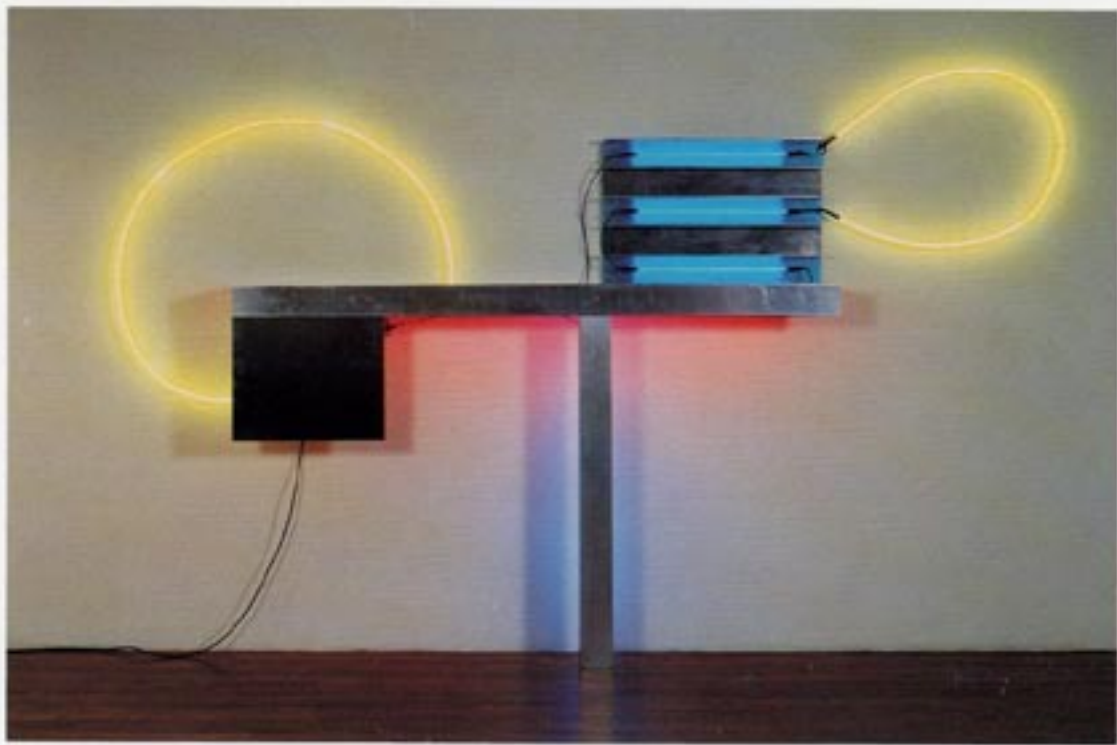


KEITH SONNIER: NEON

AUGUST 2 - OCTOBER 29, 1989



Wall Slash II, 1988. Neon and aluminum, 97 x 157 x 12 in. Leo Castelli Gallery, New York.

I have an intense interest in primitive cultures, anthropologically, sociologically, politically; but when it comes to actually making work, I feel that I have to contain my information in a real 20th-century, machine-age context.¹

OVER THE PAST TWENTY YEARS, American artist Keith Sonnier has synthesized widely disparate sources to produce an important body of work in the medium of neon. While he has also mastered a diverse array of materials from bamboo to video, he is perhaps best known for his neon sculpture. The five works in this exhibition exemplify Sonnier's major work in neon from 1969 to 1988.

Born in Mamou, Louisiana, Sonnier grew up in the rural isolation of this French-speaking, Cajan community. His father owned a hardware and electrical supply store. Sonnier recalls, "I was always interested in art. I grew up in a very pleasant surrounding, had a lot of free time, stayed in an area of about 200 miles until I was about 21."² Sonnier studied fine arts at the University of Southwestern Louisiana in Lafayette. After graduation in 1963, he left the South for the cosmopolitan art world. His first encounter with the work of such artists as Matisse and Picasso during a year-long sojourn in Paris convinced him to challenge the modern tradition. He later remarked, "Museums are mausoleums. . . . where one goes to view beautiful cadavers!"³

