CASTELLI WAREHOUSE 1970

KEITH SONNIER

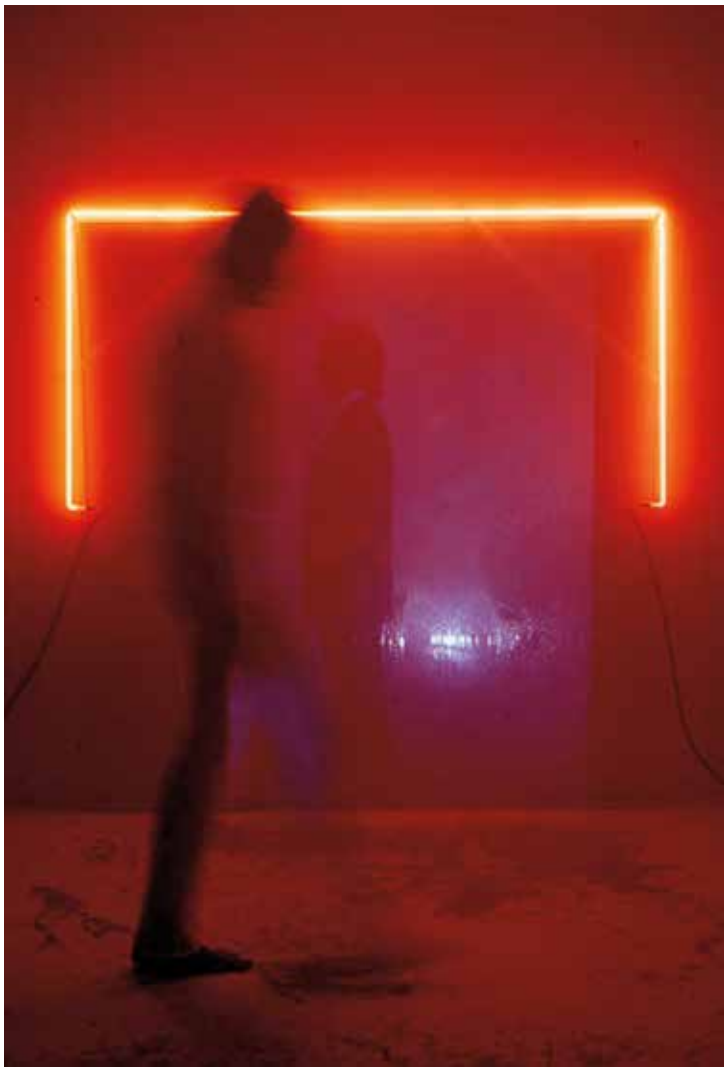
CASTELLI GALLERY 2015

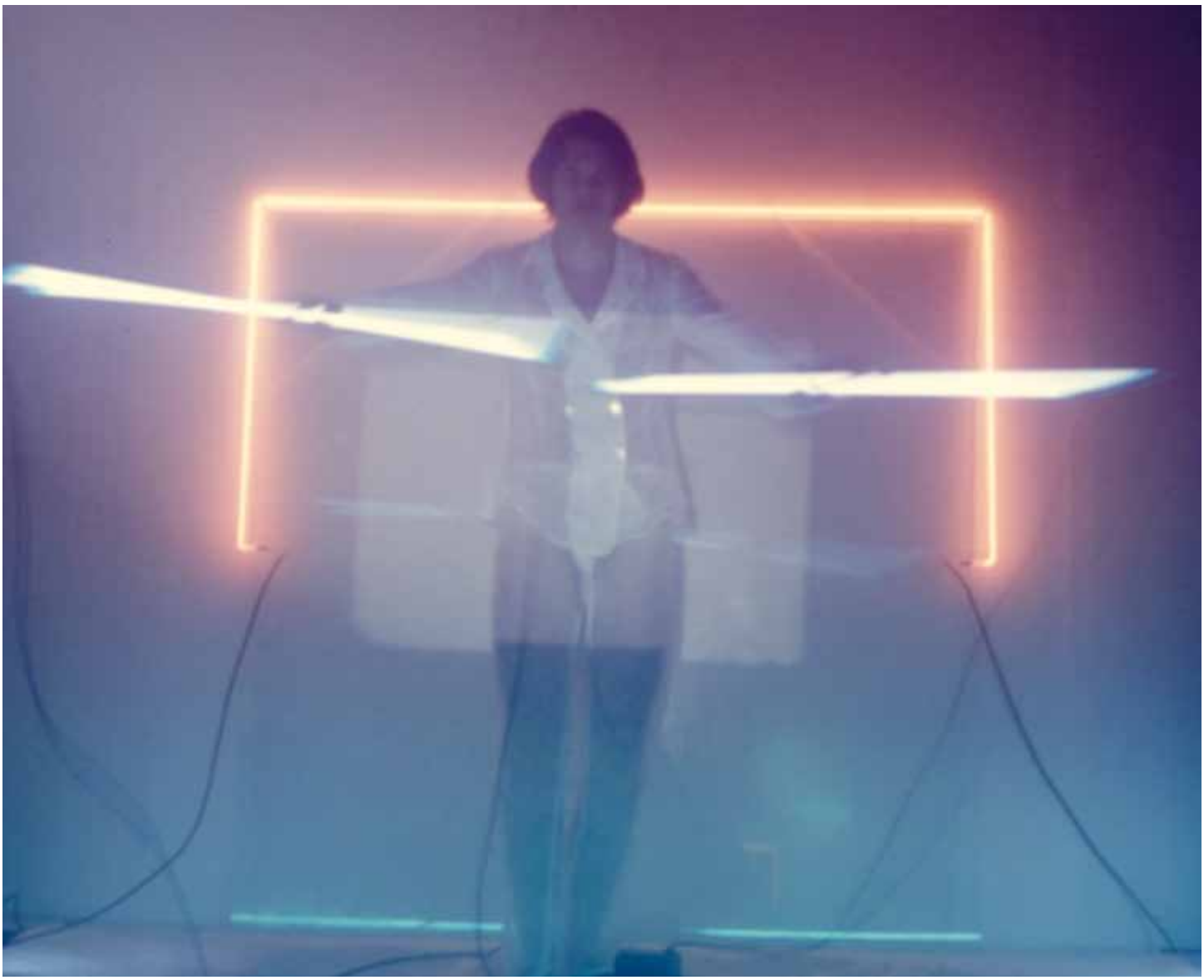
KEITH SONNIER

CASTELLI WAREHOUSE 1970 / CASTELLI GALLERY 2015

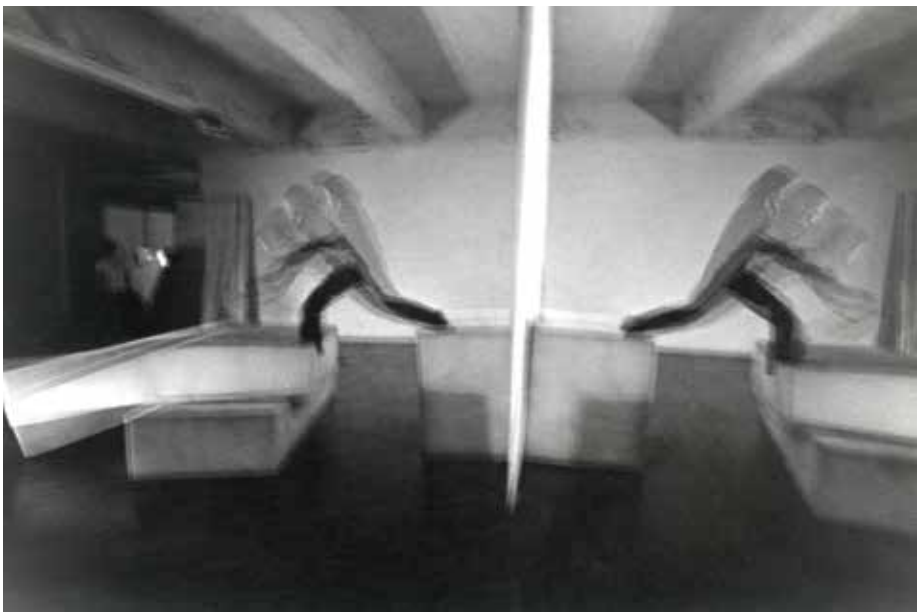
JANUARY 14 – MARCH 28, 2015 ***CASTELLI***

