

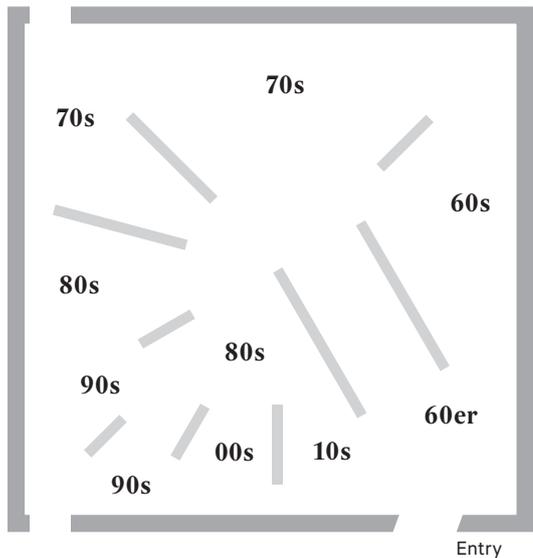
# Exhibition Guide

**KEITH SONNIER. LIGHTSOME**

*October 15, 2021 – February 6, 2022*

**NEUES MUSEUM  
State Museum for Art  
and Design Nuremberg**

# Map Exhibition Hall



# Contents

Map Exhibition Hall	p. 2
Introduction	p. 4
Tour of the exhibition	
<b>A</b> Transgressions	p. 9
The 1960s	
<b>B</b> Process and Media Criticism	p. 15
The 1970s	
<b>C</b> Diversity of Materials and Cultures	p. 21
The 1980s	
<b>D</b> Plays of Light	p. 27
The 1990s	
<b>E</b> Everyday Life and Energy	p. 31
The 2000s and 2010s	
Notes	p. 37
Biography	p. 38
Accompanying Program	p. 40
Imprint	p. 42

## Introduction

Keith Sonnier’s name is associated first and foremost with the colored light works he became internationally known for. The memorability of his sensually beautiful works with illuminants—especially with colored neon—as well as his large-scale projects in public spaces, however, overshadow a much more far-reaching development of his oeuvre, which brings together light art with sculpture and architecture, as well as media art and performance. Art and everyday life were intended to combine and not only convey an aesthetic approach but also attain functional tasks. In the 1960s in particular, he significantly expanded the conventional concept of sculpture in this way. Sonnier’s work is characterized by great openness and mobility. This can also be seen in his exhibition stagings, a selection of which is addressed in Nuremberg.

### Freedom

The exhibition *Keith Sonnier. Lightsome*, the first retrospective following the artist’s passing in the summer of 2020, provides insights into all of his creative phases. On the one hand, it illustrates how the light works ran through his oeuvre as a common thread since the 1960s, continuously further developed by Sonnier, and how they had a decisive influence on his work as a whole. On the other hand, Sonnier’s playful freedom in complementing and enriching the formal language of his works time and again with a wide

variety of materials, media, and forms of expression, becomes tangible. The exhibition features a cross-section through six decades: from early fabric objects, sculptural works made from found objects, light sculptures, and videos to elaborate installations. The title *Lightsome* can also be understood in this sense, referring both to the light works as well as insinuating “cheerfulness” and “light-heartedness” in reference to the artist’s open attitude.

### The South

Keith Sonnier’s works can manifestly be connected to biographical milestones. Particularly his origins in Louisiana, in the deep south of the United States, with its subtropical landscapes—vast rice fields, extreme humidity and especially hazy, misty light—play a crucial role. Sonnier grew up in a French-speaking, liberal family surrounded by Cajun culture (population of various cultural groups in southern Louisiana).<sup>1</sup> Sonnier’s bilingualism most surely was one of the reasons for his interest in language and communication—a theme throughout his work. Sonnier firmly believed that childhood experiences are critical to artistic work: “I still think that artists are basically influenced by their experiences as children anyway and continue to draw from that early information, no matter how sophisticated or unsophisticated they become. It’s that cultural sensory base that you have, that you work from.”<sup>2</sup>

### Travels

His numerous trips to various countries, experiences with other cultures and artist colleagues, as well as his intimate relationship with nature also carried a special significance for his artistic development

During his travels and residences abroad, he deepened his interest in cultural and natural-historical phenomena and experimented with new, unknown materials he encountered there. Although uncompromising in the composition and material language of his works, Keith Sonnier remained open, sensitive, and receptive to the “other” and “unfamiliar” throughout his life.

### **New Sculpture**

Keith Sonnier’s works defy clear classification in terms of stylistic traditions. In the context of pioneering international exhibitions, his early works have been ascribed to the art historical categories of “Postminimalism” and “New Sculpture,” chiefly because of Sonnier’s openness and willingness to experiment with non-art materials such as foam, rubber, textiles, or latex, which ultimately runs through all of his creative phases. Sonnier, however, also remained open to the formal language of Minimalism and its strict geometries consistently.

### **Impulses of Light and Color**

The approximately sixty works from six decades on display at the Neues Museum are presented largely in chronological order. Visitors are nevertheless invited to follow the various light and color impulses and to drift through the open exhibition architecture. The accompanying booklet addresses essential aspects of Keith Sonnier’s work and thought processes. For this purpose, individual works from the various phases are presented exemplarily.