Returning to the United States in 1965, Sonnier settled in New York City. Awarded a graduate fellowship at Rutgers University, he studied under Robert Morris and joined the so-called Rutgers Group, a loose association of artists who had developed a kind of Minimal Art from found industrial materials such as felt, vacuformed plastics, and extruded aluminum. During the late sixties, he produced wall reliefs and floor-bound sculpture in cheesecloth, foam rubber, and similar soft materials. In 1966 Sonnier's sculpture composed of wood, fabric, and an alternately inflating and deflating air tube appeared in *Eccentric Abstraction*, an exhibition at the Fischbach Gallery. Selected by the critic Lucy Lippard, the exhibition was devoted to the newly identified trend away from the austerity of Minimal Art. By using unorthodox materials, Sonnier and his fellow artists, including Eva Hesse, Gary Kuehn, and Bruce Nauman, built upon the Dada and Surrealist tradition of collage and assemblage.

From the beginning, Sonnier's interest in materials and texture extended beyond the purely formal value of such experimentation. He has set himself apart from

both the Minimalists and the Pop artists. "In contrast with certain American artists (Morris, Judd, Rauschenberg, Stella, Jochas) who were exhibiting in New York when I began working, I was seeking, through the use of various materials, to make a more open work with a different role for the artist."⁴ Sonnier uses a wide variety of media to evoke cultural, psychological, and mystical associations.

It is in this context that Sonnier's neon work must be understood. In 1968 he began using neon in combination with cloth. He also experimented with other light sources, such as incandescent bulbs, but he soon discovered that neon suited his purposes. "It was just an easier kind of light to handle. I could span more space and could alter a situation much quicker than [with] other [incandescent] lights, and I was very interested in color."⁵ Sonnier also traced his affinity for neon to his memories of Louisiana. "About the most 'religious' experience I've ever had in Louisiana: coming back from a dance late at night and driving over this flat land and, all of a sudden, seeing these waves of [neon] light going up and down in this thick fog. Just incredible! Much better than any kind of Immaculate Conception or Ascension scene I have ever viewed in church!"⁶

Neon Wrapping Incandescent Light: Triple Loop, 1969 (fig. 1), one of Sonnier's earliest neon pieces, differs from the work of such contemporary neon artists as Stephen Antonakos or Chryssa in its frank informality and expressive linearity. Sonnier has juxtaposed the harsh, bright light of incandescent bulbs with the subtler, more suffused illumination from the entwining loops of neon tubes. Both the tubes and the exposed wires cast shadows that are integral to the composition. Sonnier also incorporated a humming transformer in the work, a practice that he has followed in most of his subsequent neon pieces.

Sonnier's deliberate use of exposed wires and uncealed transformers stems from the principle of "truth to materials." This practice differs from the pure neon work of such artists as Antonakos and the vernacular use of neon signs in commercial advertising. The sound of the transformer adds a multi-sensory dimension to Sonnier's work. This auditory element is related to his video, installation, and satellite transmission pieces, all of which use sound. Sonnier has credited the composer Richard Landry with alerting him to the possibility "that one could see and feel sound."⁷

Sonnier's multi-sensory approach to neon is also related to his concurrent work in environmental installations. During the early seventies, he produced a



Fig. 1. *Neon Wrapping Incandescent Light: Triple Loop*, 1969. Neon and incandescent bulbs, 96 x 51 x 15 in. Sylvio Peolstein. Photo: Brian Albert.

number of pieces composed of neon, plate glass, and mirrors. The generic name for this series, "BA-O-BA," comes from the Haitian Creole phrase for "light bath." In their elegant geometry and word play, these works reflect Sonnier's interest in exotic cultural sources and the interplay of form and language.

Subsequent travels to India and the Far East have reinforced this direction in Sonnier's neon work: "It was not until I began working in the Orient that I was able to 'retrieve' the formalist tradition."⁸ *Sel VII, Ger*, 1978 (fig. 4), is one of a series of neon works inspired by ancient Chinese calligraphy. "Sel," the series name, refers to an early, pictographic form of writing, which also symbolizes humanity.⁹ The simple array of red, white, green, and yellow neon and argon tubes forms a schematic figure. Unlike such artists as Bruce Nauman or Joseph Kosuth, who have created words and phrases in neon, Sonnier has avoided explicit writing. He prefers instead to evoke the mysterious origins of language with a calligraphy of light.