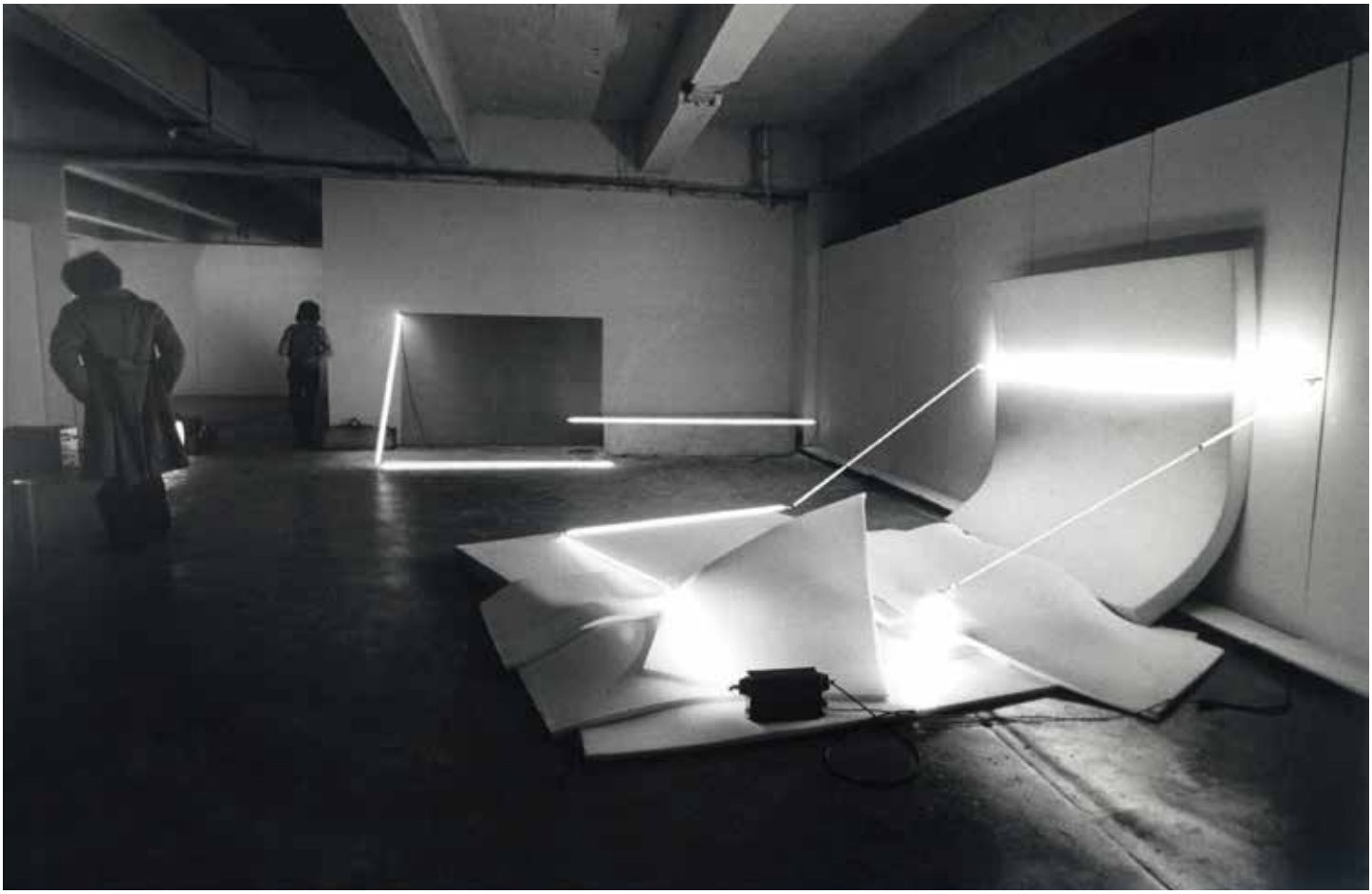
KEITH SONNIER STUDIO, *MULBERRY STREET, NY, LATE '60s*

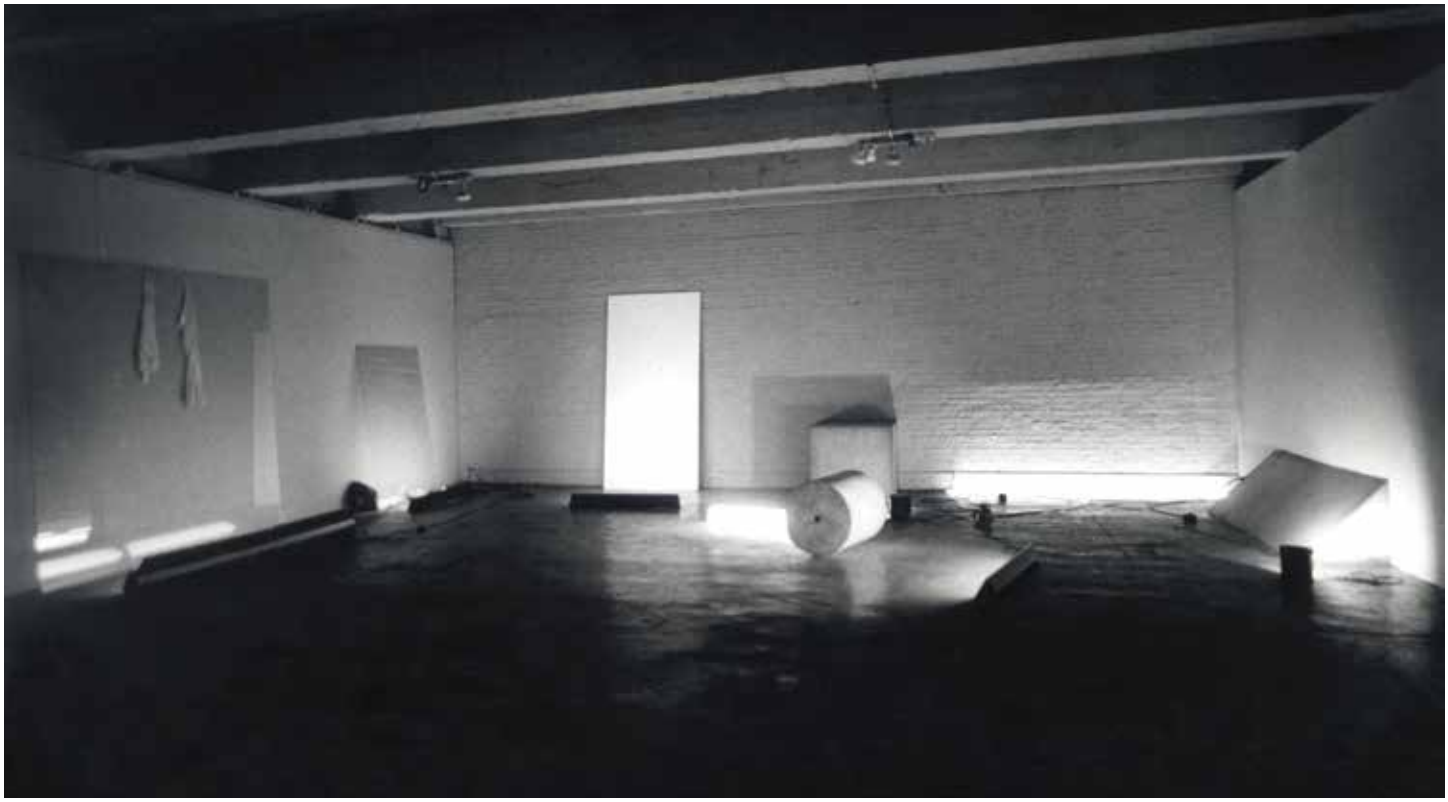




KEITH SONNIER, *CASTELLI WAREHOUSE, NY, MARCH 1970*







KEITH SONNIER INTERVIEW WITH BARBARA BERTOZZI CASTELLI

NOVEMBER 11, 2014

Barbara Bertozzi Castelli:
In December of 1968, Leo opened a new space, the Castelli Warehouse, at 103 West 108 Street. This new space was rather unusual for those days. It was a garage that was being used for showing works of art.

Keith Sonnier:
It was actually the Hague warehouse, and they were renting the garage. Leo's space was an open, raw space. This was pre-SoHo. I liked it, and when the gallery opened a few years later in SoHo, I was expecting the new location to maintain this rough quality, but it didn't.

BBC:
The first exhibition at the Warehouse was curated by Robert Morris, and was titled *9 at Castelli*. This was the first time you showed with the gallery. You were represented with three works that, in an interesting way, cover quite well the variety of materials you had been investigating: an *Untitled* work done with neon and cloth; *Mustee*, which consisted of latex applied and then pulled from the wall; and *Rat-Tail Exercise*, made with strings and flocking.