*Ba-O-Ba VI, 1970/1999*

## A Transgressions The 1960s



*Roman Trough*, 1966

New materials in art from everyday life, technology, and nature, the discovery of the human body as a means of expression, the dissolution of the genres of painting and sculpture, the merging of film, theater, dance, music, and visual art, as well as various ways of involving viewers in the work of art are just a few key points characteristic of what was happening in art in the 1960s. Like many other artists of the time, Keith Sonnier experimented with a wide variety of materials. In the field of sculpture, the relationship to the wall and the floor in particular was being explored at the time. “Taking the sculptures off the pedestal” and incorporating walls and floors, the perception of space and the sculptural works presented in it also began to change. Likewise, the status of the artwork was called into question—issues that Sonnier would engage in from then on.

These developments become particularly evident in the early work *Roman Trough* (1966): With a certain austerity and rhythmicity, the sculpture on the floor reminds of the formal language of minimalist works. However, the use of everyday materials remote from art, such as gauze cloth, wood, and rope, as well as the work’s title, also evoke other associations. Gauze cloth, used for filtering and straining certain foods as well as for cheese production, among others, in conjunction with the title “trough,” suggests that the sculpture refers to everyday actions.

A reference to everyday life is also clear in *Green File* (1968/69): Divided into segments, the simple, rounded form refers to commercially available sandpaper nail files, contrasted here by an oversized, shimmering green surface, which oscillates on account of the metal grid. Even in this early work, Sonnier succeeded in dynamizing a rigid form with the help of light effects.

*Red Flocked Wall* (1969) not only illustrates artistic examinations of the artwork's relationship to the wall and floor, but also merges the genres of painting and sculpture. Sonnier worked with a sheet of latex covered with pigments and sawdust that extends from the wall to the floor and expands into the space. It is a conceptual work, executable even after the artist's death and destroyed at the end of each exhibition—incidentally calling into question the original's uniqueness and with it the commodity character of art.

At the same time, Keith Sonnier worked with light bulbs, a functional everyday material which, in the form he chose for *In Between II* (1969), with a porcelain holder and pull chain, as they are still available in the U.S. today, seems rather nostalgic to a German audience. The interconnection of painting and sculpture is intensified by Sonnier here. On the one hand, the expressive painterly gesture reminds of Abstract Expressionist paintings. On the other hand, the strangeness of the material may evoke disgust and revulsion in equal measure; the paint appears dirty and carelessly applied and might remind of physical excretions. The work's title alludes to the act of stepping in between—a subject that accompanied the artist in many guises throughout his life. Literally pressed behind glass and framed by the illuminants, this particular latex "painting" seems like an attempt to open a door in order to give space to the sensual, physical experience.

In *Neon Wrapping Neon and Incandescent Bulbs* (1969), neon tubes compete with light bulbs as malleable light sources. The industrially prefabricated and rigid shape of the incandescent bulb meets a dynamic form apparently capable of movement. In addition to the possibility of deforming the fluorescent tubes, Sonnier now also played with the dialog between the two different light sources. Fluorescent tubes interested him mainly because of their energetic quality. The constant movement of the noble gases neon and argon and their radiation into space would continue to fascinate him from then on.

In the larger walk-in installations such as *Dis-Play* (1969), the sensual dimension of Keith Sonnier's works becomes particularly perceptible. As in other comparable works (cf. works from the *Ba-O-Ba* series), Keith Sonnier here draws on the so-called *Infinity Channel*: A combination of mirrors and glass plates facing one another, which was installed in Sonnier's studio in various constellations over a period of ten years. This setting provided the spatial point of departure for numerous actions, performances, and films, including the black-and-white film *Dis-Play* (1969).

In 1969 Sonnier began the *Ba-O-Ba* series, which was eminently important to him and from which four installations are featured in the exhibition. The series' sonorous title can be traced back to a trip Sonnier made with his artist colleague Gordon Matta-Clark to Haiti, where the term was found written on a boat. It originates from Haitian-French patois and describes the effect of light, literally translating to "moonlight over the sea," "moonlight on skin" or even "light or color bath." The geometric compositions of glass and neon light thus also hint at Keith Sonnier's romantic side. At

the same time, this series in particular illustrates Sonnier's ongoing concern with bringing together personal and general experiences in the face of a technologized world, the continuously changing communication media, and various cultures. Sonnier summarized his objective as follows: "To make visual experiences and physical phenomena perceptible in 'one' manifestation and to achieve a rubbing-off effect by changing the position in the way of seeing," thus stressing the importance of transferring perceptual content to his viewers.<sup>3</sup>

In the earliest works of this group, such as *Ba-O-Ba Circle Diptych* (1969), Sonnier used round glass panes, which here enter into dialog with two longer and two shorter neon lines. Sonnier thus played with the geometric shapes, reflections, and interactions occurring within the work itself, as well as with the space and the viewers.

