969. (destroyed.)



Keith Sonnier, *Dacron, String*, ca. 7½ x 6 x 2½', 1967. (Rolf Ricke, Cologne.)



Keith Sonnier, *Flocked Neon*, neon, plastic, flock, ca. 7½ x 8', 1969. (destroyed.)



Keith Sonnier, *Neon and Flocked Glass*, 72 x 48 x 33", 1969.

with "blankets" of cheesecloth, a highly modifying, disembodied substance, which in its shroud-like character acts in a way similar to a broad "wash" of color. Several trough-like works were also covered with cheesecloth, or were presented at rest upon such "beds." At this point Sonnier felt that he too "was an artist, not just saying something about myself as an adolescent but saying something to everybody." These would be the last "constructed" sculptures until 1969—although the act of covering such forms with semi-transparent rags brings up considerable issues connected to color as well as "poetical" ones, such as disguising, hiding, covering: covertness versus overtness.

Before attacking such a problem, let me indicate that the "tiny module"—as Sonnier characterized the diaphanousness of cheesecloth—and the high gloss of the pink satin had its counterpart in several sculptures of 1968, made of window screening. This is a more tensed-up, resistant material, one which was also shiny and composed of minute crosshatchings of wire once again forming "tiny modules." The use of window screening led to several bulging works (now destroyed) of eccentric proportions — long, wall pieces, in which the wiry sheen was stressed, as well as the capacity of the substance to lend itself to *repoussoir*. Other experiments with screening were several floor exercises of elementary pleating and folding. In 1967, Sonnier began to incorporate a further range of materials: rags, torn patches of tinted silks and disembodied, delicately colored remnants.

The new tremulous substances and hesitant colorations led Sonnier to be interested in broad sprawls of latex, often heightened with "flocking," that is, of colored powdered rayon, a substance employed in the manufacture of wallpaper. The act of spreading the latex on the wall or floor has superficial resemblances to the flooding of colors in field painting—think of those by Louis, for example. But the bleeding of thinned out paint into unprimed canvas is much faster, much more flushed than the comparatively resistant stickiness of the thick and pasty liquitex substance. Moreover, there is no absorption into the ground as in the case of thin paint on unprimed canvas. Instead, the spread latex remains on the surface and dries into distinct figure-ground relationships. The dusting or flocking, is an attempt to modify the color and shape problems caused by a layer of rubber contrasted against the color of the wall. Perhaps the use of rubber is similar to Richard Serra's rubber spreads of 1968, although his was used even more thickly and in a more shredded, tire-like fashion. Sonnier instead emphasized the membrane-like nature of rubber and its potential for thinness and fragility.

The flocked latex works measure Sonnier's refined sense of the whole environment, not only because of the coloration and tonality of the pieces themselves but also because they are so

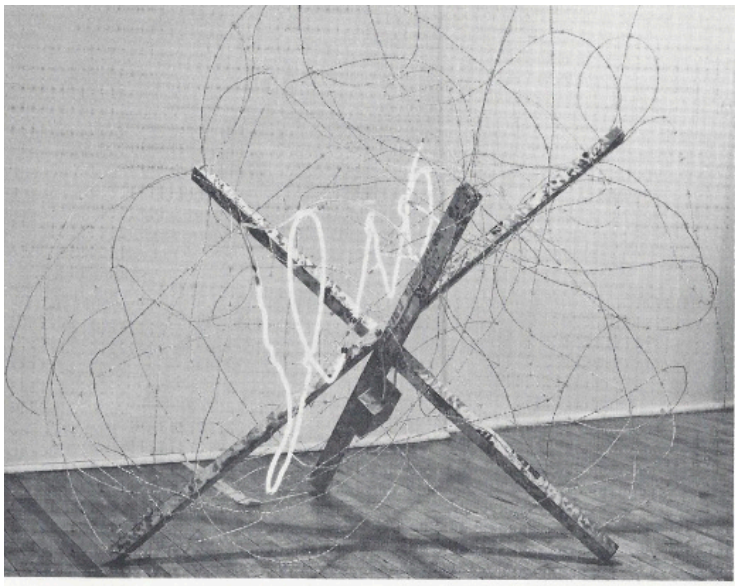
affected by the stray elements of the studio; a chair, a wall, a table, an electrical circuit box, a nest of cables. By peeling the latex membrane away from the wall other issues were brought into prominence. The latex pulled down halfway in a more or less rectangular sheet related to issues of limpness as well as surface subdivision: arrangements of flocked surface, naked latex underside, the color of the wall, and the smudged original edge of the latex rectangle would result. These were further dilated upon by tying the peeled edges or levels away from the wall and by holding these projections out into space by thin, improbably weak strings or cords, which were sometimes fixed to the floor at some distance from the wall or which were themselves allowed to dangle limply. The tentative sculpture that results is a kind of muted memory of the edges of loose collage or Cubist grids. The strings tying all these limp substances into twisted rectangles tended to project a collage-like appearance into space, as if palely colored rectangles had been projected off the paper and their edges, now transformed into strings, were tied to the ground, or the floor, or the wall, or simply left to the mercy of gravity.