Sonnier's mastery of linear neon calligraphy is apparent in the "Pictogram" series, which evolved di-

rectly from the "Sel" series. He explained that it is the "act of writing which interests me and not the word, or how one begins to form symbols."¹⁰ In *Pictogram I*, 1980 (fig. 2), Sonnier has united counterbalanced arabesques of red, green, yellow, and blue light within an encompassing white neon circle. The immediacy of such light compositions derives from his use of drawing to discover and to visualize his ideas: "I must have physical contact even if it is only for drawing, because afterwards I work with a technician."¹¹ The resulting neon "Pictograms" symbolize a reconciliation of Eastern mysticism with Western technology.

In his most recent neon work, Sonnier has extended this dialogue between high technology and exotic cultures into fully three-dimensional sculpture. He now combines neon with aluminum I-beams in monumental reliefs and free-standing pieces. In *Wall Slash II*, 1988 (cover), Sonnier has counterpoised two open loops of yellow neon on a cruciform aluminum armature. In contrast with his earlier neon work, this mixed-media relief features concealed red and blue neon tubes that create a suffused glow behind the intersecting aluminum I-beams. The transformer, mounted behind



Fig. 2. *Pictogram I*, 1980. Neon, 72 x 96 in. Leo Castelli Gallery, New York.

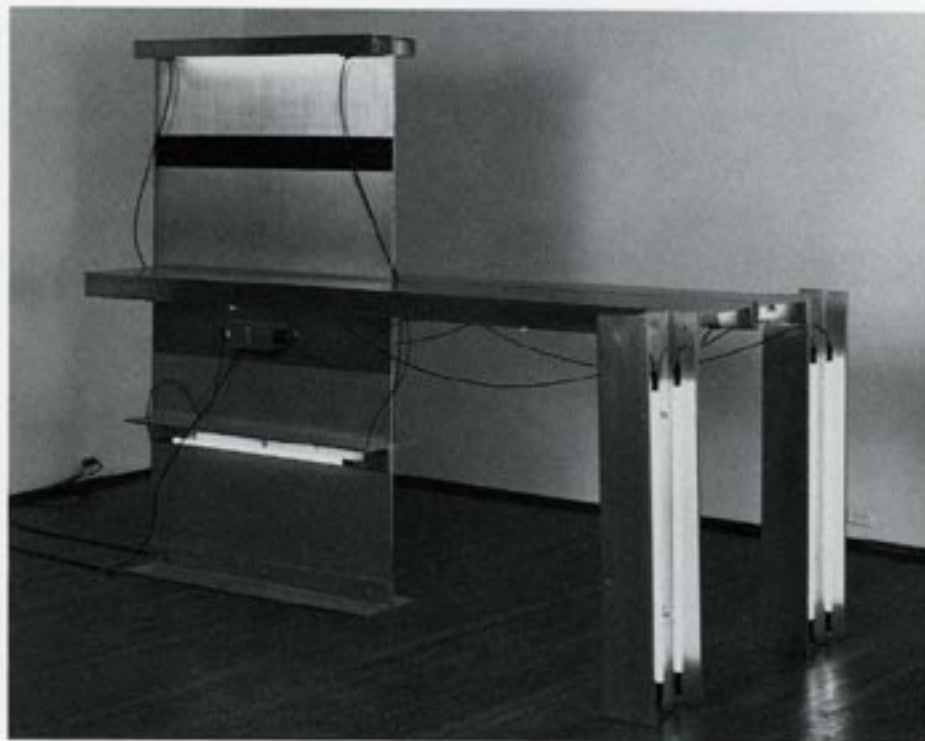


Fig. 3. *Sphinx Position*, 1988. Neon and aluminum, 84 x 104½ x 54½ in. Leo Castelli Gallery, New York. Photo: Steve Tucker.

the left metal plate, is partially hidden. The primary color scheme of this neon piece and the orthogonal design of its metal elements recall the compositional principles of the Dutch avant-garde movement De Stijl. At the same time, the slightly asymmetrical composition and the interplay of open and closed rectilinear forms resemble the planar format of the sculptor David Smith's *Cubis*. In *Wall Slash II*, Sonnier has reused the formalist tradition of modern art to create a monumental semaphore.