In *Ba-O-Ba VI* (1970/99), foam was added, a material Sonnier valued highly for being simple, inexpensive, and malleable. He also attributed the material with a "perverse" quality that fascinated him.<sup>4</sup>

By juxtaposing the rigid neon tubes with this soft and pliable texture, he set the materials' sensual qualities against each other. Last but not least, the use of foam can also be considered an ironic commentary directed at Minimal Art.

In comparison, the later installation *Ba-O-Ba, Krefeld III* (1977/79) seems much more strictly composed, revealing Sonnier's open attitude towards the formal language of Minimalist art. The sculpture consists of a glass pane, half of which is painted with black lacquer, leaning against the wall, and of colored light tubes. These are reduced to the primary colors of red, yellow, and blue. Since

they are attached both to the glass pane and directly to the wall, the difference in the light's expansion is rendered visible. The various possibilities of perception and change of light, especially in contrast with transparent materials, represent a central theme in Keith Sonnier's work.

## B Process and Media Criticism The 1970s

A central postulation of the 1960s and 1970s was that art should have an impact on society, cooperation became a key term. Authorship, previously associated with the role of the artist, and concepts such as identity, subjectivity, and the individual were called into question. Research on the conditions of perception inevitably also fuelled doubts about artistic materials and methods. The relationship of media-mediated images and physical spaces, the connections between visual, physical, and social perception became the subject of artistic investigation. In the field of sculpture, installations offered the possibility of creating experiential situations and actively involving viewers in the art event. To this end, as with many artists at the time, new media found their way into Keith Sonnier's practice: video, performance, TV, telephone, and radio.

In this way numerous video works were created on the basis of performances, including *Blow* (1969), *Painted Foot: Black Light* (1970), *Rubdown* (1970), and *Color Wipe* (1973)—a video featured as a large-scale projection in this exhibition and thus in Sonnier's preferred mode of presentation for his videos.



Ideally, visitors were able to enter the video image and gather spatial experiences. The videos demonstrate how the work process was considered as defining as the artistic end product. Accordingly, the video equipment was also included in the film, and stage directions remained clearly audible.

Sonnier used the latest technologies of his time here. In addition to a computer animation system allowing to superimpose different image tracks, he experimented with ways of mixing and superimposing sound tracks.

Recording the work process both served to reflect on the media per se, and to document how the artist collaborated with others. Likewise, Sonnier was concerned with appropriating and interrogating the media's various reality levels. In *T-Hybrid V-I* (1971), he divided the picture plane in the middle and played the two halves of the image with disjointed film sequences. The close-up of a person thus encounters various filmed sequences from TV. Distortions and flickerings, over- or under-lit pictures—ultimately all the technical possibilities and manifestations of the medium at the time were included. “I think this was the most remarkable thing about the artists of my generation who worked with media at that point, they investigated [...]”<sup>5</sup>

This approach was further intensified with *Channel Mix* (1972), a central work in both Keith Sonnier's oeuvre and the Neues Museum's collection. Rather than filmed sources, it features “live material” from four different and simultaneously projected television programs. Two programs are shown on each screen, horizontally on one side, vertically on the other. One half of the image is reproduced as a positive, the other as a negative. The work follows the

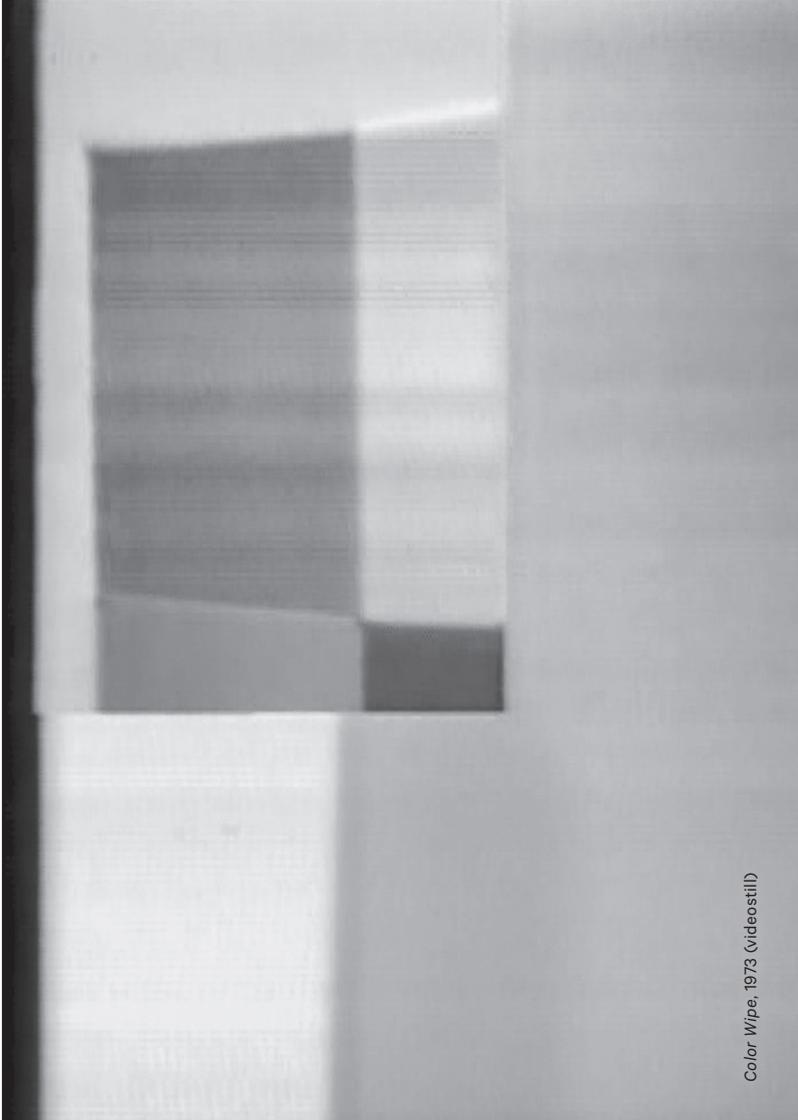
principle of collage, the crucial factor, however, being that the determination of which contents and pictorial worlds combine is left to chance. Extremely contradictory, absurd, and paradoxical images thus emerge. The daily flood of images and the overstimulation associated with it, rather than the individual picture's content, thus gain center stage.