At this moment, too, the materials employed were enlarged to include neon tubing which was industrially molded after templates fashioned out of copper tubing by the artist. This kind of gestural neon is peculiar and idiosyncratic rather than commercial in character. It may be that Richard Serra's rubber and neon pieces of 1968 helped to confirm Sonnier's decision to introduce luminous and gestural components although in the latter's work, the materiality of the substance was underplayed in favor of its role in the pictorial and coloristic vocabulary.* Neon assumed the role of line and gesture in contrast to the flocked latex and rags which were in this context identifiable as transparent planes, washes and patches of color. It would be interesting to know to what degree James Rosenquist's *sui generis "Tumbleweed"* (1963), a construction of wood, barbed wire and neon, affected both Sonnier and Serra, since both have expressed admiration for this work to me.

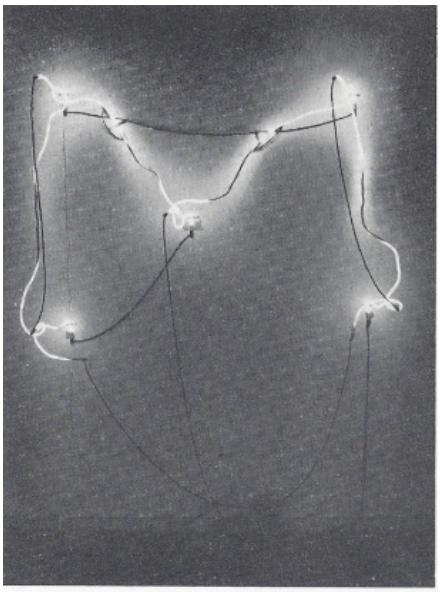
What I have been attempting to show is that the latex, the flocking, the neon, the rags, the cheesecloth, were, in Sonnier's case, substances analogous to the painter's palette, which he superficially appeared to have abandoned at the time of the "inflatable sculptures." These substances mark, then, in 1968, a return toward painterliness and colorism, a rejection of his "sculptural phase" which had been touched by the prevailing Minimalist mode, however eccentric its forms may have appeared. It is evident that Sonnier shared several coloristic premises with a body of young artists working in New York City, who gravitated to the Bykert Gallery. Foremost among these were William Bollinger and Alan Saret, the latter particularly. Saret's colored wire sculptures, limp

*Sonnier has acknowledged that Bruce Nauman's neon pieces were instrumental in bringing him to this material.

Keith Sonnier, *In Between*, glass, light bulbs, timer, 72x94", 1969.



James Rosenquist, *Tumbleweed*, m/m, 76 x 80 x 96", 1963.



Keith Sonnier, untitled, neon ca. 6 x 9 x 2', 1969. (Dr. L. Ludwig, Cologne.)

rubber sheetings and mounds of powdered chemicals share with Sonnier both an intense feeling for color, which itself is unusual, as well as a revival of certain features connected with Abstract Expressionism, notably a gestural focus and an all-over dispersal of energy. These Abstract Expressionist qualities are more Saret's than Sonnier's, who in all of his work has rejected the Abstract Expressionist infinite screen in favor of a configuration based on a viable internal structure of shifting weights and balances. That is, there is no "figure" in Saret; there is a kind of oriental or calligraphic "figure" in Sonnier. This orientalism is particularly noticeable in the *Neon with Cloth* of 1968.