KS:
Oh, *Rat-Tail Exercise*. Yes.

BBC:
Until then, you had been concentrating on the series of *Files*, in which the idea is to take an object, isolate it from everything else and, rather than painting or manipulating it, transform it somehow by wrapping it.

KS:
The transformation wasn't so much about changing the shape of the object. The shape was often recognizable. It was more about manipulating and altering the context and the way the object was perceived and the way it was used.

BBC:
Speaking of the *Files*, you once said that these works are like mummies. They are fully wrapped objects, and you spoke about the idea of bodies, skin… This idea is still present in the work you showed at the *9 at Castelli* exhibition. Now it assumes new forms: you have satin and cloth scattered around a neon, and in *Mustee* the latex looks like the skin of the wall being pulled off.

KS:
Yes.

BBC:
So, you went from concentrating on just one object, to combining different objects and materials, and then elaborating on the relationship between them, investigating how they relate to the space, to the floor.

As in the case of the *Files*, you employed rather unconventional materials. I don't think latex had ever been used in sculpture before. You had used satin in the *Files*, but in that instance it was a tool to create a structure: now you simply take pieces of satin and let them hang on the wall.

KS:
Actually, Eva Hesse, and maybe even Louise Bourgeois, was using latex by then. Lynda Benglis was using poured rubber around then too.

You have to realize that my choice of objects and materials was not always based on extruded materials. The objects I was drawn to were psychologically imbued with a sense of otherness; with a feeling beyond their literal and material interpretation. Latex, for example, is an industrial material but it looks like skin and it has a sort of animalistic heritage. Satin is a very suggestive material too, not just in the way it looks, but in the way it feels. My choice of objects and materials wasn't based entirely on appearance. It was more about how they related to the senses.

BBC:
This was a time in which many artists were investigating new materials. Often, people discuss your work in the context of Arte Povera, and they connect your use of neon to a broader interest in industrial materials, which many artists shared. Or, they relate it to the employment of found materials. I don't think this is what interested you, meaning, I don't think you were interested in found materials: satin is not something you find, you need to go and look for it. Or, you might bump into it if you bump into somebody's clothes somehow. Even regarding the neon, I don't think what interested you was that it was a new industrial material.

KS:
I think I was drawn to materials that were psychologically loaded. When I looked at neon, I didn't think about neon signs. I had other associations. When I looked at latex, I wasn't thinking about the nature of the material itself. Well, maybe to a certain extent I was, because I liked that I could use the wall and the floor as the support for something that was so soft and pliable and that had no structure. But it was the psychological "buzz" from the material that prompted me to transform it into an artwork.

BBC:
You were speaking about neon, and when you said, 'I was not attracted by the neon signs, it was something else,' I was suddenly reminded that I read a while ago that your father was always having several televisions kept on simultaneously. I wondered if you were attracted to neon simply because of the light. Something that belonged to your life as a young person.

KS:
What interested me about neon was the linear travel of electricity, the travel of light across the horizon.

What I saw as a child, I think, had a lot to do with the building of my form language: the objects, the sensations, the manipulations. All of which goes back to simple childhood responses and thoughts. Any artist is a product of their environment. I hesitate to tell people about this because it's rather private and very intimate, but at the same time if I don't allow myself the freedom to delve into that aspect of my psyche, then what I make is not truthful enough.

BBC:
I think that we are all attracted by things that somewhere we know, we are familiar with, even if we may not be aware of this in a rational way. It is a little bit like if some emotional part of our brain wants to go back, if not to the physical home where we lived, then to some places it knows…

KS:
Yes, but I was also reacting to what was happening in the art world at the time I was first exposed to contemporary art. It was the height of Minimalism. When I went to Rutgers, my teacher in fact was Robert Morris. So, when I approached these materials that were not extruded materials, that present other psychological input, it was almost as if I was violating a minimalistic principle: I was allowing the psychology, or the persona, to enter into the making.

BBC:
And interestingly enough, the *9 at Castelli* exhibition was curated by Robert Morris. So, he must have appreciated your choice of materials, after all.

In 1970 you had your first one-man show at the Castelli Warehouse. In this exhibition, among other works, you showed *Ba-O-Ba*, in which you investigated further materials, like foam. In *Ju-Ju*, you used cheesecloth, (which you had had employed earlier), together with a tuxedo.

I wondered, what came first for you: the idea of the work you wanted to do? And you thought, 'Oh, I need to go and look for

cheesecloth and a tuxedo.' Or the cheesecloth came first, and you said, 'Oh, look at this cheesecloth, I need to do a work with this?

'Look at this neon, I should really use this material for something?' Was the choice of the materials something that came before the idea of the piece, or did you have the idea of the piece and you then went to look for something you thought was going to work for that piece?

KS:
I had an idea for a piece and I had to find materials to translate that idea. But more importantly, I sought out materials that were not traditionally sculptural materials.

Artists of my generation (Carl Andre, Robert Smithson, Richard Serra, Bruce Nauman, Eva Hesse and Jackie Winsor) chose to use materials that were not considered "art" materials, so the principle was different. Can you make art using industrial metals, light bulbs, fiberglass and ephemeral substances like latex? We made art that was defined by its defiance of the traditional idea of what could be considered art.

At the time, there was much debate about whether work could still be defined as sculpture if it was not made from something permanent like bronze or marble, or if it wasn't on a pedestal. If sculpture doesn't have a base then it has to rely on the architecture, or the concept, to exist.

BBC:
Because it has to be held by something.

KS:
Yes, it has to be held by something. I would also look at a material and say, 'Well, this reminds me of something when I touch it.' And I would like that to be imbued in the work. When I first started making artwork while studying with Morris, I was making work that inflated. It blew up. Not that it exploded, but it actually grew in size. It is very much a principle of the modern world that when you turn on a light switch, the light extends, when you turn on a fan, the air blows, when you turn on the air conditioner, this happens, and I grew up with these objects as part of my environment.

BBC:
Well, I think it is also very interesting that you studied with Robert Morris: even if he has been a founding member of the Minimal Art movement, I always had a hard time thinking of Robert strictly in terms of Minimal Art.

KS:
No. He was open to many other aspects and conditions.

BBC:
The work he exhibited in the now famous show at Green Gallery in 1964-65 resonates in relation to the body of the viewer.

KS:
Right. Or how the person moved through the space. I like this period of his work very much. I was influenced by it. It's what led me to introduce light in my work, what led me to the idea that you could alter a space with light and move through it.

BBC:
Two things are worth noting in your show at the Warehouse: one, indeed, is your use of light, also in relation to color and to darkness—because the show was a dark show. The other is how different the work looked installed in the Warehouse in comparison to when it had been in the studio.

You challenged the use of conventional materials and the pedestal in traditional sculpture, and then, going a step beyond this, it seems that you actually reached the point in which the work only exists when and where it is installed, and each time it is its own thing.

One looks at the photos you took of the work in the studio and imagines it will be the same in the Warehouse, but then the photos you took at the Warehouse show something quite different.

KS:
Yes, but the key to all of it was the video.

BBC:
In which way?

KS:
The video froze the work in time. At first I tried to make a film of the work. This wasn't successful because I couldn't see what I was doing while I was filming.

BBC:
So, you had somebody filming as you were making the work?

KS:
Yes, and then I saw the film. But it took one month to process. So I only saw the film a month later.

BBC:
So, what was intended to be the work? What you built? Or the film of you building it? Or both?

KS:
Well, the film was supposed to be projected onto the work somehow.

I had large mirrors up in my studio for ten years as I worked on a series called *Mirror Act.* I wanted to be able to walk "into" the

work and I wanted the work to surround me. I worked in what I called an "infinity space," or a fourth dimension, (it was really a kind of false hologram)—a space between two mirrors that were set up facing each other. I would then project the film on the mirror, multiplying the images.

When I introduced video, that allowed me to add a fourth dimension. By that I mean I could observe the work from a distance and record it, or freeze aspects of it that interested me, with all the components and variations intact. It was a way for me to watch my own live process.

This led to the making of different pieces: you have the materials and you manipulate them, but then you shoot a video and they get frozen, and you see what the work looks like. So, I could make ten pieces in variation and film them and then I would make a series of pieces that are almost alike—the *Ba-O-Ba* series for example. At the same time, I drew a lot and that was important. I always made drawings of what I saw—simple line drawings and primary color. The drawings were working drawings and they became scripts in a way. But the electricity, since it was linear, directed the structural composition of the drawings.