The large-scale presentation, enabling viewers to enter the pictorial space and thus to sensually experience or immerse themselves in these superimposed visual worlds, was considered acutely important by Keith Sonnier.

The video work *Send/Receive Satellite Network: Phase I* (1977), created in collaboration with Liza Béar, was likewise concerned with the inclusion of social reality or media-mediated image worlds. Film sequences of various origins were cropped, superimposed, and reassembled in a variety of ways. In addition, excerpts of documentary footage from the eponymous performance of the same year can be seen, among other things. The fact that Liza Béar and Keith Sonnier were able to establish a live connection between New York and Los Angeles and record it on video with the help of NASA's satellite technology represented a fundamental step towards a participatory concept of art.

What has become commonplace today, in view of video-conferencing and other media networking practices, was associated with questions which continue to hold relevance today, but have increased many times over. How, for example, would television, radio, and satellite technology develop politically and socially, and how would they impact and change human communication? Discussions about the meaning of simultaneity—when events

taking place at the same time are interconnected and visualized—serve as a further example. In any case, the ability to establish direct contact with other people and places—to send and to receive—allowed artists to bridge at times enormous distances.



## C Diversity of Materials and Cultures The 1980s

As previously in the *Ba-O-Ba* series, Sonnier increasingly embraced themes, motifs, and materials from foreign cultures in the early 1980s and combined them with the material aesthetics of Western industrial societies.

Journeys to South America, China, Japan, India, and Southeast Asia changed and expanded Sonnier's stance toward Western art concepts and thus also toward his own artistic practice. The change of perspective that ensued—including the formal expressions of art forms and cultures unfamiliar to him in his own work—was accompanied by intensive studies of philosophy and the theory of religion. He had already studied anthropology in Louisiana and would later lecture on African art at Rutgers University in New York.

Further large series followed. During a trip to China in 1978, for example, Sonnier created the *Sel* series, which was graphically conceived during the trip and subsequently developed by Sonnier over several years. The works are based on ancient Chinese characters from the 12th century BC. They thus channel both the pictorial nature of writing and the activity of writing or writing movements. The resulting works, such as *Expanded Sel Series III* (1978) and *Sel* (1984), indeed appear like signs of light and color written into space. Although the arrangements of lines are not



aimed at legibility, but rather at a purely physical presence, a special, open kind of sign-like quality is conveyed. Similar to the early form of the Chinese Sel calligraphy, these are images that seem to hold a secret.

In the works *Pictogram II* (1980) and *Pictogram III* (1980), the curved light tubes even transition into the figurative. The cables function as lines, but they also have a much more far-reaching function: they hold the respective material structure together. Only the electric circuit supplies the necessary energy to make the gas in the tubes glow.

In contrast, works such as *Rangoli IV (Rangoli Series)* (1981), created during Keith Sonnier's stay in India (1980/81), look completely different. Instead of glowing neon tubes, color now appears in the form of painted poles or, as in *Aum-Om-D (India Series)* (1981), on colored aluminum elements. With no illuminants available, Sonnier resorted to vernacular materials such as bamboo. "For me, this challenged the iconographic distance that exists between art and life in the West, especially in contrast with India where you're constantly surrounded by art in a common everyday sense."<sup>6</sup>

A dialog of sorts between shapes and materials of different origins ensued. Sonnier made use of the craftsmanship of foreign cultures as well as high-tech constructions from the Western world. *Rangoli IV (Rangoli Series)* (1981), for example, already via its title refers to an Indian folk art decorating the floors of the entrances to temples, courtyards, and even living rooms. The special patterns were initially applied for religious reasons and were supposed to bring good luck. Originally, the mostly strictly

geometrically arranged ornaments were composed of cow dung, red and white rice, flour, color pigments, colored sand, and flower petals—materials that have long since been replaced by synthetic colorants, but are still used today in various regions of India. Sonnier referred to the ornamental and symbolic nature of this folk art, but "translated" it into his own language. He never aimed at legibility in the literal sense. Accordingly, in *Aum-Om-D (India Series)* (1981), the representation of the syllable *Om* (in Sanskrit also *Aum*), which is considered sacred in Hinduism and Buddhism and is also depicted as a sign in numerous Indian scriptures, is interpreted very freely by Sonnier. The works are presented on colorfully painted exhibition walls, thus tying back into their presentation history. Sonnier had already shown these groups of works on colored walls in New York in 1983.

