

Art in America

APRIL 2004

KEITH SONNIER

WTC MEMORIAL

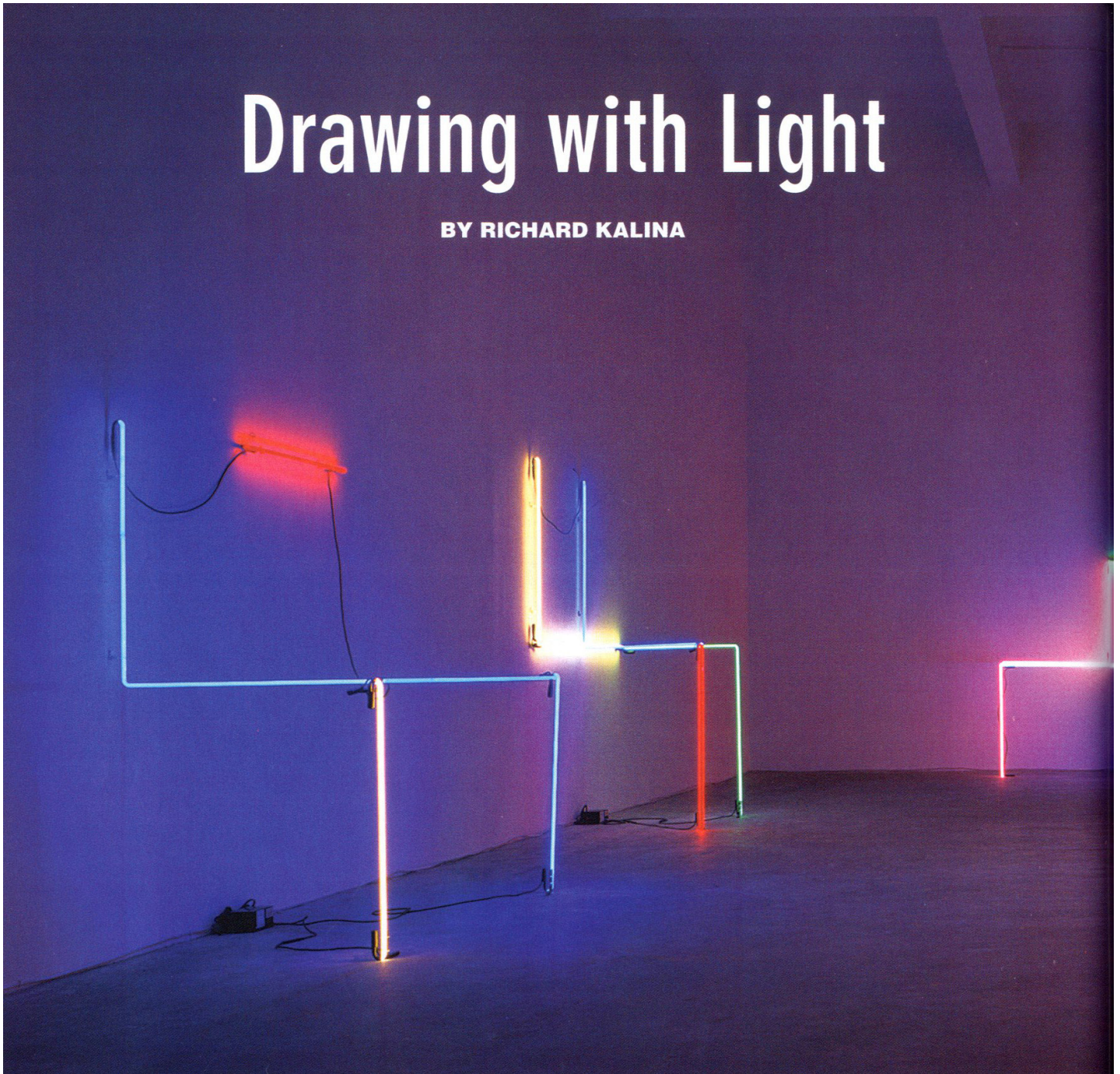
PAUL KOS

CHRISTIAN SCHAD

\$5.00 USA
\$7.00 CAN £3.50 UK

Drawing with Light

BY RICHARD KALINA



In the late 1960s and early '70s the orthodoxies of the art world were, as usual, being challenged. Greenbergian Color Field painting and welded-metal sculpture, Minimalism and Pop art—all bastions of formal rigor—found themselves being jostled by the work of artists whose approaches to materials, facture and permanence were decidedly informal. Artists like Richard Tuttle, Barry Le Va, Lynda Benglis, Eva Hesse, Jackie Winsor, Gilberto Zorio, Giovanni Anselmo, Richard Serra, Alan Saret and Keith Sonnier consciously used low-end, non-art materials to make sculptural work that, while well thought-out, defied the conventions of the well-made object. This loosely allied group turned to materials that stubbornly retained and asserted their identities, even