BBC:
You go from a moment in which you say, 'I am not interested in just looking at something, I am interested also in touching something, I am interested in smelling something, I am interested in…'

KS:
…in walking through it…

BBC:
'…I want to walk through it, I want to hear it,' and beyond all of that you are now also introducing time.

KS:
Exactly.

BBC:
Time, concepts like the "here and now."

KS:
And the dark.

BBC:
I never understood this simply from looking at these old photos.

KS:
It wasn't until my first trip to India and my first departure from Western culture that I assimilated these concepts. I could look at the work and experience it in a very different way after that. In the West—and let's not forget that my cultural background is deeply rooted in French Acadian Catholicism—the church

created a certain distance. There is the altar and there is the participant.

And you were not allowed to touch. You were allowed to adore…but only from a distance. But then I went to India. There you walk into a temple and things are touched, and caressed, and washed. Food is thrown as an offering. It brings things down to a human level.

BBC:
However, we here are speaking about works you did in 1969–70, before going to India. Didn't you go to India in 1972?

KS:
Going to India opened me up to the idea that there have always been other ways to think about art and art making. Other ways that have always been accepted, and seeing that allowed me to accept it too. It's true that I made the works we've been discussing before I went to India, but at that point the focus was more on the struggle to change preconceived Western ideas about art. It didn't occur to me that Eastern cultures had already embraced the very ideas we were trying to introduce.

BBC:
Well, yes, in a certain way, there is this, I guess, Euro-centered idea that art should be unchangeable and forever. We die, but the work we do survives us and will be there forever. And, I think the choice of the materials traditionally used in the West—you know, bronze—it may relate to that.

KS:
Right, exactly, rather than maybe what the works actually were supposed to mean at that time.

My choice of ephemeral materials was deliberate, and it was another way to react against the permanence of traditional sculptural materials.

BBC:
One of the pieces in your 1970 show at the Warehouse uses foam. Foam is a highly perishable material. We could say the same about cloth. Will these materials be here in fifty years? Will they not be? It looks like they are not intended to be here fifty years from now.

KS:
In a way, the possibility of loss is inherent in everything really. You can also relate it to the basis of language, to drawing, and to thought. It is either the Mayans, or the Aztecs…they base their language on cloth, and knots. If they no longer exist, then the language is lost. We base our language on something else, we base it on the written words, but they can also be lost.

I was drawn to cotton as a material because I grew up in the deep South. Cotton was the basis of the economy so it was everywhere—it was very much a part of my cultural experience. I didn't go to museums to see art. I had other visual experiences.

BBC:
Much of what goes into this early work seems to have this strong relationship with something that was impressed deep inside you, in your childhood.

KS:
Absolutely, and I still think your first impressions and sensations stay with you all your life.

BBC:
Sometimes we remember books we read when we were ten years old better than what we read three days ago. When we are old we lose the memory of things that happen during our recent life, but we gain the memory of our childhood again…

KS:
Right, and that's a very interesting concept. I think there's a real push and we are supposed to make this highly volatile, intellectualized work, but we are constantly seeing artists, even an artist like Jeff Koons, violate that and turn it around.

BBC:
We are living in a world where people like concept, they like idea, more than they like psychological feelings and emotions. Aren't you afraid that your work might be seen as too beautiful, too romantic?

KS:
Well, at the beginning I was very worried that people would read too much into the psychological input. I was very protective of that. I tended to hide behind abstraction, and somehow fit it into this modern context. The last thing that I wanted people to know about was the deep psychological source of my imagery. For example, something like *Ba-O-Ba* seems very sophisticated. The works of the *Ba-O-Ba* series are sophisticated, but the idea behind them is very simple and comes from a kind of childish impression.

BBC:
Where does the title *Ba-O-Ba* come from?

KS:
At the beginning, I didn't want to have titles for my work because I didn't want anybody to know my source, because it was so personal.

The term *Ba-O-Ba* has several sources. First of all, I'm bilingual—grew up hearing English and French—so I was very attuned to picking up tonality in language. I was very interested in that.

Ba-O-Ba comes from a variety of things. I was very involved in film and video early on because of my upbringing—my dad watched five or six television sets at a time and my aunt ran the local movie house. So I'd pick up tickets for the black loge and I'd watch the same movie fifty times over. Let's not forget that I grew up in a culture still mired in segregation. I was very drawn to the darkness and the light. When the film would come down, you would enter into the fantasy at the movie theater: this was a unique experience, very different than watching television.

When I started to travel, I went to Western places that were very primitive, like Haiti, and the Haitian dialect really intrigued me. There I saw a boat parked in the harbor in Jacmel, which is a wonderful old town in Haiti, and "Ba-O-Ba" was written on the boat. It was a kind of Haitian abstraction of a word, and I asked the boat owner what it meant. He told me, 'It's how you feel when you are in the boat and the moonlight touches your skin'. And I thought, 'Wow, this is a pretty interesting concept.' When I was a young student in France, I was watching television and there was a French commercial called *Bain o Bain le Bain a la Japonaise,* and it was this thing of using terminologies to conjure up different sensations, and that fascinated me too.

BBC:
During your show at the Warehouse in 1970, were you trying to share those experiences through your work? And now, in 2014 or 2015, do we want to try to recreate those experiences, or this is no longer the point?

KS:
Those objects were assembled in a dark space for the exhibition, and that experience was frozen in time by the use of video.

That happened in that moment. It's not my intention to try to recreate it, or duplicate it in any way. This will be a different experience.

Art is experienced differently by different people, and often it means what you think it means.

The important thing is that today I've learned that I can accept where it all came from. In the '70s it was very hard for me to accept where it came from.

BBC:
Seeing the work now, 40 or 50 years later, I think we lost the perception of how difficult it was to first show these works. We lost the perspective that people were even discussing whether to define them as works of art or not.

KS:
You know, what was important for me is that I wasn't able to make this work until I came to New York. New York gave me the freedom to become an artist.

It allowed me to understand my relationship with Europe. You have to realize that I was one of the youngest from the first generation of artists that began an exchange with Europe culturally, intellectually and socially. As young artists we were accepted in Europe way before we were in America.

BBC:
In a very short period of time we went from people looking at France as the center for art, to Robert Rauschenberg winning the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale in '64 and all of a sudden seeing America taking the leadership.

KS:
Right, and since you mentioned Robert Rauschenberg, he really showed the way regarding bridging the gap between art and life. He put this concept together.

I have to acknowledge Robert Rauschenberg for many reasons. When I was a young student in Europe in 1964/65 I realized, after seeing a work of his, that I was an American artist and I had to come back to the US. I saw *Oracle* in Paris, this assemblage of amplified junk. I knew I had to come back to New York.

Every time I saw work like this it was like seeing a movie. It was a combination of all kinds of things. And then I came back and I happened to meet Rauschenberg. Only in New York can this kind of thing happen. We showed at the same gallery too…

BBC:
How did it help you showing with a gallery like Leo's, which was at the center of the art world in those years?

KS:
I was so naïve I didn't even realize that. I just thought, 'Well, of course. I'm supposed to show there because I'm making really very important things!' I guess all young artists have this assumption.

BBC:
I often think about the Castelli Warehouse—again, opening in '68, before SoHo.

The way in which you talk about your work, the "seven elements"—the five senses and space and time…work like this couldn't have happened in a normal gallery's space, you needed a warehouse.

KS:
Yes, I needed a warehouse…or that. America was the right culture for that to happen because things were really opening up and becoming very experimental and Leo was very much a part of that. Castelli Warehouse was ahead of its time. It was more like a Kunsthalle or artist's loft than a gallery.

BBC:
Somebody told me that some artists met at a party—the Warehouse had just opened—and were talking about the Warehouse; they were saying that they thought Leo was in the business of losing money.

KS:
Yeah, we were on our stipend. We were the last artists to be part of the stipend system at the gallery, and it was very important for us because we got enough money to make work. We never imagined that we would actually sell anything. I don't think there was even a price list!

BBC:
Back for a second to the dark show at the Warehouse. Another piece you installed is titled *Ju-Ju*. It employs glass, cheese cloth and on the floor there is a tuxedo. What does *Ju-Ju* as a title refer to?

KS:
Well, actually, the funny thing was that Leo knew what it meant right away when I showed the work to him. He said, 'Oh, been thinking about voodoo?' And the truth was that I first heard the term during one of my trips to Haiti. I was drawn to the Haitian dialect because it was very similar to my own Louisiana patois. When I'd hear a Haitian word, it would immediately conjure up images.