Sonnier subordinates ethereal light to architectural structure in his fully three-dimensional works. In *Sphinx Position*, 1988 (fig. 3), he has mounted red, yellow, and blue neon tubes on a robot-like "sphinx" composed of aluminum I-beams. Multi-colored lights emanate from this mechanistic apparition. The rigid geometry of this piece derives from his earlier mixed-media sculpture. Works such as *Aesthesipol*, 1982, in which a working pay telephone and television set are attached to a painted aluminum armature, assume an

anthropomorphic character. Sonnier has likened the spatial impact of these works to "walking through 'primitive' architecture," which "creates a very sculptural spirit."¹² In *Sphinx Position*, Sonnier summons the mysteries of ancient Egypt with 20th-century materials—neon and aluminum.

Through the medium of neon, Keith Sonnier links high technology and mass communication with archaic subcultures and the origins of language. His neon work achieves its enigmatic power through this reconciliation of opposing materials and themes. Within this complex body of work, it is possible to discern a progression from expressive informality in the early pieces to geometric order in the most recent sculpture. Sonnier exploits the transcendent possibilities of neon with wit and elegant restraint.

Judith Zilczer
Associate Curator of Painting

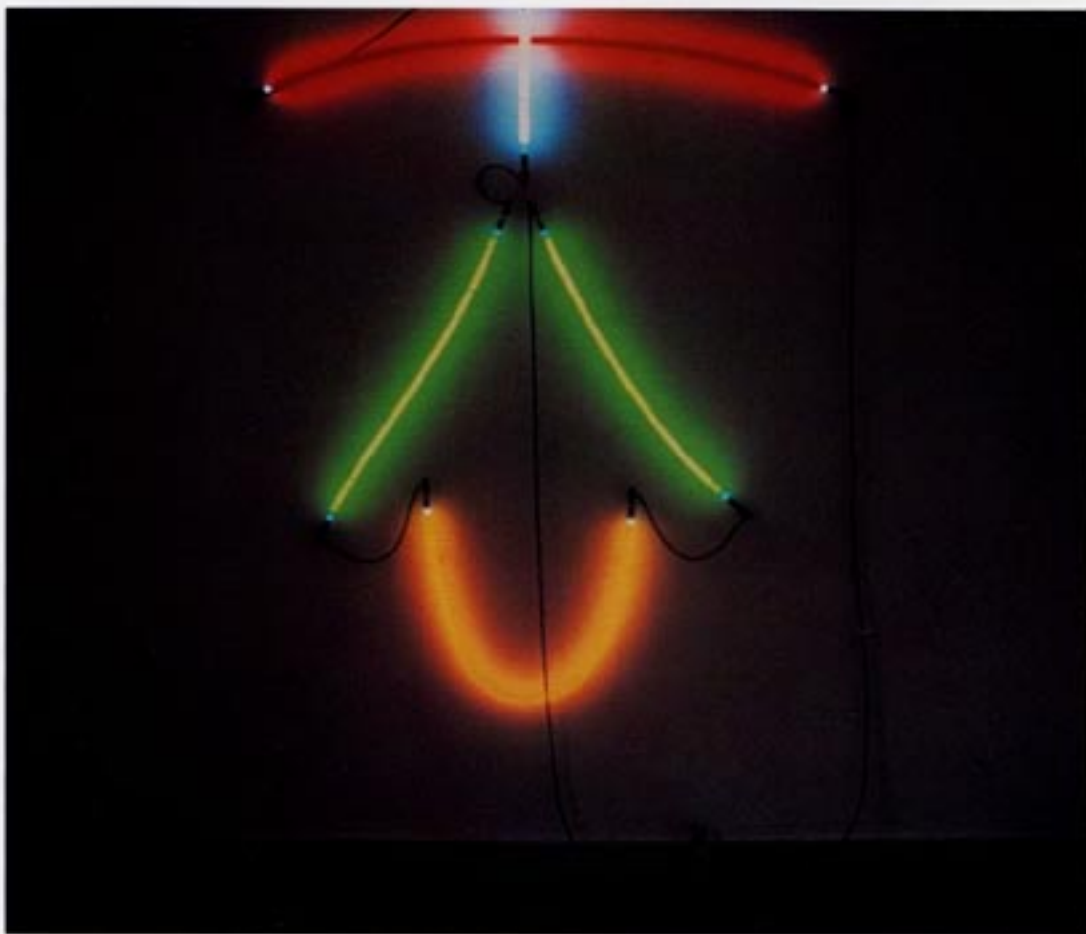


Fig. 4. *Sel VII, Ger.*, 1978. Neon and argon, 89 x 54 1/2 in. Collection of the artist.

1. Keith Sonnier, in Calvin Haslan, "Keith Sonnier: An Interview," *Parachute* 6 (Summer 1977): 26.

2. Sonnier, in Ray Thorburn, "Ray Thorburn Talks with Keith Sonnier [1974]," *Art International* 20 (Jan.-Feb. 1976): 69.

3. Sonnier, in Haslan interview, p. 26.

4. Sonnier, in Bernard Lamarche-Vadel and Dominique Breis, "Entretien avec Keith Sonnier," *Artistes* 1 (Oct.-Nov. 1979): 11; translation by the author.

5. Sonnier, in Thorburn interview, p. 70.

6. Sonnier, in Haslan interview, p. 28.

7. Sonnier, in Betty Susler, "Aesthetipoli: Keith Sonnier Interviewed by Betty Susler," *Bomb* 3 (1982): 29.

8. Sonnier, in Patrick Javault, "Keith Sonnier: du bambou au néon," *Art Press* 102 (April 1986): 10; translation by the author.

9. Sonnier, interview with the author, April 14, 1989.

10. Sonnier, in Javault interview, p. 11.

11. Sonnier, in Lamarche-Vadel and Breis interview, p. 13.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

BIOGRAPHY

Born in Mamou, Louisiana, July 31, 1941.

Educated at the University of Southwestern Louisiana, Lafayette, 1959-63, B.A., 1963; traveled and studied in France, 1963-64; Douglass College, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1965-66, M.F.A., 1966.

Awards include a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship, 1974; and First Prize at the 9th International Biennial Exhibition of Prints, National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, 1974.

Traveled extensively in Europe, India, South America, and the Far East, 1966-present. Lives and works in New York City.

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 1966 Douglass College, Rutgers University.