after artistic manipulation. Fiberglass, plastics, leather, plate glass, rubber, flocking, fluorescent powder, rocks, chicken wire, rope, felt, lightbulbs and neon tubing were esthetically resistant and not entirely pleasant substances. These artists exploited those qualities.

Change and invention were in the air and became manifest in numerous ways. Older structures might be adapted (Hesse's deformation of the grid, for example) or contemporary technologies, such as video and electronics, could be employed. Physical elements might be jumbled and scattered, or left relatively untouched. But what finally resulted were *things*, art objects of a kind that hadn't really been seen before. Even though the materials used called forth references from

A New York gallery exhibition of Keith Sonnier's work from the late 1960s and early '70s included the U.S. debut of the installation "Fluorescent Room." Meanwhile, the Lever House commissioned a site-specific neon piece for its lobby gallery.



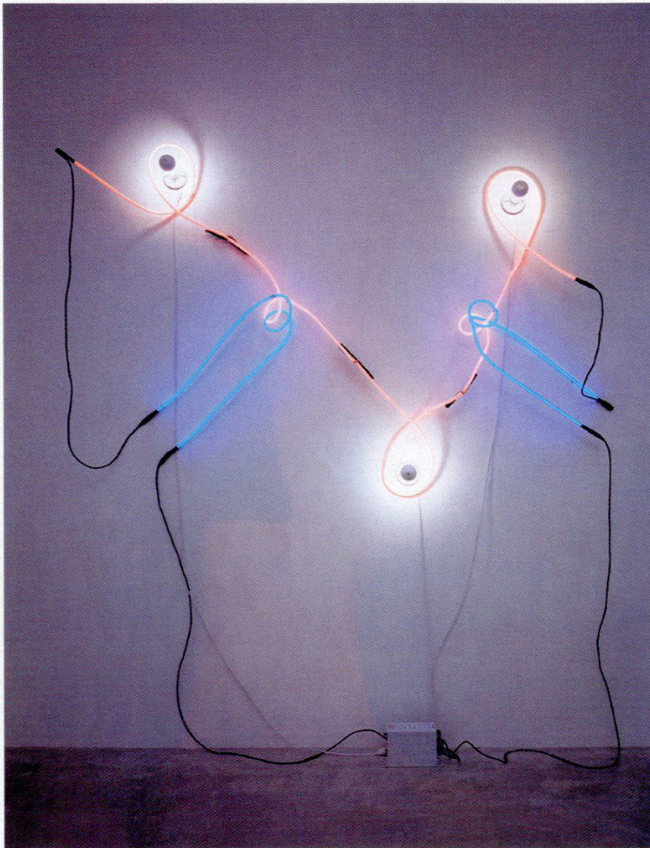
the everyday world, the work of Sonnier and the others was essentially abstract, and remained, I believe, committed to the modernist tradition of formal and perceptual innovation, rather than semiotic manipulation or cultural critique.

The exhibition held this winter at Ace Gallery's cavernous New York space featured throughout its many rooms eight major Sonnier pieces executed between 1968 and 1975. Funky, elegant and incisive, they made it clear how central to the period's developments Sonnier was. Light figured in all but one of the works—either neon, incandescent, black or laser light, or a combination of types. Some of the rooms at Ace contained a single work, others a large multipart installation, while

still others held a number of thematically and materially consistent pieces. The works from the earliest series on view, "Neon Wrapping Incandescent," were executed in 1968, the year after Sonnier came to New York. In this group of wall-mounted sculptures, glass tubes of red, yellow, blue or green neon loop around each other and, depending on the piece, encircle either two or three incandescent bulbs screwed

Keith Sonnier: "Neon Wrapping Neon" series, 1969, neon tubes, transformers. All works this article, except BA-O-BA Lever House, installed at Ace Gallery, New York, 2003-04. Photos this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy Ace Gallery.

