

Keith Sonnier

Inside Light, 1968 – 1970

September 18 – October 24, 2026

Los Angeles

Press Release

David Kordansky Gallery is pleased to present *Keith Sonnier: Inside Light, 1968–1970*, the gallery's second solo exhibition of works by Keith Sonnier (b. 1941, d. 2020), a major postwar American artist whose singular vision encompassed advances in sculpture, painting, installation, video, and performance. *Inside Light*, which was previously presented at David Kordansky's New York gallery in 2024, features Sonnier's earliest experiments with neon and argon, which mark the beginning of his career-long exploration of new technologies and materials. The expanded exhibition will be on view in Los Angeles at 5130 W. Edgewood Pl. from September 18 to October 24, 2026. An opening reception will be held on Friday, September 18 from 6 to 8 PM.

Throughout a career spanning six decades, Sonnier authored a complex body of work that challenges dogmas at the heart of twentieth- and twenty-first-century art historical narratives, often questioning previous conceptions of what sculpture—and indeed, art itself—could be and do. While his work draws associations with artistic movements and genres from process art to conceptualism to minimalism, his visionary practice stands apart for its expansive and generous approach to worlds both within and beyond the studio. This exhibition focuses on a three-year period between 1968 and 1970 in which Sonnier first began working with incandescent gas and made many of the breakthroughs that would define his career.

Sonnier established an early interest in, and openness to, untraditional materials whose properties made them unstable, malleable, and ultimately conducive toward radical experiments with space. The neon sculptures on view are an extension of that material exploration and have become one of the artist's signature series. Much of the material Sonnier incorporated into his practice, such as neon tubing, rubber, and flocking, had origins in industrial or manufacturing fields. This interest could be attributed to the early childhood influence of spending time in his father's hardware store in Mamou, Louisiana, or formative experiences like seeing Robert Rauschenberg's five-part found-metal assemblage, *Oracle* (1962–1965), during a year-long stint in Paris, which transformed Sonnier's understanding of the boundaries of sculptural practice. The fixtures and wiring that powered and supported Sonnier's neon bulbs, meanwhile, became parts of a vocabulary of abstract gestures notable for their intuitive humor, surrealism, and quasi-figurative echoes. This placed his work in dialogue with an international group of peers, such as the artists associated with Arte Povera in Europe, for whom the rawness and informality of certain materials were providing the foundation for new, surprising, and paradoxical kinds of formal sophistication and subtlety.

The 1960s was a generative time for Sonnier. He formalized his own approach to sculpture and installation as a student at Rutgers University, while also taking advantage of his proximity to the vibrant New York City arts scene. There, important figures including Eva Hesse, Bruce Nauman, Gordon Matta-Clark, and members of the Fluxus group were also dedicated to pursuing the use of non-traditional and often ephemeral materials, and conceived of their projects as multi-genre experiments in which site-specific installation and interaction with surrounding architecture informed the conception and production of works. Sonnier drew inspiration from every life experience: from his upbringing in Louisiana and his study of art and archaeology to the latest technological

breakthroughs and the vibrant and experimental ethos of the New York art scene in which he spent most of his career, transmuting those experiences into a distinct abstract language of his own making.

This capacious approach, as expansive as it is idiosyncratic, led to Sonnier's inclusion in important group exhibitions, among them *Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form*, organized by Harald Szeemann at Kunsthalle Bern in 1969, and the American Pavilion at the 36th Venice Biennale in 1972, where he exhibited alongside a heterogeneous group of artists—including Diane Arbus, Sam Gilliam, and Jim Nutt—selected by curator Walter Hopps. By this time, Sonnier had begun to produce works like *Ba-O-Ba I* (1969)—whose title refers to a Haitian French expression that Sonnier translates as “the effect of moonlight on the skin”—in which shaped, reflective sheets of glass offer physical and optical counterpoints to the neon tubes installed around them and set up complex and subtle relationships between the wall against which they lean and the radiant fields of light that emerge around and behind the glass. Because they establish dialogues in two and three dimensions, they can be read alternately as pictures or as sculptural constructions. But they also seem to make room for the existence of another category, one in which the experience of the physical world is, like the thoughts and emotions that animate the people who interact with it, equally dependent on immaterial forces.

Site-specificity has been integral to Sonnier's practice from his earliest works, in which he first began to analyze, and come to terms with, his relationship to the materials he was drawn to and to his own understanding of sculptural possibility. Each work included in this presentation has a reciprocal relationship to the walls, ceilings, and floors around which it is installed, casting light, line, and shadow onto those surfaces, but also relying on the site as a support in the same way a painted canvas relies on stretcher bars. This is most apparent in *Untitled Neon Corner Piece* (1969), whose neon tubes, aluminum supports, and associated fixtures coalesce in a bracing minimalist composition that draws attention to the qualities of its own components as well as their relationship to the corner in which the artist has fitted them. Sonnier's ability to create works that effectively engage with their surroundings results in even more profound and personal relationships between the works and the viewer, whose own shadows add to the existing dynamism of each piece.

The group of works that make up *Inside Light* were created during a brief three-year period that saw Sonnier's earliest experimentation with neon and argon, and exemplify the speed with which he was able to better understand and therefore manipulate these delicate materials. *Arced Neon (Cool White)* and *Arced Neon (Violet)* (1968), for example, represent the two earliest works on view, with each focusing on a singular color and neon line gesture. Just two years later, works like *Neon Wrapping Incandescent V* (1970) involve a more layered, multi-color, and multifaceted installation that suggests a facility with the material that allows for freeform, gestural line. While the period from 1968 to 1970 represents a small fraction of Sonnier's six-decade career, the works on view show the dexterity with which he was able to fully understand and push the material possibilities of neon.

Sonnier's oeuvre reveals his fascination with a broad range of material, light, sound, and technology, but also, and perhaps more acutely, the way cultures engage with the materials around them, and how art is shaped primarily by the time in which it is made. In a 2015 interview, for instance, he noted that his passion for artmaking was driven by a desire to keep “reading the culture that I'm in.” Sonnier localized and particularized abstraction in ways that make it equally surprising, accessible, and personally resonant with its viewers. Beyond the luminous and visually commanding qualities inherent to the works, it is Sonnier's deft ability to impart layers of meaning into these abstract forms that distinguishes his practice and has established his enduring influence.

Sonnier is currently the subject of a long-term solo exhibition at Dia Beacon featuring works from the 1960s and 1970s, many of which recently entered the museum's collection. Solo exhibitions have also been presented at the New Orleans Museum of Art (2019); Parrish Art Museum, Water Mill, NY (2018); Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT (2017); Whitechapel Gallery, London (2016); Musée d'Art Moderne et d'Art Contemporain, Nice, France (2015); Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C. (1989); and Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris (1979). Recent group exhibitions include *Minimal*, Bourse de Commerce - Pinault Collection, Paris (2025–2026); *The American Dream: Pop to the Present*, British Museum, London (2017); *Museum of Stones*, Noguchi Museum, New York (2015); and *America is Hard to See*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2015). His work is in the public collections of more than fifty museums worldwide, including The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Tate Modern, London; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Art Institute of Chicago; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; Museu de Arte Contemporânea de Serralves, Porto, Portugal; and Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt, Germany.