BBC:
How could Leo know that?

KS:
Well, it was probably intuitive but we also have to remember that Leo was European and had an ear for many languages.

BBC:
I would like to go back to your idea of filming yourself doing the work and then eventually projecting the film on the work. You never really projected the films onto the works?

KS:
I did project light on the works as well as some video images and slides. This is not, however, the reason I wanted to re-exhibit the videos in our show.

In some of the videos, the frame opens, and it's as though you're allowed to move

into the space of the film. It's reminiscent of Jean Cocteau's *Orpheus*, where he walks into the frame, or the frame is carried on his back as a sheet of glass: it is this concept that you are allowed to enter a pictorial plane, and inside it you have one object behind another object behind another object.

In contemporary terms, we began to think of the frame being altered and changed and, especially with video, you move from left to right to open the frame—that's what the camera can achieve—and that produces a very different concept of looking and of experiencing. That was the big appeal of the television too.

A series of sculptural work like *Ba-O-Ba* exemplifies these same neoclassical horizontal electrical cuts in space.

BBC:
This is first time I'm really understanding the importance of video and film in relation to your work and, in a certain way, I also understand why you at a certain point decided to stop making film.

KS:
Well, that's an important point. I moved on to television because of the narrative possibilities and how it defined space. My early investigations in *Dis-Play*, 1969, and *Painted Foot/Black Light*, 1970, were about touching and feeling, and experiencing different lights—from black light, to white light, to infrared light.

Later, with *The TV Hybrids*, 1971, and *TV In and TV Out*, 1972, I wanted to make things in relation with the object of the television and the experience of viewing, where the performer is in front of the TV and talks to the TV. And then I focused on the electronic aspects of television: how the frame is manipulated and how you pull one object from one plane to another, or one track to another track.

My final phase of interest was transmission: how the signal travels from one place to another. It was because of Castelli that I made my first international broadcast, which led to satellite usage, and I went on to create a body of two–way video and sound pieces, like *Send/Receive Satellite Network: Phase I and Phase II*, 1977, which I made in collaboration with Liza Béar.

BBC:
Would you consider *Air to Air*, shown at Castelli in New York and Ace in Los Angeles in 1975, part of this body of works?

KS:
We connected the two galleries, and you would hear in New York what was happening in LA, and in LA what was happening in NY. We would overhear phone calls in the galleries with conversations like, 'You have a Warhol for sale? How much do you want for that?' But, you know, that period of using mass communication and satellite systems to make work made me realize that, if I wanted to continue in this direction, I couldn't be the same kind of artist anymore. I was going to be behind a desk and I would become a television producer or a director and I realized I didn't want to do that. I had chosen to be an artist, so I went back to drawing. I went back to making work in the studio.

BBC:
Eventually, what is really constant throughout these different experiences is drawing.

KS:
I didn't being to draw until I was 15 and only then because I was ill and convalescing. I began to create a drawing form language that only I could understand, which I still use today. But you are right, the drawing is what remains hidden behind, when materials are perishable or a sculpture is remade over time.

BBC:
What stays the same, and what has changed in a work from 1969 that is being reconstructed now?

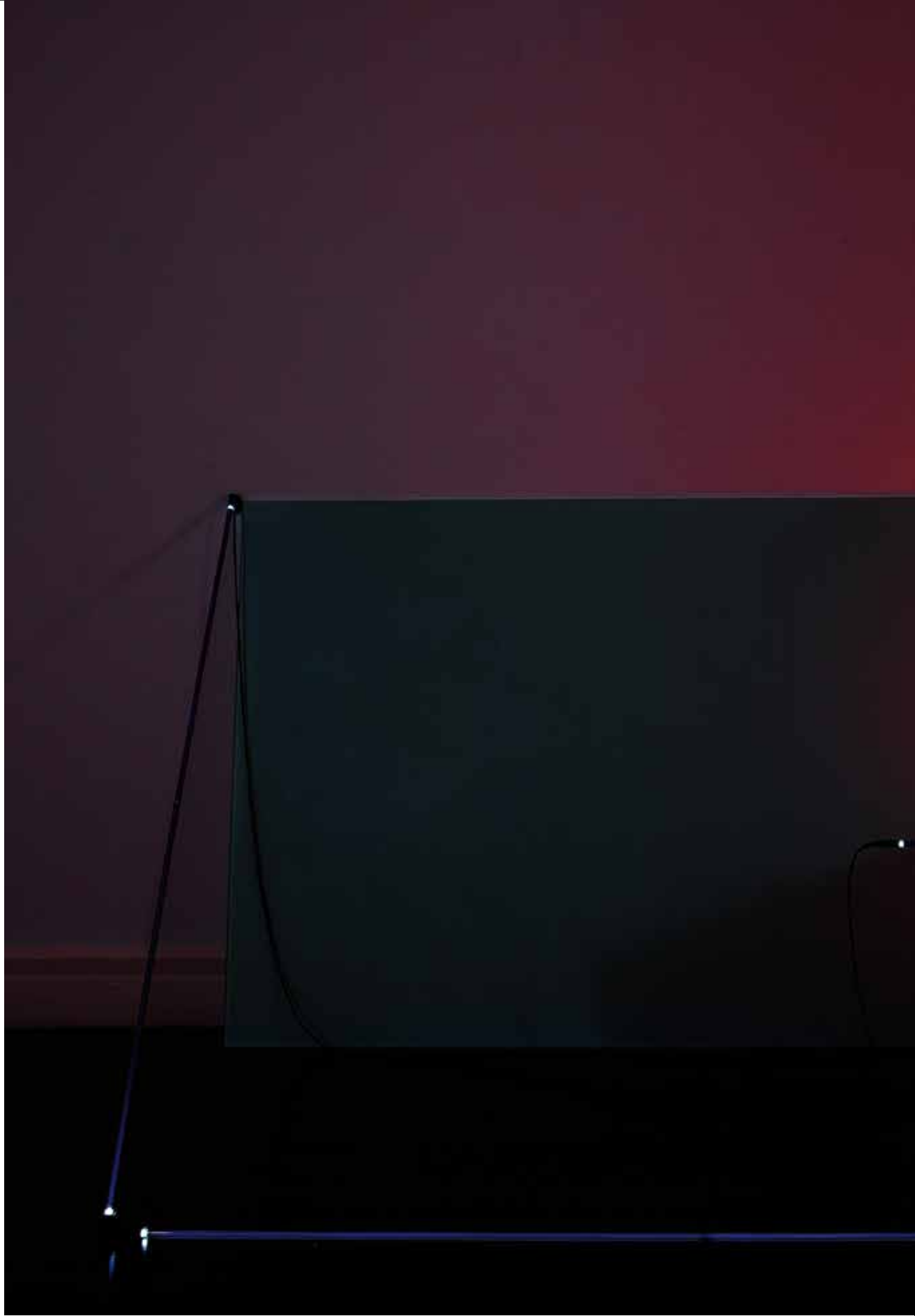
KS:
The original idea is important. The work should remain true to the original idea.

In researching the material for this show—I was concerned that I wouldn't be able to find this fluorescent pigment anymore, in which case I wondered what I would do. Then I thought, 'Well, I'll just have to come up with another material,' but in the end it wasn't necessary. I was able to find it.

Nothing is ever exactly the same. I've always considered everything to be part of the sculpture: the neon tubes, the electrical wire, the transformer. The technological components have evolved since the sixties —for example, the transformers are digital now, and this alters the appearance of the work somewhat. But otherwise the work is true to the original drawing, the original concept.

And it is only because of you that I've reinstated *Ju-Ju;* until now it just existed as a kind of idea. I think I've remade that suit five times, each time has been a different attempt to complete things, and it's still not complete. Each time *Ju-Ju* is made, it has to go through a transformation, it must be imbued with a soulful purpose. It's funny in a way, the work has to have a phosphorescent spirit. ●

Castelli Gallery installation January 2015



Castelli Gallery installation January 2015

KEITH SONNIER FILM

Mirror Act, 1968, color, 32 min., ancillary sound.
Mirror Act was the first attempt for Sonnier to utilize the moving image. It was his first film. He knew that the *Mirror Act* set he created needed to have a projected, recorded presence. Not yet familiar with video, this short film lead to later work with video in combination with film. *Mirror Act* was made as a film first and then a series of film works shot directly from a television screen followed and eventually a series of *TV Hybrids* were produced. After *Mirror Act,* Sonnier became less interested in participating in his own films, preferring to include other participants, and to remain more in the role of observer.