The practice of using "natural" materials instead of illuminants and technical equipment was maintained in further works. While still in India, Sonnier also began creating sculptures. "The first bamboo pieces I made in India were in fact the first free-standing works that I made, and although they looked like tribal pieces, they were in a sense early studies for work that would be made later in New York from Western materials—at a time when my work was becoming very high tech."<sup>7</sup>

The sculpture *Jingo (Tokobashira Series)* (1984) may also draw from this series of freestanding works. "Tokobashira" is the umbrella term for naturally-grown tree trunks of various wood species primarily used in interior design and decoration. "Tokobashira," however, also plays a crucial role in Japanese architecture, especially in the furnishing of traditional alcoves, which are often

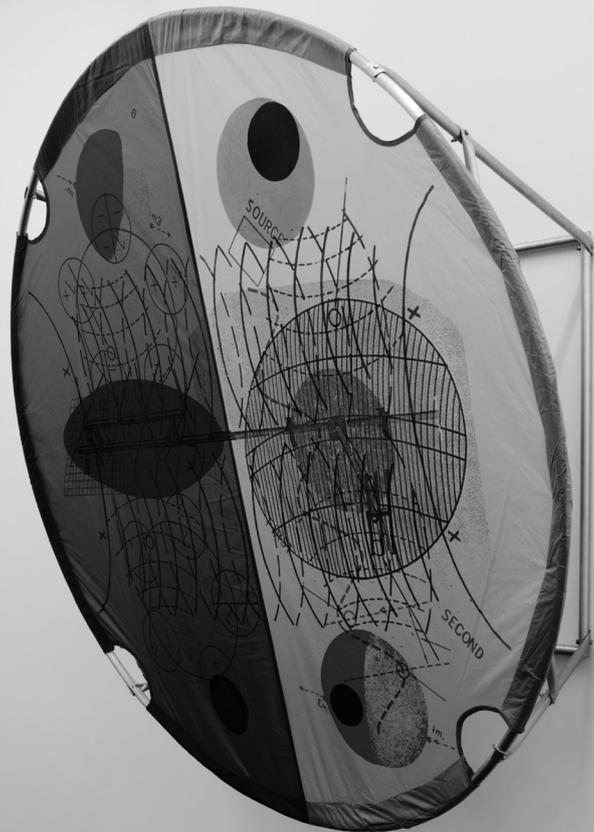
associated with the ritual of the tea ceremony. In this case, Sonnier treated a Japanese cypress with pigment and wax. Once again, he engaged with cultural techniques foreign to him, combining them with his artistic ideas and transforming them into sculpture.

„[...] I have developed a more flexible repertoire of forms and images [...]. Depending on place, time, and economics, I arrange work projects and draw from my image bank of ideas.”<sup>8</sup>

In the mid-1980s Sonnier spent more time in New York and from there returned more frequently to Louisiana. The work *Tri-Parish (Triptych)* (1988) can hence also be seen as a dialog between different cultures and places. The title alludes to his native Louisiana. *Tri-Parish* describes the situation of various parishes existing side by side. The Catholic Cajun communities (Sonnier's background, see note 1) cultivated a wide variety of rituals and a diverse cultural life with events and gatherings that were formative for Keith Sonnier. “These fluorescent pieces remind me a lot of driving in Louisiana. Coming back late at night, and in the distance seeing a club somewhere through the fog. About the most religious experience I've ever had in Louisiana: coming back from a dance late at night and driving over this flat land and, all of a sudden, seeing these waves of lights going up and down in the thick fog.”<sup>9</sup>

Colored, reflected light is also a key feature of the expansive installation *Kiosk I* (1987) at the foot of the Neues Museum's spiral staircase. The fluorescent light in this work serves the effect of dissolving the hardness and coldness of the metal construction to some degree, making it appear softer and warmer. Furthermore,

the freestanding, open spatial structure illustrates Sonnier's interest in architecture and statics. Custom-made, thick-walled and large plates of aluminum lend stability to the industrially produced and vertically standing beams. The title alludes to an everyday place where people meet—buying newspapers, tobacco products, and the like, ultimately a place where a lot of communication occurs.



Meridian Passage B, 1992

## D Plays of Light The 1990s

Numerous recourses to earlier work cycles are characteristic of Keith Sonnier's work in the 1990s. In particular, the works from the 1970s, dealing with information and transmission technologies as a possibility of communication, were addressed once more. Sonnier now frequently visualized this thematic complex via the image of the antenna, that turned into a kind of icon for him.<sup>10</sup> In the wall piece *Syzygy Transmitter* (1992), for example, he used different wire grids from television antennas, wire mesh, and various aluminum parts.