These coloristic attitudes were especially evident in the "Here & Now" exhibition held at Washington University in January, 1969. Commenting on the similarities between Saret and Sonnier I observed at the time that in addition to its relation to Abstract Expressionism, the new colorism possibly may relate:

> . . . to something older . . . there are qualities relevant to late Monet [I mean after 1890], in the kind of unravelling that one sees in the later paintings of Monet. And this is sensible in the kind of colors that Saret is using, a highly lyrical, perfumed and confectionery range, equally relevant to the painting of late Monet. That kind of color is also . . . in the fine color selections that we see in the works by Keith Sonnier: pale pinks, pale greys. Utilizing the pale beige of the wall is a very conscious coloristic reference back to issues that deal with late Monet.[3]

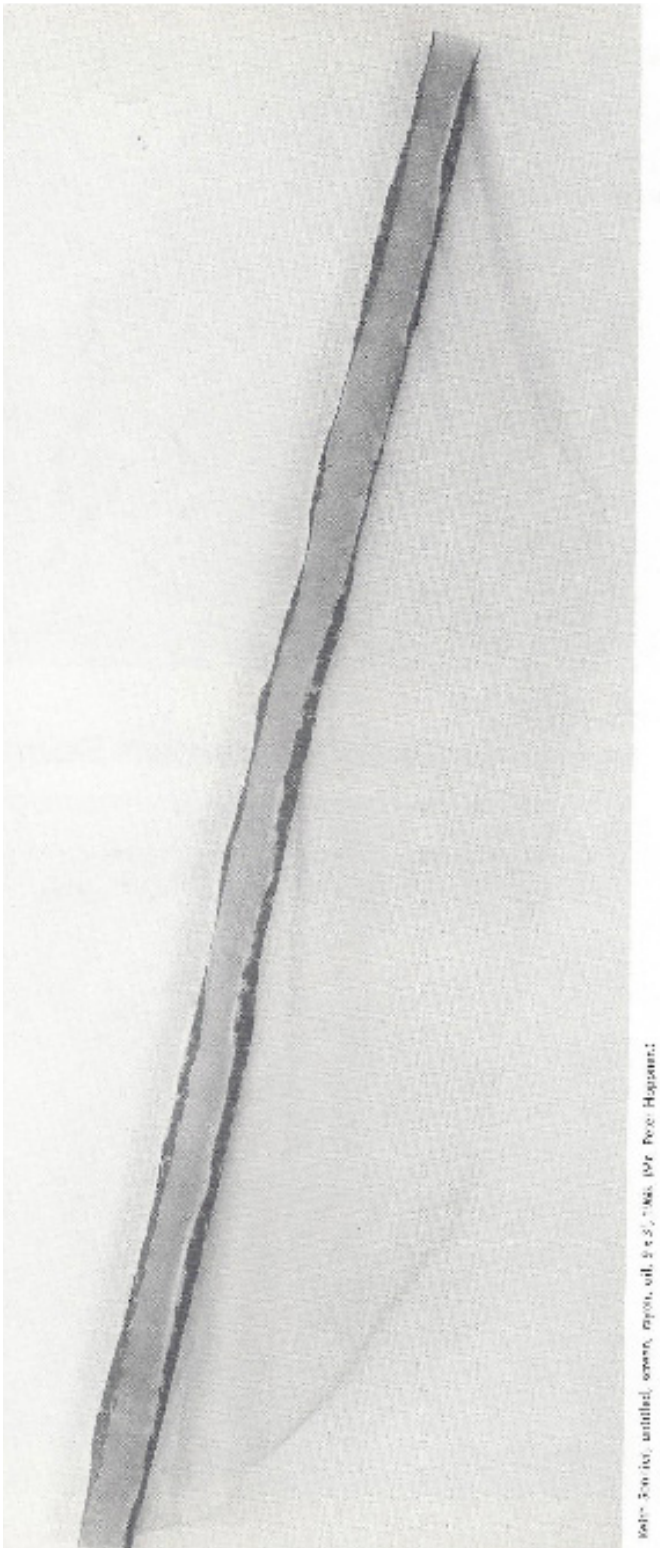
It is apparent that the range of color favored by Sonnier is of a wistful, greyed-out range. The emotional tenor of the color, and the insubstantiality of the material in which that color is embodied, led me to a dangerous area of "poetical" speculation, although I am not yet willing to abandon this attitude entirely. At the same panel, I went on to speculate that the kind of forms taken by such limp materials:

> . . . enter a very remarkable area of subjectivity . . . that is a kind of funerary, shroud-like, dispiriting . . . association. I think that the shroudiness is perfectly easy to see, or is visible in that enormous pile of dusty rubber . . . by Saret. But, in a certain sense there is also, in the pink shroud floor piece by Sonnier, a kind of delimited, funerary site, the grey flocking covering an abandoned bed.[4]

The piece I was referring to was specially made for the St. Louis exhibition. It was executed on the beige linoleum tile floor. A "bed" of latex was spread and flocked over with grey. A pink rectangle was fixed along the lateral edge, like a gauzy blanket. The only color similar to it that I can think of is the salmony pink cape held by *Mlle. Victorine in the Costume of an Espada* by Manet, although this association was as far from the artist's mind as possible.

