

ETC



New York The Mid-Career Review Column

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Number 18, Spring 1992

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/35897ac>

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Publisher(s)

Revue d'art contemporain ETC inc.

ISSN

0835-7641 (print)

1923-3205 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Kaplan, S. (1992). Review of [New York: The Mid-Career Review Column]. *ETC*, (18), 65–68.

ACTUALITÉS / EXPOSITIONS

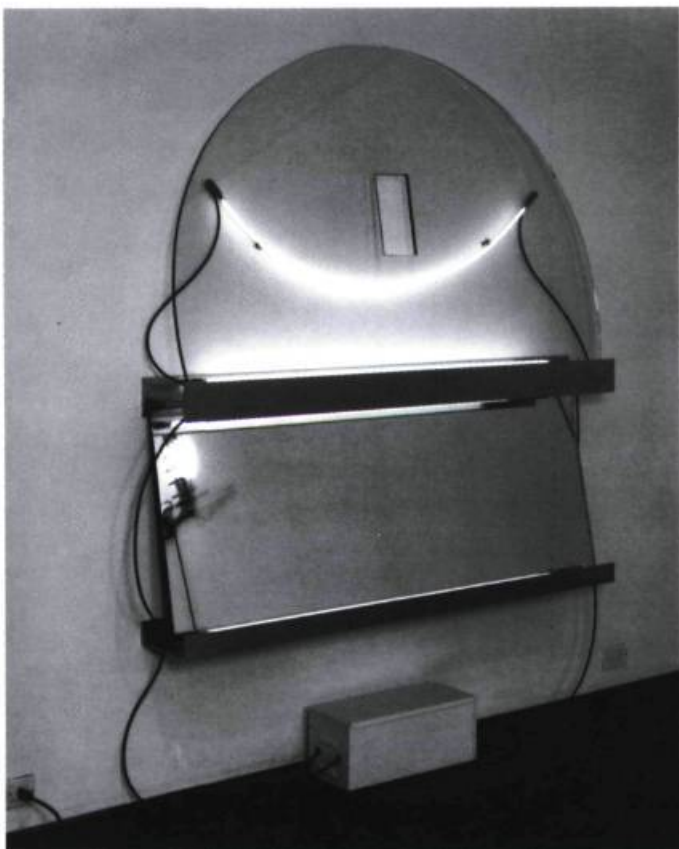
NEW YORK

The Mid-Career Review Column

Let's talk, for just a moment, about those soundbite labels foisted on artists' careers by critics, curators, and the like. A "young" artist of my acquaintance – early 30s, but looks younger, in town a decade, with several one-woman shows at a good New York gallery, and similar exposure in Europe – was amused but alarmed to find herself tagged as "emerging" in a recent bit of artcrit. When would that threshold moment finally arrive when her career was "established" to the point of no longer needing to peep out of its shell? Was it a matter of age? Was 35 or 40 years the magic portal to "mature" work? Or was it the "experimental" nature of her sculpture – conceptual objects, to be sure, with a wry, semiotic bent – that caused her full critical emergence to dally? Perhaps if she had been carving marble or painting on canvas for the last ten years – more "traditional" art forms – the critic in question might have found her work less emerging and more "mainstream".

At the other end of the spectrum is the "blue chip" label, a marketing term that has crept into the realm of empyrean art discourse and connoisseurship. It connotes artists such as Brice Marden, Ellsworth Kelly, Jules Olitski, Roy Lichtenstein, who have reached the pantheon, whose careers are so established and whose market "niches" so developed that the value of their work (both historical value and resale value) is implicit, inviolable, unquestioned. Somewhere below those who dwell in this pantheon, in the vast reputational void between emerging and blue chip, rest those in "mid career". A favorite tag of museum curators organizing retrospectives, this term describes an artist who is neither fresh out of school nor with one foot in the grave, but further suggests a whole other realm of meaning: that here is a career worth being in the middle of.

