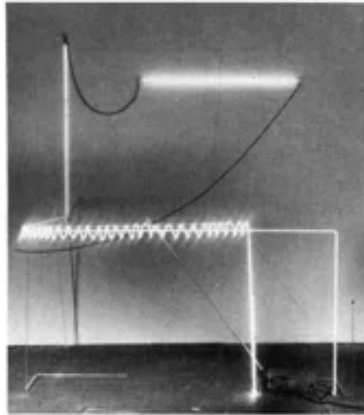


# ARTFORUM



Keith Sonnier, *Neon Wrapping Neon*, 1969, neon, 8½ × 4½ × 7.

whether these technical means can be made to emblemize a universal goal of transcendence, an almost Buddhist mirage of ultimate meaning. His art depends on the swift mental conversion of object into image into sign into symbol and back into object; it is only the completion of the circle that allows for transcendence. This hermetic completeness, generally coded in bipolar terms, makes his pieces the ideal icons of a consciousness eager to achieve a selfless state. Sonnier has dissected meditation and reconstructed its remains in the terms of modern technology, the skeleton on which our society hangs its flesh; he shows us that technology can also be a cabalistic code for our spirituality.

The strangeness of Sonnier's art, then, is that his constructions, while technological, are mandalas. This is not just a matter of updating the mandala look, or of creating an arbitrary affinity of traditional and modern forms, but rather of Sonnier's discovery of a profound inner relationship between spiritual and technological codes. He does not just create the shape of a holy letter in aluminum, or invent new holy letters for an old alphabet, but recovers the common import of forms in both codes. *Pictogram II*, *Pictogram III*, and *Runic Roll I*, all 1980, are basic clues to his work. The pictograph and the rune are both ideograms, graphic symbols of ideas; it may be argued that ultimate ideas can only be represented in ideograms—can be emblematically pictured but not put into words. For me, Sonnier has offered some of the boldest, most important, and subtlest meditative envisionings of such ideas; or final truths, by the most delicate of esthetic means. He reminds us of what, after all, is the basic task of abstraction: to provoke us with the possibility of our own higher consciousness, to demonstrate to us in living form the absolutes targeted by meditation. For Sonnier abstract form once again functions philosophically, as for the pioneer abstractionists. The special power of his art is that it is instantaneously and effortlessly able to convert material information about our society into abstract spiritual form. One can say that Sonnier, like an alchemist, has learned how to cool off material, reading it as language if not as the perfect embodiment of spirit.

*Triped*, 1981, with its radio on the lower half of one black leg and its microphone on the upper half of another (a central white leg is between them), is not

simply a hallucinated robotic figure in the Duchampian tradition, but also a coded form. The mystical conception of spirituality as the power to unify opposites, and to make the unity stick, echoes the computer use of a binary system. In *Neon Wrapping Neon*, 1969, where a neon right angle is repeated and reversed, in space and on the two dimensions of the wall, and in such works as *Orleans Suite (Ba-O-Ba Series)*, 1977, where again a form, itself made of opposite (transparent and opaque) elements, is repeated and reversed, binary unity becomes emblematic of spiritual intensity. The "beauty" of the pure neon pieces, also systems of coded contrasts, is that the impure elements of black rubberized wiring and ominous black power box (unpainted gray in one piece) are integrated into the structures, adding another element of contrast to heighten the intensity. The invisibility—the blackness—of the power system in contrast with the radiance and visibility of the neon also generates an unconscious/conscious, power/form duality, in which the simultaneity of the terms establishes their spiritual interconnection.

Sonnier, then, is not involved in social comment, as such examples as *Channel Mix*, 1972, or the "Star Lament" series, 1980, with its use of newspapers, might imply. Whatever the ironies of juxtaposition when the Sesame Street Cookie Monster and a news announcer appear side by side on the same video monitor in *Channel Mix*, the information units are more suggestive of the matrix of chaos out of which elementary form and elementary meaning emerge—or, rather, are forcefully lifted by the energy and effort of the artist. Sonnier gives one the sense that in the process of mastering the form and power of technology he discovered that it was not really in essence an instrument or a medium, but rather, unexpectedly, embodied a universal code which was an end in itself. Technology existed not to be deciphered but to be experienced, so that its quality of being an end in itself could make one selfless. This is why the code exists as a vision without an interpretation. Like some of the biblical prophets, Sonnier is reporting a vision in the sky, fathomable only through its effect on us.

**KEITH SONNIER, P.S. 1; GEORGE SEGAL, the Jewish Museum:**

#### KEITH SONNIER

Keith Sonnier's mastery of neon signals his awareness of our society's technological destiny—his sense of its destiny being dependent on its means, not its ends. The question in Sonnier's art is