The artists of Sonnier's milieu tended to exploit the esthetically resistant and even unpleasant qualities of their materials.



Neon Wrapping Incandescent VI, 1968, argon and neon tubes, porcelain fixtures, incandescent bulbs, transformer, 67 by 105 by 9 inches.

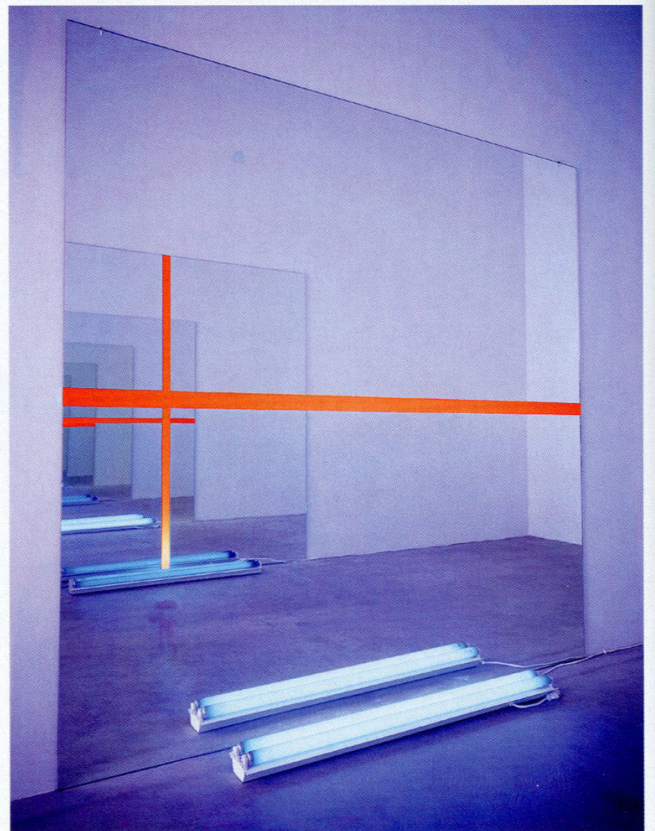
into white porcelain fixtures. Sonnier has spoken of wanting to create sculpture that was colored but not painted. In these works he takes advantage of the malleability of glass tubing. The neon curves and twists, and the colored lines it forms feel as spontaneous and freely drawn as a swoop of pastel. He shows no qualms about exposing the mechanical underpinnings of a piece, making the power cords and electrical transformer integral parts of the work. Black wires dangle from the ends of the neon tubing and are inserted into a very visible transformer box, while white wires connect the incandescent bulbs to the wall plug. The wires hang loosely, and their seemingly matter-of-fact (but artful) placement sets up a relaxed, improvisational counterpoint to the neon. The incandescent bulbs, silvered on the tops to diffuse their light in a soft spread over the wall, function as punctuation points and visual anchors. In each piece the transformer box is formally active as well. Resting on the floor, it steadies the work compositionally and introduces a small but significant squared-off element to counter the prevailing curves and circles.