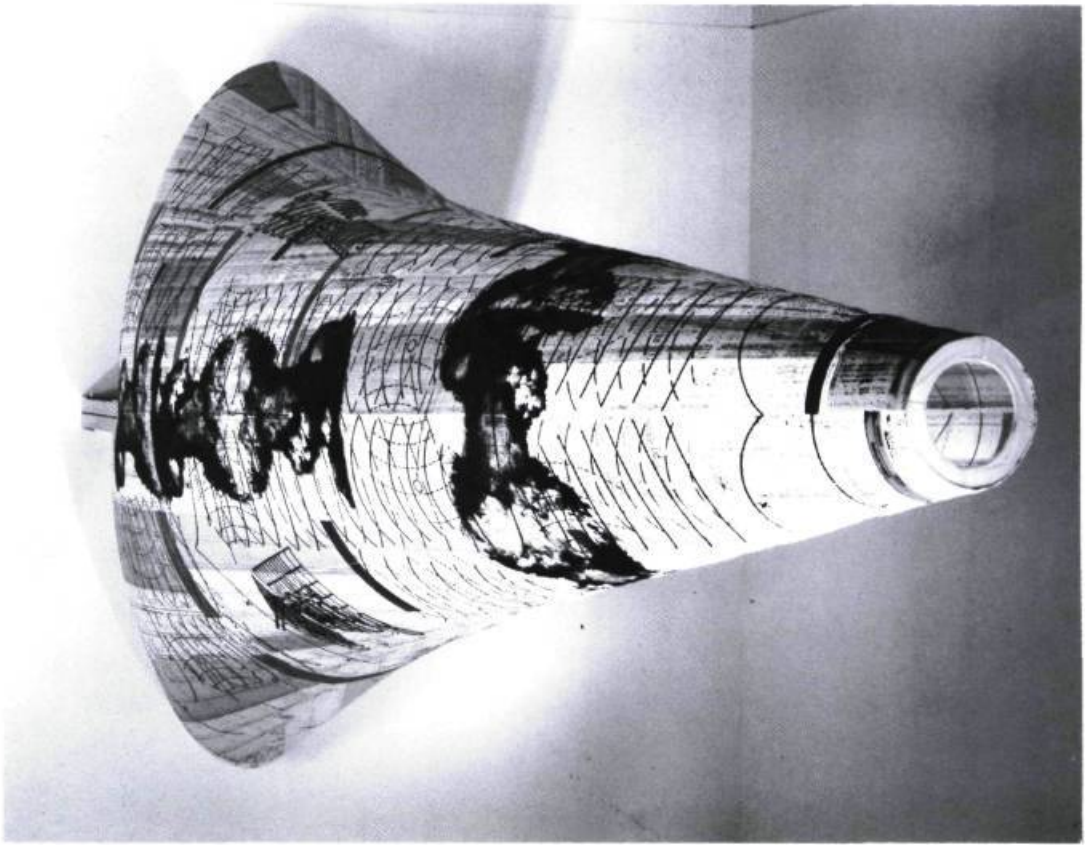
This awkward but ultimately sonorous construction – mid career – is an honor of sorts, a recognition of accomplishment. There are currently two mid-career retrospectives – William Wegman and Terry Winters –



Keith Sonnier, *New Orleans Dyad I-D*, 1990. Neon, glass, mirror, aluminum; 64 x 62 in. Gallery Leo Castelli, New York.

at the Whitney Museum, with a Richard Prince show scheduled for May. John Baldessari received similar treatment in an exhibit that travelled to Montreal after its stay at the Whitney. This past fall, Dennis Oppenheim was given his mid-career moment at P. S. 1, New York's pre-eminent kunsthalle.

Like Oppenheim, Keith Sonnier has been making and exhibiting his art for over 25 years, which would comfortably put both of them in mid career, if not late mid career. But like Oppenheim, Sonnier's work does not look particularly mid career. It looks – how should I put it? – emerging, with a strong commitment to mixed media, to light and motion; a reliance on process and performance; a tendency to experiment with new forms, such as video; an ability to incorporate a wide variety of industrial materials (neon, fluorescents, plate glass, aerodynamic metals, etc.); and frequent allusions to technology, transmission, and communication. Per-



Keith Sonnier, *El Globo*, 1992. Mixed media; 10 x 4 x 9 feet. Gallery Leo Castelli, New York.

haps this is because both artists hearken back to a similar moment of creative origin, the late 60s, when the art world was in flux, when the canons of pop and minimalism, entrenched but enervated, were being overturned by a new synthesis of post-minimalism, conceptualism and process art.