The latex and flocked pieces on which, I would say, the present reputation of Sonnier has been built vacillates between the two poles of an art predicated on fine color plays and insubstantial materials, and a desire for clear, expository effects such as elemental examinations of surface peel. But the latter area, rather than existing for its own end, accompanies the refined, pictorial sensibility to which these remarks have largely been addressed.

Throughout the remainder of 1968 and into 1969, Sonnier's "palette" of materials remained fairly constant. However, in the spring of 1969, when an international interest in the new sensibility had already been stimulated — with many exhibitions held in St. Louis, Bern, German private galleries and the Whitney, for example—a change in Sonnier's work became evident, one which is still very much in the process of realizing itself. Instead of utter bonelessness and depletion, Sonnier's objects are now tending toward a fresh tenseness. This evolution is being accompanied by a greater reliance on elements of industrial prefabrication, particularly on thick sheets of glass squares and circles. Their role is largely to modulate light and, therefore, they can be related, startlingly enough, to the swatches of cheesecloth of the earlier work. The neon gestures have also been expanded to include specific geometrical elements such as arc-sections and straight "lines." Moreover, "real" elements, such as shaded light bulbs, light sockets, movie and slide projectors, and strobe lights, which had modestly functioned at the "edges" of the earlier assemblages are here being directly incorporated into the "calligraphic



figure," with passages of neon tubing "lassoing in," so to speak, such real electrical appliances. Such environmental clues were, in the earliest latex pieces, first experienced tacitly and unapologetically. By now, such material has become almost a special area of exploration. In this sense, the latest works carry in them a heavy residue of Happening, Theater and Environment.

The glass sheets, because of their weight and hardness, demand a more physical and Constructivist interplay and, therefore, are more arduously set into propped and architectural relationships. The neon elements are being placed into more tectonic—vertical, horizontal or parallel—associations, not that gestural neon has been given up entirely. Several of the most recent pieces tend to contrast the transparent geometric glass shapes against rushes of gestural neon. Such contrasts inevitably take into account the glossy modulations of light reflected by the glass surfaces as well as the transparent shadows cast *onto* the studio wall *through* the glass planes themselves. We are still dealing with a highly elaborate coloristic sensibility but it appears that the inert rags and dusty flockings are slowly being moved away from.

Among the loveliest of these recent works is the one in which a gestural yellow diagonal of neon reflects on and through a glass square, or the one shown this June at the Whitney "Anti-Illusion" exhibition, in which a semicircle of fluorescent green neon is reflected into the lower half of a circular glass sheet flushing the clear glass green up to the central horizontal bar. This last work is particularly geometric in character—though all the recent neon pieces need not be. Another remarkable gestural piece is a kind of free "M", in which an orange neon light encircles five blue neon prongs. The front face of the orange stream has been silvered opaque forcing the viewer to read these passages as black strokes, while the orange light is deflected back against the wall.

The purpose of this essay has not been to create an argument on which one may make predictions regarding the future. Whether or not Sonnier retains his pre-eminence in a stream which itself is constantly threatened with evaporation because of its sheer delicacy, is simply beside the point. Instead the manifest excellence of Sonnier's work is the *donnée* which demanded a descriptive analysis. ■

1. Sonnier especially recalls the teachings of Calvin Harlan as helpful. Harlan is a New Orleans painter of clear and rigorous color principles, in nature akin to Albers and the Yale Art School and who also had an "in" to what was happening in recent English sculpture.
2. Lucy Lippard, "Eccentric Abstraction," broadside to an exhibition organized for the Fischbach Gallery, New York, Sept. 20—Oct. 8, 1966.
3. "Here and Now" exhibition, symposium transcript of a panel held in St. Louis on January 12, 1969, p. 4. I would like to extend my appreciation for the copy of the transcript to Joseph Helman, President of Steinberg Art Gallery Associates (SAGA), and Robert T. Buck, Jr., Director of the Washington University Gallery of Art.
4. "Here and Now" exhibition, symposium transcript, *op. cit.*, p. 13.