Dis-Play, 1969, b&w, 11 min., sound.
Camera: Richard Landry. Performers: Tina Girouard, Michael Kern. Kinescope.
Dis-Play was originally shot as a half-inch videotape in the artist's studio and a kinescope later made from parts of it; the tape included several elements elaborated in later videotapes.

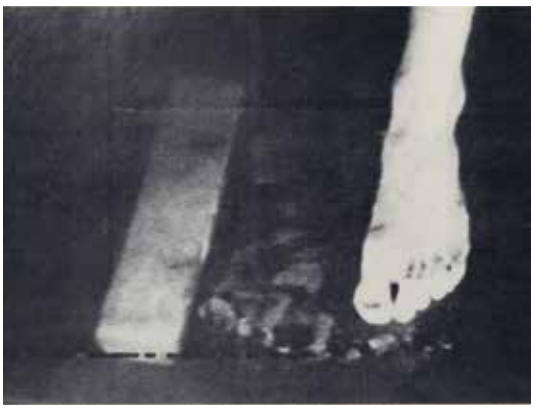
The set consisted of two six-foot square mirrors propped against opposite walls so that the performers could relate directly to what they were doing in real time. A slide projector focused onto the wall next to one of the mirrors projected white light at half-second intervals; occasionally, slides were inserted of activities from previous taping sessions. A large stretched theatrical scrim hung from the ceiling between projection wall and projector, creating a floating screen (It was the visual effect of this element that suggested to Sonnier the use of large-scale video projections.)

In the kinescope, the scrim works as a light shutter, which opens and closes as performers move it up and down. The performers cue their activity to their reflections in the mirrors or their enlarged shadows on the scrim. The combination of scrim and projected white light suggests other spatial dimensions, and the kinescope, which combines different time-sequences from the videotape, plays on the visual and audio ambiguity created by the levels of reflection and projection. An alternation of moods is set up: in some sequences the images are light and diffused; in the darker spans there are close-ups on more focused movements. The soundtrack (usually music or talk about the sound of the equipment) follows the mood of the activity.

Painted Foot: Black Light, 1970, b&w, 16 min., sound. Kinescope.
Painted Foot: Black Light was shot as a half-inch black and white videotape and shown in large projection using an Amphicon projector, one of the first uses made of this projection device by the artist. Sonnier later made a kinescope from the tape because he wanted to preserve the scale of the video projection.

The videotape was shot with a stationary camera, the performance area heavily lit and demarcated with black light together with sequenced strobe lighting. The performer enters the activated space and arranges the props—a jar of luminous paint and a two-foot length of wood—in full camera view. The activity suggests a ritualistic manipulation of elements—he slowly applies the pigment to his food, working his way up to the knee, the strobe light setting up a rhythmical cadence. He moves his food repeatedly from the paint-splattered floor area to the wooden prop in a slowed-down stamping rhythm, flexing his ankle, holding his food in different positions, and shifts the prop around with it. The activity ends with the head of the performer placed against the length of wood, now covered with imprints of his foot.

The kinescope made from the original taping reinforces black and white contrast and the use of black light suggests a negative infrared image. KS/LB.



Rubdown, 1970, b&w, 11 min., sound.
Performer: Michael Kern. Kinescope.
Rubdown, like *Positive-Negative*, was also made in a television studio at the University of California at San Diego, used in performance as a large projection, and originated on one-inch tape, using two cameras. The kinescope makes more use of dissolves and wipes rather than a vertical split screen as in *Negative.*

Filling one half of the frame is the torso of a male lying on his back. In the other half one hand rubs a foam rubber mat. Off-camera microphones are used to amplify the movement of the hand on the foam. Other props are wooden blocks, which are arranged around and on top of the performer. The torso remains motionless throughout the film. The two cameras probe different aspects of the obviously sensual activity. These shifts of point of view alter the viewer's focus on the activity so that the change in scene through dissolve and wipe, and negative and positive keying serve to rarefy and redefine the erotic connotations of the activity more abstractly.

Positive-Negative, 1970, b&w, 12 min., silent.
Performer: Tina Girouard. Kinescope.
Positive-Negative was made in the video studio of the Medical School at the University of California, San Diego, and projected during a live 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 and one-inch tape were used, and the lighting and technical facilities available mitigated the need for objects that in the earlier situational tapes had functioned as light modifiers or performance props. Rather than the camera being stationary and the activity dependent on one camera view, the set now remains stationary and the dual cameras, properly mixed, alter scenes instantaneously. In *Positive-Negative*, the two 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 solarization (causing image disintegration), wipes, dissolves and, at the end of the kinescope, superimpositions, alter figure-ground relations.

Negative, 1971, b&w, 11 min., sound.
Camera: Richard Landry. Performer: Tina Girouard. Kinescope.
Negative is a kinescope made from a half-inch videotape shot entirely in negative. A stationary camera focuses on Girouard's leg from the knee down, center frame; she moves her foot heel-toe heel-toe to the beat of a metronome. The zoom lens of the camera is opened and closed to the same beat.

At first all that is seen is a repetitive sequence of activity in the foreground in high contrast. The synchronized movements of the zoon lens have a voyeuristic touch, as though the camera were peering through a keyhole. In the original taping, the performer cued her movements in response to the image feedback of the video monitor, and one senses a narcissistic enjoyment of her moving heel and toe, flexing her ankle or arching her foot. Towards the end of the film, the sound sequences changes (the metronome is speed ing up) and the frontality of the image opens up by revealing two additional frontal planes, which expand the depth of field. The performer is in fact seated on a clear Plexiglas cube through which her leg has been filmed. The cube is identified when another performer's hand (the artist's) enters the frame and smears paint on two of its sides. He then applies the paint to Girouard's foot and leg, which continues to move in time to the metronome.

Lightbulb and Fire, 1971, b&w, 21 min., sound. Kinescope.

As in *Painted Foot: Black Light, Lightbulb and Fire* was made from a half-inch videotape in which Sonnier himself performed. The elements in this kinescope are a trick light bulb, which is turned on and off by hand or foot, and silver paint, which is applied to hand and foot, so that imprints are left within camera view in accordance with their movements. A flammable powder is sprinkled on the floor, encircling the activity, and then ignited as the light bulb is removed.

In this form of situational shooting, used in many of Sonnier's early videotapes, there is a constant close-up on an activity, which is not so much task-oriented as it is a way of sustaining the performer's interest throughout a span of recorded time i.e. the length of the tape. Some of its visual aspects derive from the framing of TV commercials—many of the tapes involve a focus on the simple movement of a part of the body repeated over and over. However the movement never becomes mechanical or rote-like because video monitor feedback in the original taping gives the performer an instant awareness of what he looks like on camera, and he can adjust the detail of his activity in response to what he sees.

The use of silver or luminous paint, of black light, and positive-negative reversals was intended to heighten contrast and to amplify visual effects, which would normally require elaborate studio facilities. They also had another function, that of emphasizing the object-like quality of a part of the body, which, by being singled out through framing, had already been objectified.

Foot and Strobelight, 1970, b&w, 8 min., sound.

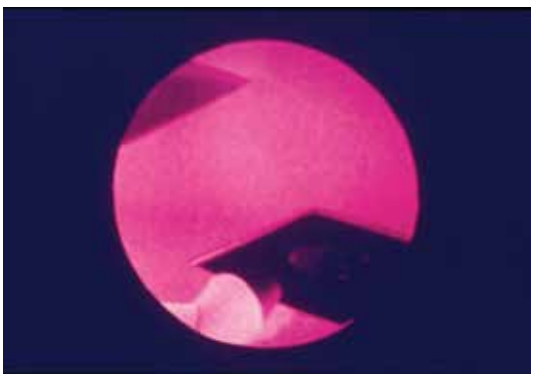
Camera: Richard Landry. Performer: Tina Girouard. Kinescope.

Foot and Strobelight is a kinescope made from selected parts of a 60-minute half-inch black and white videotape. The lighting is the same as for *Painted Foot: Black Light* (performance area lit by black light and sequenced strobe) but the elements include a foam rubber block, which supports two stocking feet kicking against it. The strobe light hits the foam directly creating an after-image, and making the feet look as though they're moving twice as fast as they actually are.

The microphone picks up the sound of the pacing strobe, the sound of the kicking feet muffled by the foam, and the performer's moans as she grows more and more exhausted. The camera is moved from its upright stationary position and turned sideways several times during the activity, thus confusing the spatial orientation.

The effect of the strobe light on the foam produces a very grey film image, followed by after-images of higher contrast.