Something about this post-minimal period (c. 1968-1974) reminds us of today's New York scene: the rejection of the finished art object as the *sine qua non* of creativity; the proliferation of performances, art happenings, and other collectivist activities; the use of non-traditional materials; the penchant for foregrounding process and interaction. This cyclical return of the art climate to an earlier moment (a hippie, countercultural moment?) is part of what gives Oppenheim and Sonnier their immediate currency today. In both their older and their more recent work, we note a characteristic embrace of the oblique, the evanescent, the open-ended, the ephemeral.

Sonnier is not enjoying an actual museum retrospective at the moment, but the large body of both recent and older work displayed in three SoHo galleries (Leo Castelli, Castelli Graphics, and 65 Thompson, April 4 – 25) could be construed as a retrospective in the making. In any case, it gives us ample opportunity to reflect on

Sonnier's continuing love affair with the iconography of technology, and on his creation of a virtual space of transmission and communication that bridges the primitive and the modern, the mystical and the corporate, the shamanistic and the scientific.

Sonnier's earliest performance work (sometimes in conjunction with such colleagues as Bruce Nauman and Richard Serra), his whimsical sculptures using video (TV sets mounted on branched, bifurcating structures) and other symbols of contemporary communication systems (antennae, CB radios, telephone booths) are well documented. But they receive no coverage in this three gallery extravaganza, as they would in a true, rigorous retrospective. Rather, the focus of the show is on Sonnier's best known work, his neon and fluorescent sculptures, and on some intriguing new pieces that seem deceptively low tech at first glance.

Sonnier, Dan Flavin, and Bruce Nauman are the pre-eminent artists working with lighting fixtures. But while Nauman uses neon to confront linguistic conundrums/dislocations, and Flavin builds his monuments to Tatlin and his walls of neon, Sonnier's approach is decidedly more inwardly directed and more meditational. His objects, while emulating high tech consumer items (wall appliances for the mind), seem to invoke an

oceanic human consciousness, and conjure up mystic eternities through the trappings of electricity. Even before entering a roomful of Sonnier neon sculptures and being bathed in their electronic glow, one is sonically alerted to their transformative power: the hum of power transformers at 60 cycles per second. Are they speaking to us? Is it a mediational chant, a technological mantra? "Om" His sculptures chant "Om", and will continue to intone that sound *ad infinitum*, for as long as they are plugged in and turned on.

A darkened room filled with Sonnier's neon wall sculptures leaves an indelible impression: part high tech elegance, part fulfilled science fiction prophecy, and part aleatoric invocation of ancient shamanistic rituals. At Castelli Graphics, a series of wall pieces entitled *Paleolithic Shelf* and *Perforated Shelf* (suffixed with various Roman numerals – they are editions) fuse neon with aluminum and glass to give a space age version of prehistoric cave painting. Not that Sonnier actually offers the images of bison and woolly mammoth to conjure up a spell for the hunter in his quest for game. Rather, something to do with the quality of the light, the reflection of a muted neon aura off a brushed aluminum surface in an otherwise darkened room, returns us to year zero, to the origins of human perception and will in the understanding and ordering of nature. In other words, it returns us to the origins of animism and magic. How ironic that Sonnier, with his highly refined surfaces and full tilt reliance on electrotechnology, is able to mediate our journey back to man's primordial confrontations with the mysteries of the universe.

Sygyzy Transmitter (1992, neon, mylar, aluminum, wire mesh) also seems poised to reveal these mysteries, a cross between a microwave and an antenna, a transmitter/receiver of energy and encoded messages from the stars.