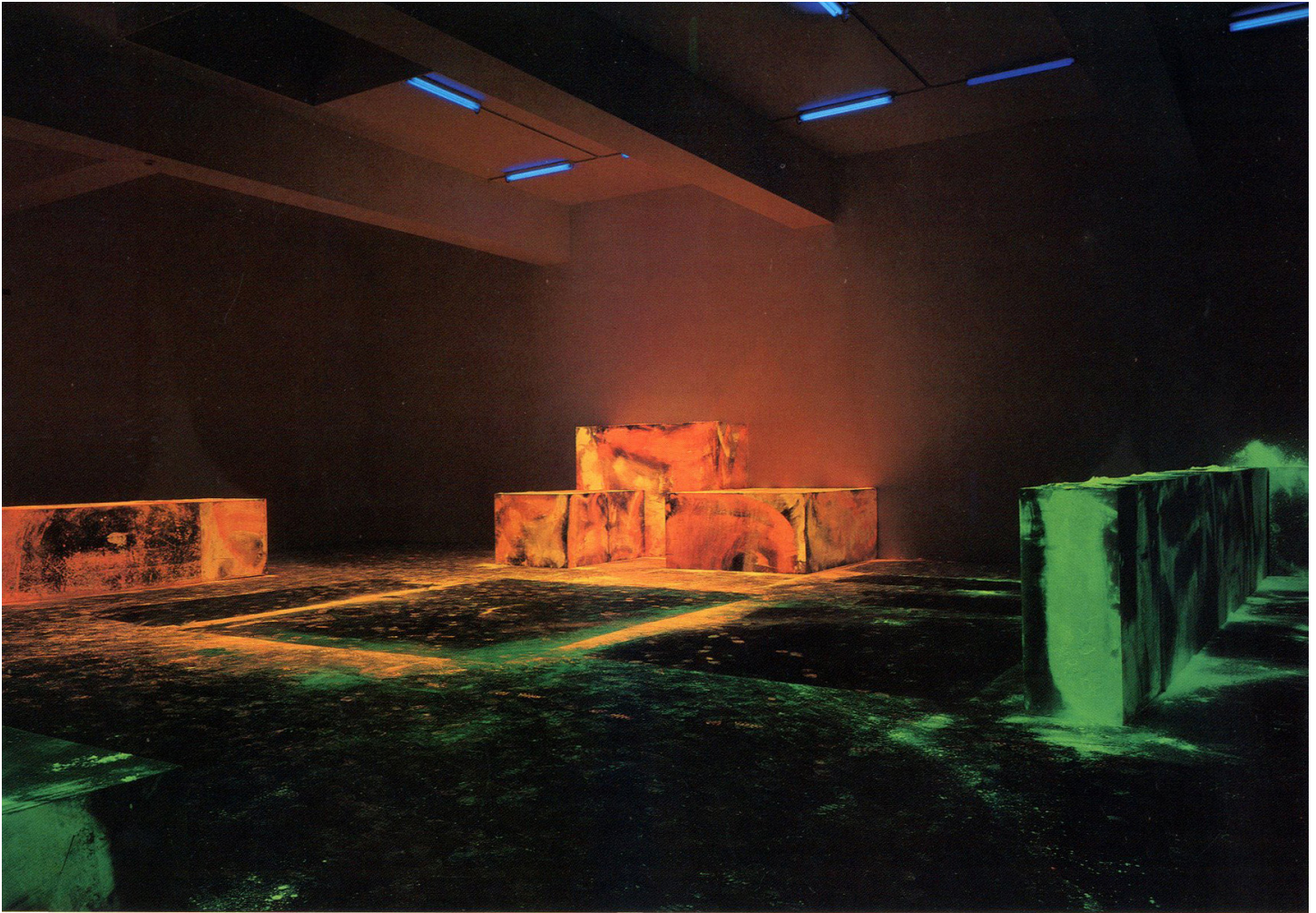
Sonnier and the sculptors experimenting in similar ways were engaged with issues of process. The idea was to embody the conditions of the work's making in the final form of the work itself. There were numerous postwar precedents for this—from Jackson Pollock's drip paintings to Robert Morris's *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making*. For Sonnier and the others, the idea of process could be highlighted by paring down the acts of making, so that one or two actions would be given primacy—Benglis's pours of pigmented latex, or Serra's splashings of molten lead, for example. (Serra's famous list of verbs as a program for art-making speaks directly to this idea.) The straightforward, presentational quality of Sonnier's work, its ability to generate complex effects by simple means, flows directly from this conceptual premise.

Sonnier's project of drawing with light was given a new dimension the following year. The "Neon Wrapping Neon" series of 1969 extends the sculpture out into the room. The straight colored tubes, all of which are placed on the vertical or horizontal, first hug the wall, then turn out at right angles in a table- or chairlike configuration, then turn again and form supporting legs. That support feels somewhat tenuous. The construction looks rickety and a bit out of plumb, and the light glows with an inconspicuous cheeriness. These Sonniers are as formally nonsense as Flavin's work, but they avoid Flavin's rhetorical stance and his appeal to a hands-off industrial ethos.

