

Art in America

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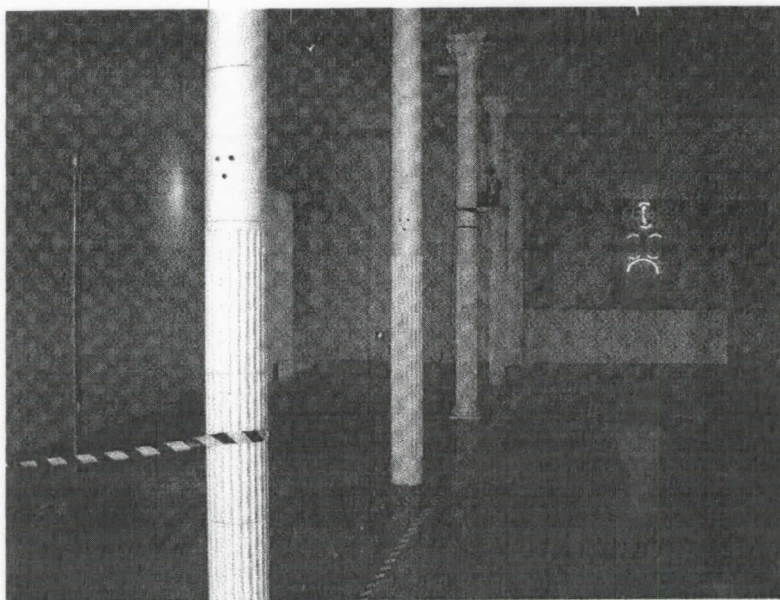
REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS

NEW YORK

Keith Sonnier at Location One

One sensed danger, walking into the ground-floor loft housing Keith Sonnier's "02=03: Fractured Oxygen =Ozone." Floor-to-ceiling gridded wire webs hewed the space into ample Minimalist cages. Tiny lightning-bolt warning signs and strips of black-and-yellow hazard tape on the floor kept viewers back from the sculptures that resembled antique electrical generating machines. Five were dedicated to Serbian-born inventor Nicola Tesla, Edison's early-20th-century rival. *Tesla Wall* (1997), for example, involved a contraption placed high up against a column and containing a Tesla coil—a transformer that periodically discharged with an unnerving sizzle, sending voltage into one of the floor-to-ceiling cages. Other works were equally, well, electrifying, conveying all the magic and promise of primitive science. *Ceiling Ladder* (1997) featured a luminous spark arcing between two upright copper tubes, crackling as it ascended; then it started the process over again.

In the 1970s, Sonnier pioneered the use of primitive live satellite feeds, TV feedback and global telecommunication linkups in his art; some of his landmark early films and videos were grainily projected in dim light at the back of the space. What made this exhibition poignant, however, was something originally intended as a background element—an "information stream" involving walls pasted with current newspapers. However, the dates for which Sonnier had preordered the newspapers were Sept. 12-15. Thus, framing his sculptures and projections, and turning them into a



Keith Sonnier: Installation view of exhibition, 2001; at Location One.

kind of melancholy meditation on the 20th century, were horrific images of towering infernos, fleeing crowds caked with ash, and anguished editorial cartoons in languages from around the world.

Several of the pieces had been exhibited before; here, they took on new resonances. The cage-like *Electric Fence* (1999), restricting movement, became a metaphor for a new, dangerous world to be negotiated—as well as bringing to mind Lower Manhattan's postdisaster barricades (Sonnier has his studio on Chambers Street). Placed high on the wall, the neon sculpture *Depose 1* (1996), a partially deflated balloon somewhat humanoid in shape and clamped at the middle by a band of neon, now seemed a tragically prescient tribute to victims attempting to escape fiery death by leaping into space.

Three attitudes toward technology were embedded in the show. There was the industrial-age optimism of Tesla's day, when it was thought science would solve society's ills; Sonnier's low-tech films reflect the pessimism of the 1970s counter-culture, when science seemed so obscenely omnipotent that the raw and the unfinished were valued. And then there is our nerve-racking present, when our skyscrapers, power grids and airplanes, long taken for granted as symbolizing our mastery of natural forces, seem newly vulnerable and also capable of being turned against one another—and against us. Just as the evanescent electric spark travels up the wire and disappears, we see how transitory our seemingly stable universe may prove to be.

-Carey Lovelace