By returning to textiles, the artist built on the material vernacular of earlier works, using canvas in the cases of *Meridian Passage A* (1992) and *Meridian Passage B* (1992). Sonnier combined the objects, reminiscent of satellite dishes in their shape, with graphic representations. Suggesting transmission waves, they thus take up the theme of transmitting/receiving addressed earlier (cf. p. 17). His extensive knowledge of natural phenomena, his own experiences with nature and sailing, and skills in navigation and cartography may also have played a role. Furthermore, the concept of passage named in the title may allude to the many transitions between the worlds Sonnier moved among, as well as to his search for his own path.

In the 1990s Sonnier returned to Louisiana more frequently. He tended to his sick parents and, after their passing, took over their estate, including his father's hardware store. In his own words, Sonnier was now mainly focused on "[...] going back into my own psyche and [...] continuing to develop the form language of my work. At this point, I have a thirty-year body of work behind me, so it's a matter of using this source to continue my investigation ... to continue in the role of being an artist, and continue observing and recording my impressions of the culture, time, politics, whatever. So I have been going back home much more, recently."<sup>11</sup>

In this context, the title *Los La Butte (Tidewater Series)* (1994) could be seen as a kind of linguistic collage of English, Spanish, and French, reminding of the diversity of languages and dialects so crucial for Sonnier's life. The work itself consists of objects Sonnier retrieved around his parent's home, combined with a curvy yellow neon tube—thus bringing together artistic expression with experiences from a period in his life that was dominated by memories and parting with his parents. The sculpture could also be read as a critical commentary on environmental pollution.

For *Plunge* (1998), Sonnier also combined found pieces. In contrast to the more "freely" arranged shapes in *Los La Butte (Tidewater Series)* (1994), the individual elements are assembled widely symmetrically. The over-all structure might appear reminiscent of insects or flying objects, with two conspicuous drain cleaner bottles attached to the wire grid.

*Tailgate* (2000) refers to the so-called U.S. Car Culture with its numerous car-related happenings, such as tailgate parties, a type of event that usually takes place in connection with football games in the parking lots of stadiums. Accompanied by barbecues and alcoholic beverages, these gatherings are considered an American tradition. Everyday culture and functional design elements such as window panes and car lights merge into a sculptural form in this work.

Curved, circling lines of light suggest the drawing of a feminine-looking figure in *Okalouisa Cat Doucet Series* (1997). Focused on outlines, it also reminds of works by fellow artists such as Fernand Léger or Joan Miró. Okalouisa is a common female name in the southern states of the U.S. Furthermore, the series' title refers to the local history of Sonnier's home region. Via the name Cat Doucet the work is dedicated to an eponymous sheriff and known ladies' man active in Louisiana from the 1930s through to the 1960s. Sonnier commemorated several of the former sheriff's lovers in this series.

## E Everyday Life and Energy The 2000s and 2010s



USA: War of the Worlds (Sagaponack Blatt Series), 2004

The great diversity of themes and materials in the work of Keith Sonnier became evident once more in the last two decades of his life, when he spent a lot of time in his native Louisiana: “I guess I’m re-digging at my roots to come up with the essence of my oeuvre in a way, to find out what it’s all about, so I’m studying myself now, in a way. Living the life of an artist in New York isn’t enough for me anymore... I feel I have to be around nature more to sustain the creative energy of making work.”<sup>12</sup>

Sonnier ran his own rice farm and planned to set up a foundation, providing a space for artists of various fields—dance, music, visual arts—, and also giving them the opportunity to live, work, and exhibit there for a certain period of time. His goal was to give back to the community he had grown up in and to which, in his own words, he owed so much, through art, culture, and communication.<sup>13</sup>

Sonnier increasingly addressed social issues and specific political events in his practice during this period. Compared to earlier works, he now seemed to deal even more freely with materials or combine them in previously unfamiliar ways. This can be seen, for example, in the politically ambitious works *Baghdad Relic* (*Sagaponack Blatt Series*) (2004) and *USA: War of the Worlds* (*Sagaponack Blatt Series*) (2004). Both works are mounted on

walls, each of which is plastered with current, international daily newspaper issues of one single day, quoting a form of presentation that Keith Sonnier had chosen for earlier exhibitions. In Nuremberg, news from September 20 and 21, 2021 encounter works by the artist from the year 2004.

Similarly to *Channel Mix* (1972) (cf. p. 16), the random coincidence of news items from one day plays a significant role here. Sonnier once again confronts his viewers with a flood of images and text.

The work titles from this period in particular allude to political events and wars: the U.S. flags and the globe in *USA: War of the Worlds (Sagonack Blatt Series)* (2004), for example, hint at the United States' world power, which has at times resulted in devastating wars. With the title *Baghdad Relic (Sagonack Blatt Series)* (2004), Sonnier specifically addressed the Iraq war, however embedding it in a larger context. The rectilinearly arranged neon tubes are juxtaposed with the organic shapes of found objects, here: fossils of unknown origin. Illuminated with colored light, they appear almost mystical. Especially the ammonite, conveying unimaginably long dimensions of time with its history and occurrence, contributes to the impression of the work evoking infinite time scales. The area of present-day Iraq (Mesopotamia) belongs to the oldest advanced civilizations and is also known as a "cradle of civilization." Due to its volatile and dramatic history, including numerous wars and crises, massive destruction has taken place here.