- 1968 Galerie Rieck, Cologne, West Germany (also 1971, 1975, 1978, 1981, 1984, 1987).
- 1970 Leo Castelli Gallery, New York (also 1972, 1974, 1976, 1978, 1979, 1982, 1984, 1985); Ace Gallery, Los Angeles; Stedelijk Van Abbe Museum, Eindhoven, Holland (catalog).
- 1971 Museum of Modern Art, New York.
- 1978 Rosamund Felsen Gallery, Los Angeles (also 1982, 1985); Institute for Art and Urban Resources, The Clocktower, New York.
- 1979 Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; Museum Haus Lange, Krefeld, West Germany (catalog); Galerie Eric Fabre, Paris (also 1982).
- 1980 Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York; Galerie France Morin, Montreal.
- 1981 David Bellman Gallery, Toronto.
- 1983 Institute for Art and Urban Resources, P.S. 1, Long Island City, New York (catalog).
- 1984 Galeria Schema, Florence; Hara Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo (catalog, tour).
- 1986 Tilden-Foley Gallery, New Orleans.
- 1987 Centre d'Art Contemporain du Domaine de Kerguehennec, Rennes (catalog); Alexandria (Louisiana) Museum of Art (catalog).
- 1988 Chrysler Museum, Norfolk, Virginia (catalog).
- 1989 Leo Castelli Gallery and Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York (two-part retrospective); Galerie Montenay, Paris; Galerie Ryszard Variszela, Frankfurt.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1965 Arnel Gallery, New York.
- 1966 Fischbach Gallery, New York, *Eccentric Abstraction* (catalog).
- 1968 *Soft Sculpture* (American Federation of Arts tour); Castelli Warehouse, New York, *Nine at Leo Castelli*.
- 1969 Kunsthalle Bern, Switzerland, *When Attitudes Become Form*, (catalog, tour); Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials* (catalog).
- 1970 Tokyo Metropolitan Art Gallery, Tokyo Biennale '70 (catalog, tour); Whitney Museum of American Art, *The 1970 Annual Exhibition: Contemporary American Sculpture* (also 1973, catalogs).
- 1972 36th Venice (Italy) Biennale (also 1982, catalogs); Museum Fridericianum, Kassel, West Germany, *Documenta 5* (catalog).
- 1974 National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, *9th International Biennial Exhibition of Prints* (catalog).
- 1975 National Collection of Fine Arts, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., *Sculpture, American Directions: 1945-1975*.
- 1976 Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, *200 Years of American Sculpture* (catalog).
- 1977 New Orleans Museum of Art, *Five from Louisiana* (catalog).
- 1981 Washington (D.C.) Project for the Arts, *Neon Fronts: Luminous Art for the Urban Landscape* (catalog); Louisiana Museum, Humlebaek, Denmark, *Drawing Distinctions: American Drawings of the Seventies* (catalog, tour).
- 1986 Centre International d'Art Contemporain de Montreal, *Lumière: Perception—Projection* (catalog); Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, *Individuals* (catalog).
- 1987 Städtisches Museum Abteiberg, Mönchengladbach, West Germany, *Neon-Kunst: Bruce Nauman, Richard Serra, Keith Sonnier* (catalog).
- 1988 American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, New York, *Paintings and Sculpture by Candidates for Art Awards*.