T-Hybrid-V-I, *1971,* color/b&w, 12 min., sound. Kinescope.



The *Hybrid* series of kinescopes derive their title from the juxtaposition of commercial television content with situational narrative taped material.

T-Hybrid-V-I is a split-screen kinescope in which the input from six or seven different, black and white, studio-shot tapes is intercut with three-minute sections from daytime television programming. These were shot from one half of a TV monitor while the other was masked, and original situational footage was edited in to the blank action of the film. The film was then rolled back and the procedure repeated with the other half of the monitor.

Numerical counting sets up the narrative structure of the situational taping: first by a man in Spanish, then a woman in Chinese, then a man in English. While the counting takes place on one half of the screen, fragments of daytime TV movies are seen on the opposite side, setting up a dramatic tension between the two visual inputs. This tension is accentuated by the soundtrack, which switches back and forth from one half of the screen to the other, thus deflecting the viewer's attention from side to side.

The black and white sections of original tape were occasionally tinted by placing corrective color lenses over the kinescope camera so that off-air reception color is combined with flat monochromatic tints.

T-Hybrid-V-II, 1971, color, 11 min., sound.
Performers: Tina Girouard, Suzanne Harris. Kinescope.
This kinescope was made from excerpts from a one-hour black and white videotape of situational activity shot in the artist's studio. A distinctive feature of this *Hybrid* is its framing: a circular mask replaces the rectilinear frame of the monitor for kinescoping. The color, an intense red-violet, is generated directly through the monitor by intensifying the appropriate color guns and by artificially tinting the black and white videotape.

In the original studio taping, two cameras and a special effects generator were used. The performers sit on a piece of foam rubber out of which a hole has been cut; corresponding circular image is set up on the wall behind them by a sheet of paper with a hole cut out of the center. Each performer holds a microphone into which she speaks and which she also manipulates as a crop. The soundtrack combines with the voices of Girouard and Harris counting and talking, Sonnier's muffled directions in the background, and the sound of the microphones rubbing against the foam.

The performers are almost always seen in close-up, with the circle occasionally being split horizontally or vertically. There are frequent wipes and horizontal roll bars, and at times the image is abstracted into line patterns: an effect produced during the making of the kinescope by fast-forwarding the tape. Because of this, the pacing of *TV-Hybrid-V-II* moves from static dialogue to accelerated activity, suggesting animated time-shifts.

T-Hybrid-V-III, 1971, color, 11 min., sound. Kinescope.
As in *T-Hybrid-V-II,* a mask was placed over the video monitor during the making of the kinescope, this time so as to create two equal vertical parallel rectangles on a black background. The rectangles show sections from a one-hour black and white videotape, which is artificially colored blue and green from the monitor, rather than by tinting the lens of the kinescoping camera.

The activity is minimal; large paper cut-out numerical digits in one section of the screen, and parts of the body in the other, dictate the composition of the imagery. During the shooting of the kinescope, the tape was speeded forward to other sequences where horizontal roll bars and illustrated numbers suggest computerized images, which are vocally reinforced in the soundtrack.

T-Hybrid-V-IV, 1971, color, 12 min., sound.
Performers: Tina Girouard, Barry Sonnier. Kinescope.
As for the other *Hybrids,* the kinescope was shot directly from a masked television monitor. The screen is divided into two horizontally parallel rectangles over a black ground. Inputs from two video cameras are combined and modified, often keyed to negative by use of the special effects generator. The dominant color of the image in the first and last sections of the kinescope is a deep artificially-generated green; the center section is scarlet and shot full screen with no masking of the video monitor and frequent shifting from positive to negative, producing variations in intensity depending on the contrast levels. The performers count out commands and numbers in relation to the positive-negative shifts. Value-changes are achieved through the use of dissolves and wipes and frequent superimpositions of images.

Both *Hybrids III* and *IV* were used in large projection during a live performance on a proscenium stage at Document V, Kassel, Germany, in 1972.

Channel Mix, 1973, color/b&w, 21 min., sound.
Technical assistance: Richard Landry, Kurt Munkasci.
The kinescope of *Channel Mix* was made from a taped section of Sonnier's video installation at the Leo Castelli Gallery in 1972, during which live programming from four different commercial television channels was shown in two wall-size split-screen projections. In the raw tape, made from the installation, two special effects generators were used to alter the juxtaposition of channel inputs and to change the pacing of the imagery. This is the first kinescope of Sonnier's in which there is no pre-recorded narrative situational footage and only off-air TV signals are used.

The color in the kinescope was produced by placing theatrical gels directly over the monitor face; the gels were cut and arranged in different ways to section off parts of the image, suggesting elaborate computerized mixing. The composite flow of direct channel information is interrupted by rapid alterations in speed, giving the appearance of a much greater and more diverse level of input.

The kinescope sets up a complex reality from the sometimes conflicting information from four different channels simultaneously, so that there is no longer a single linear reading of a televised event, and the viewing of the film becomes analogous to a quadraphonic visual experience.

Send/Receive Satellite Network: Phase I, 1977, color, 25 min., sound.
(co-producer Liza Béar)
Send/Receive Satellite Network: Phase II, 1977, color, 30 min., sound.
(co-producer Liza Béar)
A primer in satellite system operation, *Send/Receive* extends the critique of media as commodity by asking questions concerning the people's right to access satellites. The objective of *Send/Receive* was specifically to connect groups of artists on the East and West Coasts via public satellite, and it was the first artist-initiated project to do so. *Part I* presents an in-depth study of the politics and possibilities of using satellite networks to establish a two-way communication system for public use, as opposed to the industry-driven, militaristic and mass media uses to which satellites are currently restricted. *Part 2* excerpts a live satellite feed between New York City and San Francisco.

Liza Béar collaborated with Keith Sonnier on the pioneering media work *Send/Receive Satellite Network: Phase I* and *Send/Receive Satellite Network: Phase II,* 1977, which used a NASA systems operation to demonstrate the possibility of establishing a two-way communication system for public use and to oppose government and military control of public access to information. *Phase II* provided a live satellite feed between groups of artists in New York City and San Francisco.

Light Bulb and Fire, 1970, b&w, 20 min., sound
Light Bulb and Fire is a directly shot situation videotape, static except for camera-range activity and close-ups. Various activities are performed within a restricted area involving props such as a trick light bulb (a way of "lighting" without an electrical source or cord), spray paint, powder for igniting a fire, and sheets of paper. While the thematic continuity of light by means of bulb and fire is maintained throughout the tape, the activities are improvised. Hands and feet manipulate the objects—the viewer cannot see more than these limbs, which operate as tools for the movement of the props. The activities are improvised rather than choreographed, even though some have been derived from movements made in the execution of Sonnier's static work. The activities convey a sense of performance that is task and object-oriented. The situation in which these occur is that of video space and time—an unedited block of time that Sonnier has maintained as a unit. He emphasizes the ambiguity of images in video as opposed to real life. For example, a black "hole" or shot appears on the screen from time to time. Only later does the viewer see that this is caused by the trick light bulb going on and off. The ambiguity of information viewed on the monitor is reinforced by his use of wipes and reversals of image from positive to negative, by means of a special effects generator.

1-200, 1972, b&w, 30 min., sound.
1-200 was taped with two cameras with alternating visual scopes. Each has a different focal point (one a circle and the other a cross), and the counting of numbers alternates arbitrarily between the camera operators. (One person can pick up where the other left off counting). The events in the tape, activities that are played or performed, involve positive-negative reversals done both literally and electronically by turning lights on and off and by means of the special effects generator. The difference in these modes of lighting can be recognized by the range of the light source. Literal lighting has a precise position within the video space while the electronic lighting conveys no such differentiation. Panels with rectangular holes through which images can been seen (body parts such as a finger or a navel) parallel the electronic creation of rectangles or quadrants through special effects. Sometimes these effects are layered over each other, the literal rectangle within the electronically generated rectangle. These devices show Sonnier's interest in framing—the close focus of the camera within the flat rectangles of literal and electronic frames.

Black Light, White Light, 1972, color, 60 min., sound.
Black Light, White Light is an extension of Sonnier's interest in the execution of activities in uninterrupted video time. He and two performers, Tina Girouard and Suzanne Harris, play with fluorescent paint and a bowl of water, painting themselves or each other so that they glow when the black light is turned on. For example, Harris paints Sonnier's face pink and paints a line drawing on her own face that is revealed when the lighting changes. The switching from white to black light is a variation of the on-off, negative-positive binary systems of Sonnier's other tapes. In this one also, he continues certain thematic activities—the making of handprints with paint and the use of the light bulb as a moving object even when it doesn't light up. Eventually almost everything gets covered with fluorescent paint in the spirit of playing a joke—the bulb, the tip of the microphone, arms, hands, a cigarette. As in other tapes, there is punning on the levels of reality within the video space. A pair of pants is hung up, for instance, to stand for a body. Panels are used with rectangular holes through which objects are seen to mimic the electronic creation of such images.