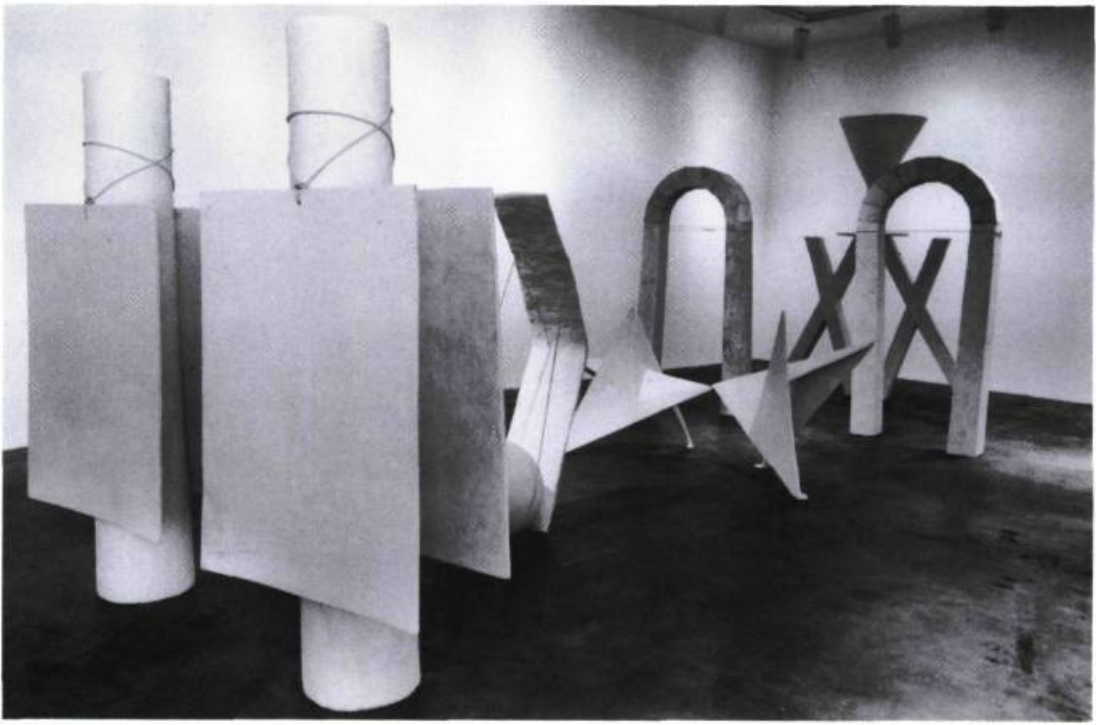
In the past, Sonnier has tended to anthropomorphize technology by constructing his neon and metal sculptures on a human (or slightly larger than human) scale, so that the viewer could sidle up to one mounted on a wall and engage in a tentative, respectful dialogue. *I, Robot*, indeed. This is a strategy he continues to employ in the Castelli show, with neon/aluminum/antenna pieces such as *Propellor Spinner* and *Selector Dipole* (both 1990). Sonnier expands this figurative vocabulary by using an elliptical shape as the basis for several pieces: *Elliptical Lock* (1991, tempered glass) and *Space Slipper* (1992, corrugated aluminum panel and paint). As Sonnier notes in the catalogue that

accompanied the exhibition: "There is something of humanistic aesthetic about the new works. They are almost sarcophagus like. You feel that they are ready to be transported into some other place" (page 20). *Space Slipper*, in particular, constructed from the same honeycombed aluminum used in the manufacture of aircraft wings, yet emblazoned with red, black and green motifs reminiscent of an African shield, successfully merges the tribal with the space age.

Sonnier's newest work, reserved to the 65 Thompson Gallery, eschews high tech neon and antennae for a canvasy, windblown look from the age of sail. Here we find the two *Meridian Passage* pieces (1992), circles of sewn nylon sailcloth that are stretched, seven feet in diameter, over aluminum tubing, and printed with an overlay of scientific, navigational, and astronomical notations. Like trampolines quixotically mounted parallel to the wall's vertical axis, the tautly stretched cloth and shieldlike presence of the pieces suggest truncated motion, recreational sports design, and the reassessment of older technologies. But rather than implying a step backward, Sonnier's return to atavistic technologies seems a proper re-evaluation of our contemporary moment (where economic recession and ecological concerns both favor low tech solutions) and reasonable mid-career gesture from an artist fully cognizant of his antecedents and reluctant to abandon any medium as being outmoded or of no further use.