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- Baker, Kenneth. "Keith Sonnier at the Modern." *Artforum* 10 (Oct. 1971): 77-81.
- Castle, Ted. "Keith Sonnier's Pictograms." *Artforum* 19 (Jan. 1981): 34-35.

"A Conversation with Keith Sonnier—Machine 1980." Cover 1 (Spring-Summer 1980): 20.

Dobie, D. Brewster. "Keith Sonnier: Profile and Interview." *Art Papers* 6 (Sept.-Oct. 1982): 2-3.

Gholsen, Craig. "Keith Sonnier: Communicable Art." *Interview* (Nov. 1977): 35-37.

Haran, Galvin. "Keith Sonnier: An Interview." *Parachute* 6 (Summer 1977): 25-28.

Javault, Patrick. "Keith Sonnier: du bambou au néon." *Art Press* 102 (April 1986): 8-11 (interview).

Kuspit, Donald B. "Keith Sonnier." *Artforum* 22 (Sept. 1983): 71-72.

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Lamarche-Vadel, Bernard, and Dominique Breis. "Entretien avec Keith Sonnier." *Artistes* 1 (Oct.-Nov. 1979): 10-13 (interview).

Lippard, Lucy R. "Report from New Orleans: You Can Go Home Again: Five from Louisiana." *Art in America* 65 (July-Aug. 1977): 22-25.

Morgan, Robert C. "Eccentric Abstraction and Postminimalism: From Biomorphic Sensualism to Hard-Edge Concreteness." *Flash Art* 144 (Jan.-Feb. 1989): 73-81.

Pincus-Witten, Robert. "Keith Sonnier: Materials and Pictorialism." *Artforum* 8 (Oct. 1969): 39-45.

Sharp, Willoughby. "Keith Sonnier at Eindhoven: An Interview." *Arts Magazine* 45 (Feb. 1971): 24-27.

Sussler, Betsy. "Aesthespot: Keith Sonnier Interviewed by Betsy Sussler." *Bomb* 3 (1982): 29-30.

Thorburn, Ray. "Ray Thorburn Talks with Keith Sonnier [1974]." *Art International* 20 (Jan.-Feb. 1976): 69-74.

Upshaw, Reagan. "Keith Sonnier at Castelli." *Art in America* 70 (Dec. 1982): 127-28.

CHECKLIST

Neon Wrapping Incandescent Light: Triple Loop, 1969. Neon and incandescent bulbs, 96 x 53 x 15 in. Sylvio Perlestein.

Sel VII, Ger, 1978. Neon and argon, 80 x 54 in. Collection of the artist.

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