Mat Key and Radio Track, 1972, color, 10 min., sound.

Mat Key and Radio Track, filmed with two cameras and using a special effects generator, extends Sonnier's involvement with a direct and immediate video situation. People perform extemporaneously with a range of objects such as light bulbs, gloves, paint, and cloth. The independent play of color through color keying allows technological as well as physical activity. This tape also uses binary systems such as positive-negative images and on-off, (the metaphor of the light bulb), both through special effects and literal action.

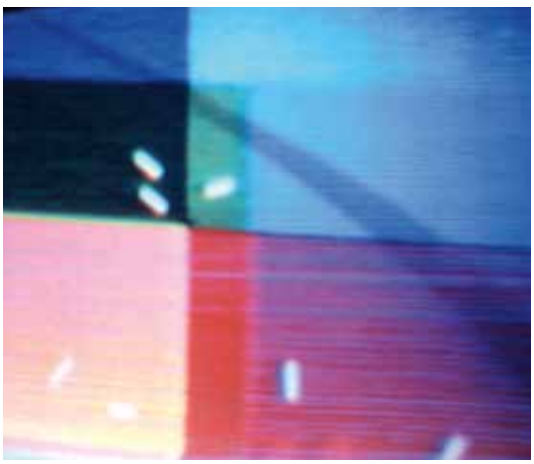
The soundtrack includes the constantly switching channels of a radio as well as the dialogue between the performers, often unrelated to the observable events. The interactions between the two performers (Tina Girouard and Suzanne Harris) has a certain psychological edge. Its context remains unknown but functions along with the arbitrary humor of the radio track to reinforce the actions of the tape in unedited video time. The sense of a specific amount of time is clear from the comments made during the tape, such as "…get the green light bulb…you only have a minute to get it together," which has the ring of an AM sportscaster.

TV In and TV Out, 1972, color, 10 min., sound.

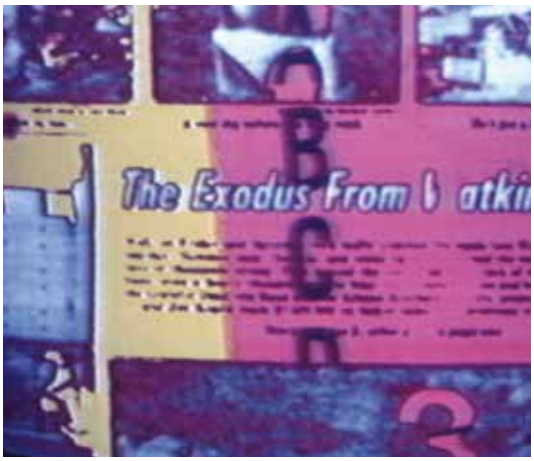
TV In and TV Out is a situational videotape shot with two cameras and taped in front of a monitor. One performer (Suzanne Harris) couldn't see her own image, while the second performer (Tina Girouard) was in the control room with Sonnier, although these positions change during the tape. The performer who is isolated from her own image and from the TV set is dependent upon the other, who has microphone contact with both the control room and the isolated performer, for information. The necessity for communication is intensified by the frequent switching of television stations, when one performer can respond to only audible cues. The soundtrack includes the dialogue between the performers and Sonnier as they discuss the situation and respond to what they can see or hear of the TV programs. As in Sonnier's other tapes, props such as light bulbs and a record disc are used. The objects within the video space are often manipulated as puns on the special effects generator. For example, a bulb is displayed through a piece of cardboard with a rectangular hole, mimicking the quadrants possible through special effects. The camera's focus on the TV screen and then on a performer within a quadrant parallels the commercials heard on the soundtrack.

As in many of Sonnier's other tapes, *TV In and TV Out* is unedited. However, there is much off-screen information that extends, by implication, the video space into the control room. Consequently, the tape is about modes of signaling and transmitting information, sometimes involving a psychological interchange between the performers as they continuously switch roles.

Color Wipe, 1973, color, 30 min., sound.



In *Color Wipe*, two pivoting studio cameras, handled almost like machine guns, are rotated by Tina Girouard and Suzanne Harris. Sonnier is in the control room giving directions, able to see what both cameras are picking up, and punching in between the two images. Harris and Girouard, on the other hand, can see only what their own camera is getting and not the mix of the two. The studio set-up involves literal color blocks—a whole wall covered with color, organized in relation to the color switches in the control room, the result being almost the reverse of what is on the wall. Sonnier plays with both literal and electronic switches and wipes—sometimes a literal panel switches over the technological color switch. The panels are also used to create literal wipes while the special effects generator permits vertical and horizontal wipes electronically. There is a strong sense of being within a studio situation. For example, Harris says, "I crossed my own wires." Sonnier gives the instruction, "In your next round, try to take in the monitor and the camera." One shot is of the cameras focused directly into one another, lens into lens, as Harris and Girouard find and are picked up in each other's position.

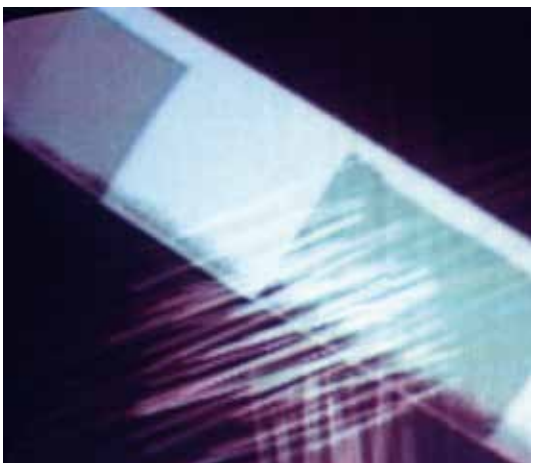


Animation I, 1973, color, 14 min., sound.
Animation I is made with a computer, "Scanimate," that is able to control the scan lines of a television and to cue information into certain lines. The computer is programmed for three independent visual transformations or channels, similar to audio "tracks." One program of the tape is off-air, using television images, predominately the questioning of Haldeman by Sam Dash, with the accompanying soundtrack. A second track is done with Kodaliths, like film negatives. These were placed in front of a lit screen and shot with film that could shoot negative type. The third track involves numbers and letters—1, 2, 3, 4, and A, B, C, D—which cue in information for the entire tape. Thus, showing these as images is like revealing the outline for a script, each figure representing a section of it. The playback of the machine is based on moves divided into four parts, each of which can be animated in a different way. Because "Scanimate" cannot store information or play more than one part simultaneously, it had to be run through three separate steps in making the tape, unlike *Animation II*.

The soundtrack is composed of texts from newspapers and magazines in July, 1973, including the story of Robert Smithson's death in a plane crash in Amarillo, Texas, and small "human interest" items. These are intercut with commercials and electronic interference. The overall feeling of the tape is political because of this content and because it uses organs of mass media, newspapers and television.

Animation II, 1974, color, 25 min., sound.
Animation II, taped at Computer Image in Denver, Colorado, was made electronically on a computer named "Caesar" that animates predominately cartoons and type. Sonnier's tape explores the possibilities of the computer set-up: the computer frame is divided into seven parts with an input for each one, each with an axis that can be rotated, and each having an independent track. Any number of these sections can be eliminated, and they can all be sectioned, superimposed, or twisted topologically. Sonnier has used all seven tracks in his animation, the limits of the information determining the parameters of what is referred to as the "art work" by the computer technicians. The sections of this configuration are listed and keyed in by number. Separate images include textures, colored bars, grids, and the radar-like face of the computer. The soundtrack is the dialogue between Sonnier and the technicians; he directs them in the manipulation of elements, sometimes requesting "stop and playback" or a view of the total "artwork." There are no pre-determined sequences for this animation—moves are chosen extemporaneously.

While the narration occurs in ordinary video time, the use of the computer involves a different kind of time. Instead of continuum time, it is possible for the computer to animate and store information that can be recalled and placed where desired, as if this data existed on loops. This is unlike ordinary tape editing, for it implies longer stretches of time than one experiences in watching the actual tape.



Design by HHA design

Printed in Canada

CASTELLI
18 E 77 NY 10075