This inclusive gesture comes full circle (or rather full funnel) in the show's most monumental effort, *El Globo* (1992), a 19-foot long wind sock kept aloft (erect?) by internal fans. Modeled on the kitelike projectiles that he observed while travelling through Guatemala, *El Globo* is the great white whale of Sonnier's *œuvre*, a playful, priapic sheath of sailcloth inscribed with stock market quotations and the oscilloscope prints of soundwaves. A giant condom, a bit of high conceptual slapstick, a fertility symbol for our brave new technological globe, *El Globo, el hombre mucho grande*, hovers over Keith Sonnier's three gallery extravaganza like a big, white, mid-career blimp.

Also white, and also mid-career, is the latest show of sculpture by German artist Inge Mahn at the Diane Brown Gallery (April 4 – May 2). A former student of Joseph Beuys at the Düsseldorf Kunstacademie, Mahn has mounted many shows in Germany, including a museum retrospective, and has made two previous shows with Brown, her New York gallery.



Inge Mahn, *Parade*, 1992. Installation view. Diane Brown Gallery, New York.

The first, in 1989, involved a cleverly arch replication of pre-existing architectural elements in the gallery space. The column, the sprinkler system, the water pipes, etc., that already occupied functional positions within the gallery were reproduced, with subversive glee, three times over, so that instead of one column there were four. This “mirroring” was done with a fair approximation of the size, shape, and positioning of the original, but with various purposeful variations of detail that would allow the astute observer to identify and separate the true column from the *fausse*. (Mahn’s gothic replication of the ceiling water pipes into a convoluted mess, on the other hand, was meant to fool no one, but being placed on the ceiling was less apt to garner immediate scrutiny). In any case, most gallery visitors were initially taken in by the subterfuge, and had the bewildering experience of walking into an “empty” gallery where they expected to find a show and wondering where in fact the show could be hidden.

Mahn has done similar installations elsewhere: similar in their quiet, dark humor and their site specificity. In Cologne, she altered a gallery that already had a plentitude of wall space by building in extra walls. In a studio with a skylight, she built a stairway with wings straight up to the skylight to ceremonially usher light into the room.

Mahn’s 1989 installation and her second show (of *Falling Crosses*) were both created for Diane Brown’s former gallery on Prince Street and Broadway. Now that Brown has moved to southern SoHo, Mahn has taken it upon herself to mark the occasion of her first exhibition in the new space with the ironic bombast of an installation entitled *Parade*. Advancing down the middle of the gallery’s main room, in couples (asexual) or, more aptly, in ranks of two, are *Flags on Mountains* (in the lead) and (respectively) *Chairs on Wheels*, *Sandwich*

Columns (plain white columns, about human height, each carrying a double sandwich board of the type used for advertising during earlier urban times), *Angle With Ball*, *Pentagram Stars*, *Walking Arches*, and *XX* (two walking X’s). The sculptures are all constructed of plaster on a steel framework, and all are rendered in Mahn’s unvarying white.

In the back room is a split *Column on Logs*, like two people facing each other toe to toe, and a horizontal assemblage of various b/w parade photographs mounted as a single strip on all four walls to create a syncretic, unbroken, multinational line of figures all walking in the same direction.

The good nature and liberal quotient of this show are very high, making it difficult to discern the same sort of theoretical cutting edge that could be deduced from the 1989 show, in which the ostensible and bewildering “absence” of art came across as a wry subversion of the gallery’s function as a locus of commodity discourse. Perhaps it is this very liberality that is being called into question, like those patently offensive Benetton ads in which multiculturalism is used as a selling point for sportswear. Perhaps the column at loggerheads with itself in the back room, surrounded by the syncretic parade of all nations, creeds and colors, is a cautionary note on the simplistic political spiel that would render us all mindlessly “one world”. Perhaps. And considering Mahn’s penchant for mordant observation, perhaps can mean quite a lot.