Sagonack is a village on Long Island where Sonnier inhabited a farmhouse for decades. Possibly this addition alludes to the

works' place of origin. The place name itself originates from before European settlers took possession of the United States, and thus also refers to the violent history of North America itself. Today, it is one of the most expensive locations in the United States, with many celebrity residents.

Architecture and its various languages were a theme from the onset and remained of great importance to Sonnier. With *Portal Wall Extension (Portal Series)* (2013), he referenced portals, which featured diverse designs in the different stylistic periods. They are considered an element of architectural structuring, particularly in the entrance areas of a wide variety of building types. Sonnier here hinted both at the history of architecture and, more generally, the theme of access and transition, of entering and leaving or even crossing thresholds—a theme that already appeared in earlier works such as *In Between II* (1969) or *Kiosk I* (1987).

With *The Venus (Modern Relic Series)* (2011) and *Winged Victory (Modern Relic Series)* (2011) Sonnier once again demonstrated his ability to surprise his viewers: in their form and manner of making, these sculptures seem more reminiscent of works by Franz West or Jean Dubuffet. Keith Sonnier here took the liberty of exploring the subject of sensual experience so important to him once more, in a very haptic way: the figures, modeled with his hands from flocked plaster, emphasize not only their particularly tactile quality, but also his sculptural devotion to malleable materials. With the titles, the artist made a tongue-in-cheek reference to sculptural archetypes known since antiquity: the winged goddess of victory and the goddess of love, Venus.

The interplay of sculpture and physicality also applies to *Stock Prop* (2010) and *Stock Prop Study C* (2014), two works developed for the choreography of a dance performance by Molissa Fenley. The strictly composed sculptures are equipped with various holes, allowing for—if not provoking—physical interactions. Body parts, for example, can cling to the forms, be laid on or stretched through them, thus using the sculptures not only as props but as protagonists of the performance.

Via Keith Sonnier's various creative periods, the exhibition *Lightsome* allows viewers to comprehend a body of work that presents him not only as a light artist, but as an artist who knew how to bring together a diversity of realms from art and life.



View into the exhibition

✓ Neon Wrapping Neon and Incandescent Bulbs, In Between II, Red Flocked Wall, all 1969

## Notes

1. The roots of Cajun culture reach back to the 17th century. As immigrants from Normandy and Brittany (Acadiens), they were expelled from Canada by the British in the early 18th century and settled in southern Louisiana. The Cajuns are descendants of various cultures and were isolated from U.S. society until the beginning of the 20th century. A western French dialect, special cuisine, and music are the most important characteristics of traditional Cajun culture.
2. Keith Sonnier in conversation with Alexander Pühringer in: "Die Psychologie des Materials – Keith Sonnier im Gespräch mit Alexander Pühringer" in: *Keith Sonnier – Environmental Works 1968-99*, exhibition catalog Kunsthaus Bregenz, Bregenz 1999, p. 26.
3. Keith Sonnier quote from Sabine B. Vogel, "Keith Sonnier: Kunst als Kommunikation" in: *Artis. Das aktuelle Kunstmagazin*, 42. Jahrgang, Bern 1990, p. 39 (translation: LC).
4. Cf. Keith Sonnier, *Lecture Series*, New Orleans Museum of Art, January 17, 2012, <https://vimeo.com/31929454> (last viewed on October 8, 2021).
5. See note 2, p. 28.
6. See note 2, p. 25.
7. See note 2, p. 26.
8. Keith Sonnier quote from Dietmar Elger: "Material als Prozess" in: *Sonnier – Werke/Works*, exhibition catalog, Sprengel Museum Hannover, Kunsthalle Nürnberg, and others, ed. by Sprengel Museum Hannover, Ostfildern-Ruit 1993, p. 17.
9. See note 8, p. 18.
10. Cf. Lucius Grisebach: "Von Ba-O-Ba zu 'El Globo'. Keith Sonniers Arbeiten seit 1969" in: "Material als Prozess" in: *Sonnier – Werke/Works*, exhibition catalog Sprengel Museum Hannover, and others, ed. by Sprengel Museum Hannover, Ostfildern-Ruit 1993, p. 30.
11. See note 2, p. 30.
12. See note 2, p. 30.
13. See note 2, p. 30.