In 1968 Sonnier began the "BA-O-BA" series, a group of sculptures that was to have a great impact on his subsequent work. The title of the series comes from a Haitian-French term—Sonnier grew up in a French-speaking part of Louisiana—that means "light bath," and refers to the play of light, particularly moonlight, over the skin. The

Partial view of Mirror Act III, 1969, two mirrors, each 7 feet square, fluorescent paint, black light.





Fluorescent Room, 1970, foam rubber, fluorescent powder, fluorescent fixtures, dimensions variable.

pieces from this series that were on view, all from 1969, feature neon tubes situated next to or against large square or circular plate-glass forms leaning against the wall. The series' purpose is to explore the reflection and spread of light across various surfaces, as well as to examine architectural relationships based on the numerical ratios of the Golden Section. Sonnier's investigation of issues engendered by the "BA-O-BA" series has continued over the years. In December 2003, a large site-specific architectural commission, *BA-O-BA Lever House*, was installed in the lobby of Gordon Bunshaft's classic glass skyscraper in Manhattan. The Lever House lobby is relatively low ceilinged and elegantly finished in polished steel and green terrazzo. Sonnier ran red, yellow and blue neon tubes alongside the lobby's vertical and horizontal elements, a seemingly simple act of architectural placement, but one that paid large esthetic dividends. Not only was the interior space beautifully and subtly articulated, but the tubes were reflected in the glass and seemed to set up colorfully lighted spaces in the plazas outside. I saw it at night, and the illusion was remarkably convincing.

Sonnier's work, no matter what its size, has the capacity to fill and activate a space. *Scanners* (1975) is visually unprepossessing. Six radio scanners, each measuring a little over 2 by 7 by 6 inches, with long antennas extending from the tops, were bracketed to the walls of the gallery's long central hallway. The instruments, tuned to different frequencies, pick up random shortwave radio and phone traffic, suffus-

ing the area with a buzz of low-level disembodied chatter. The experience felt intrusive, controlling, creepy, funny and theatrical. I was not particularly surprised to find out that Andy Warhol loved the piece—it was right up his alley. He bought the first version called *Quad Scan* and had it installed in the entrance of the Factory. Apparently visitors were not sure whether they were overhearing others or were themselves the subject of surveillance.

Theatricality of a more blatant sort was in evidence in Sonnier's 1970 installation *Fluorescent Room*. Unlike the other pieces in the exhibition, which are originals, *Fluorescent Room* was a re-creation, and this was only its third incarnation, and its first showing in the U.S. (Given its size and the unwieldy and impermanent nature of its materials, storing it does not make much sense.) Originally shown at the Stedelijk van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, it was meant to be the set for an ultraviolet-lighted video performance. The work consists of giant rectangular blocks of foam rubber laid out and stacked in a very large darkened room. Pigmented fluorescent powder was then flung and rubbed over the surfaces of the foam. The powder was allowed to splash up onto the walls and spill onto the floor, where it was tracked by visitors over the whole room and beyond. Some of the foam pieces appeared to have been rearranged as well, since the powdered outlines of several blocks remained on the floor. Fluorescent light fixtures attached to the ceiling illuminated the space, and the green, orange and yellow powder glowed with an otherworldly, psychedelic

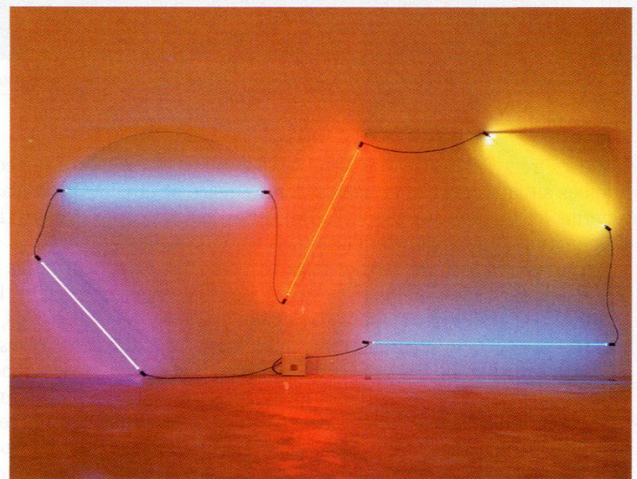


Live Video, 1970, projectors, red helium lasers, video camera, positive-negative switcher, dimensions variable.

intensity. Simple forms were turned into messily radiant monoliths that seemed to bleed out into the surrounding room. It was Don Judd meets Willem de Kooning on acid.