# Biography

- 1941** born in the small town of Mamou, northeast of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, USA
- 1959–63** Studies in Art and Anthropology, University of Southwestern Louisiana, Lafayette
- 1963/64** Temporary residence in France
- seit 1964** Relocation to New York, numerous trips to Haiti
- 1966** Master of Fine Arts degree, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey
- 1966** Participation in the exhibition *Eccentric Abstraction* curated by Lucy Lippard at Fischbach Gallery New York
- 1967** First visit of gallerist Rolf Ricke at Keith Sonnier's New York studio
- 1968** First solo exhibition at Galerie Rolf Ricke, Cologne
- 1969** Participation in the now legendary exhibitions *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York and *Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form*, Kunsthalle Bern; first presentation of *Red Flocked Wall* at Galerie Rolf Ricke, Cologne
- 2020** dies in Southampton, New York

## Selected solo exhibitions

**Since 1970** at Leo Castelli Gallery, New York; **1970** *Fluorescent Room*, Van Abbe Museum, Eindhoven; **1971** *Projects: Keith Sonnier*, Museum of Modern Art, New York; **1979** *Keith Sonnier: Porte Vue*, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; **1983** *Keith Sonnier: Act and Habit*, PS1, New York; **1989** *Keith Sonnier: Neon*, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.; **1993–1994** *Werke/ Works*, Sprengel-Museum Hannover, Kunsthalle Nürnberg, Kunstverein St. Gallen Kunstmuseum, Switzerland; **2015** *Keith Sonnier: Light Works*, Musée d'Art Moderne et d'Art Contemporain, Nice

## Selected group exhibitions:

**1972** *documenta 5*, Kassel; **1981** *Amerikanische Zeichnungen der siebziger Jahre*, Kunsthalle Basel; **1982** *Biennale di Venezia*

## Art in architecture

Large-scale public installations **since 1981**, including: **1989–1992** *Lichtweg / Lightway* at Munich Airport, a permanent light installation, stretching along 1 kilometer of terminal 1; **1998** Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center, Washington D.C.; **2002** Pfarrexpositur St. Franziskus, Roman Catholic church in Steyr, Austria; **2006** Kansas City International Airport



*Blow*, 1969 (videostill)

## Accompanying Program

### GUIDED TOURS OF THE EXHIBITION

*Saturday, 3 p.m.*

*Sunday, 11 a.m.*

#### **Additional tours**

*Monday, November 1, 2021 (All Saints' Day), 3 p.m.*

*Thursday, January 6, 2022 (Epiphany), 3 p.m.*

### TOUR WITH THE MUSEUM DIRECTOR

with Dr. Simone Schimpf

*Thursday, November 11, 2021 and January 20, 2022, 6 p.m. respectively*

### TOUR WITH THE CURATOR

with Kristin Schrader

*Thursday, October 21, 2021, 6 p.m.*

### TOURS FOR CHILDREN

*Sunday, November 7 and December 5, 2021, 11 a.m.*

Fee: 3 Euros in addition to the regular admission fee

### DIGITAL TOURS

*Wednesday, October 27, November 17, December 15, 2021*

*January 19, February 2, 2022, 6 p.m. respectively*

Please register at [museumspaedagogik@nmn.de](mailto:museumspaedagogik@nmn.de)

### TALKS

A series of conversations with companions from Sonnier's private and professional environments complement the retrospective. Dates and information regarding participation can be found on the museum website at [www.nmn.de](http://www.nmn.de).

### KIDS' WEEK

#### **Light-Play-Room**

*Tuesday, November 2 to Friday, November 5, 2021*

*Featuring two-hour programs for children from age 6 at 10, 11 a.m. and 2, 3 p.m.*

No additional fee.

The number of attendants is limited.

Please register at [museumspaedagogik@nmn.de](mailto:museumspaedagogik@nmn.de)

### DIGITAL INTRODUCTION FOR TEACHERS

with Kristin Schrader and Claudia Marquardt

*Friday, October 15, 2021, 6 p.m.*

Please register at [museumspaedagogik@nmn.de](mailto:museumspaedagogik@nmn.de)

Due to the current restrictions and precautions on account of COVID-19, events and guided tours may have to be cancelled on short notice; opening hours may change. We will gladly keep you posted on our website, through our newsletter as well as via Instagram and Facebook.

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**KEITH SONNIER. LIGHTSOME**

October 15, 2021 to February 6, 2022

**Curator:** Kristin Schrader

**Exhibition design:** Martin Kinzлмаier

Given the technical sophistication of this exhibition, our special thanks go out to the **team of museum technicians** and the **installation team:** Werner Henne, Jutta Birle, Jürgen Schuster, Markus Burkard, Carlos Cortizo, Monique Haber, Cris Koch, Andreas Oehlert and Lisa Wiczorek

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Photo: Wolfgang Stahl (*Ba-O-Ba VI*), Barbora Gerny (*Roman Trough*), Annette Kradisch (*Channel Mix*), Jürgen Schuster, NMN (*Color Wipe*), Claudia Marquardt, NMN (*Sel, Ausstellungsansicht*), Mischa Scherrer (*Meridian Passage B*), Peter Baracchi (*USA: War of the Worlds (Sagaponack Blatt Series)*), Yvonne Zmarsly (*Blow*), Günter König (*Rangoli IV (Rangoli Series)*)



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**[www.nmn.de](http://www.nmn.de)  **

**Opening hours:**

**Tuesday—Sunday: 10 a.m.—6 p.m.**

**Thursday: 10 a.m. – 8 p.m.**

**Closed on Mondays**

**Public Holidays: November 1, December 26, January 1 and 6,**

**open from 10 am to 6 pm**

**Closed on December 24, 25 and 31 December**