More restrained, but still a bit trippy, is *Mirror Act III* (1969), which consists of two 7-foot-square mirrors facing each other in a small gallery. One mirror has a thick vertical fluorescent orange stripe of paint running up its center, the other a horizontal. Placed on the floor in front of each mirror is a fluorescent light fixture containing two ultraviolet bulbs. Positioning oneself between the mirrors, one saw a series of glowing crosses reflected back to infinity. While the general concept of this work is not exactly breathtakingly original (I think I was about eight years old when I pleasurablely encountered the dual-mirror phenomenon while sitting in the barber's chair), the effect is still engaging.

Of greater interest are the two pieces *Spotted Circle* and *Spotted Square* (both 1970). Leaning against the wall at shallow angles at opposite ends of the gallery's passageway were two glass planes. One was a 7-foot circle, the other a 7-foot square. A powerful spotlight focused on each piece. The beam of light aimed at the circle was in the shape of a circle. When it reached the glass it was the same size as the circle it was directed at. Similarly, the square glass had a square beam of light superimposed on it. The light passed through the glass, and a new, somewhat distorted form was projected against the wall. The difference between the glass form and the light form, between material presence and immaterial luminosity, is slight but extremely powerful. The work speaks to the notion of incongruence, of the misregistration that occurs when different approaches to the same subject are conjoined. These pieces are, at heart, about mimesis, about the structural inability of one form to



BA-O-BA II, 1969, argon and neon tubes, transformer, plate glass, 7 feet by 16 feet by 10 inches.

exactly reproduce another, and about the newly created entity that occurs in the process.

For those interested in the possibilities of new media in the late '60s and early '70s, video presented an attractive option, and Somier came to it early on. One of video's appeals is its ability to display images in real time as well as to record them for later playback. First

created at Ace Gallery in Los Angeles in 1970, *Live Video* takes a black-and-white camera feed of the room and translates it into two images, one positive and one negative. The two versions are projected on opposing walls. In addition, laser devices located on the floor concentrate narrow beams of red light onto the projected fields, which are in turn rendered as black or white dots by the camera. The viewer who enters the space becomes the subject of the piece. Although the machinery is turned on, the work really doesn't begin to function esthetically until someone comes into range and activates it. Being in the room and viewing the images on the wall is a pleasingly disorienting experience. You aren't sure where you are meant to stand, what you are supposed to look at, or what the somewhat scary laser beams are for. The projected images are near to but not exactly life-size, and the lack of detail makes identification of who is who difficult when more than one person enters the room. Video has grown technically much more sophisticated over the years, but this rather bare-bones work demonstrates how perceptually affecting the medium can be.

It is one of modernism's great lessons that simple propositions can yield complex results. So it was with this show. Each piece had a straightforward formal and perceptual rationale, a self-contained logic, but there was also an implicit restlessness, a desire to push matters further. I found the exhibition to be remarkably fresh and appealing. This is often the case when you look at the early examples of work representing a coherent movement or direction. Sonnier and

The "BA-O-BA" series explores the play of light across surfaces and examines architectural relationships based on the ratios of the Golden Section.

the other artists he was associated with had some pretty well-established colleagues and interests to challenge. But the art world had changed and expanded its reach by then, and the innovations seemed to be accepted with reasonable equanimity by a large cross-section of that world. The new artists were, for the most part, easily and quickly integrated into the top galleries (Sonnier began his 30-year association with the Leo Castelli Gallery in 1968), and there was a general sense that something important had been added to the mix. Seen from a distance of some 35 years, Sonnier's work no longer seems quite as offhanded as it did when it was first made. We can certainly appreciate that early work's brashness and casual élan, but what comes across more than anything else now is its well-tuned quality, its sense of esthetic surefootedness. Sonnier knew what he was doing from the beginning, and it shows. □

Keith Sonnier's work appeared at Ace Gallery, New York [Sept. 24, 2003-Jan. 24, 2004]. BA-O-BA Lever House was on view in the lobby gallery of the Lever House, New York, through March and will be reinstalled periodically.

Author: Richard Kalina is a painter who writes about art.

BA-O-BA Lever House, 2003, argon and neon tubes; at the Lever House, New York. Photo courtesy the artist.

