

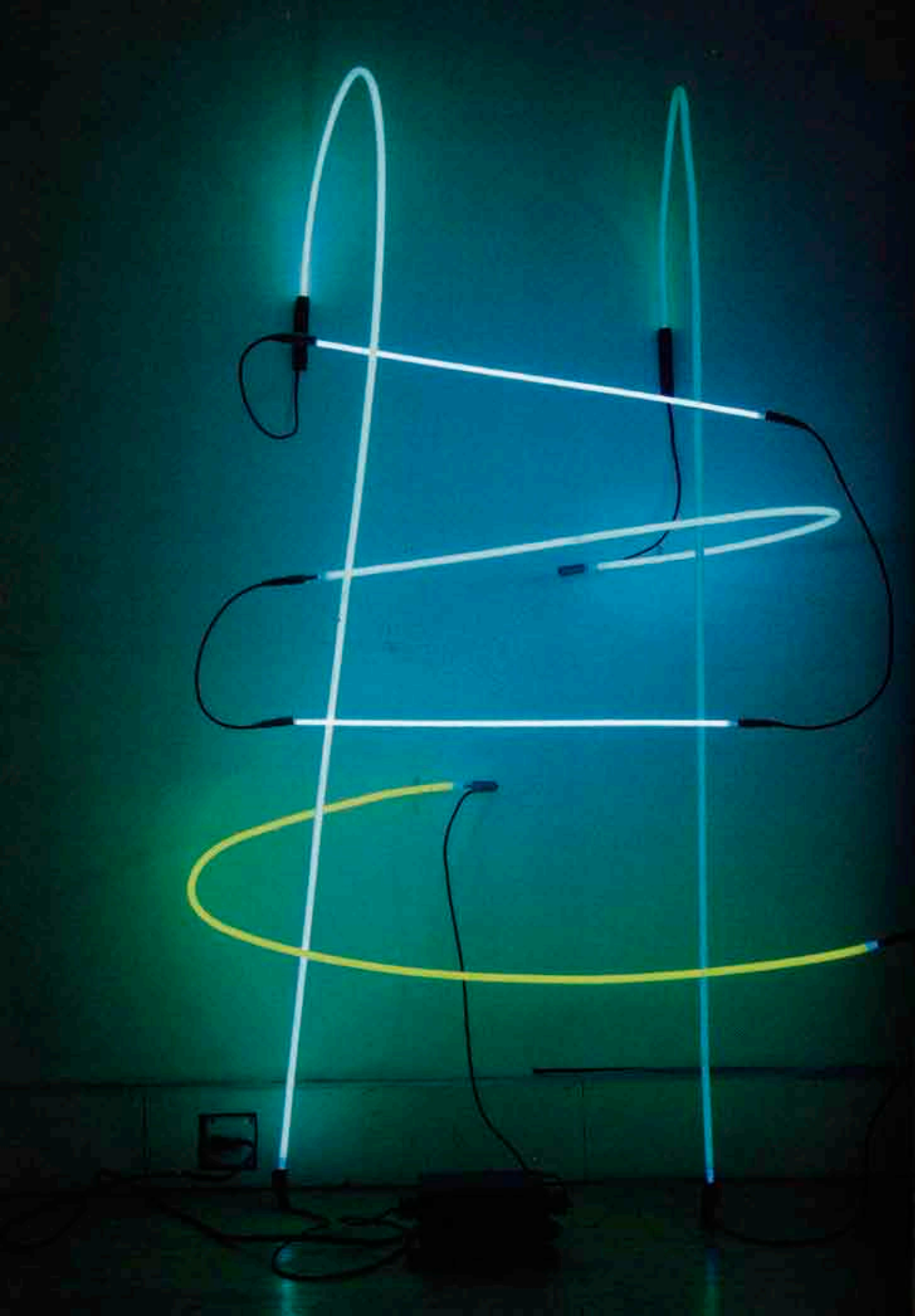
KEITH SONNIER

TRANSFORMER

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SELECTED WORKS  
1968-2005

THE ARTS CLUB OF CHICAGO



KEITH SONNIER IS A NAME RECOGNIZED IN THE ART WORLD since the mid 1960s. Along with Eva Hesse, Barry Le Va, Bruce Nauman, Richard Serra, and Richard Tuttle, Sonnier pioneered a radically different idea of sculpture by dissolving sculpture's traditional mass, a concept the critic Lucy Lippard coined "Eccentric Abstraction."

One associates Sonnier with light—especially neon—haunting in its unconventional usage, free form and ruleless, the antithesis of the formal Minimalist investigations simultaneously taking place. The Arts Club is pleased to mount a selection of works from 1968 to the present that encompass many of Sonnier's investigations during this time.

Sonnier is from Grand Mamou, Louisiana, 200 miles west of New Orleans where the panhandle begins and the bayou ends. Pure prairie Cajun country influenced by diverse cultures rich in music, food, language and brimming with corrupt politicians, bordellos, and rural superstitions. Sonnier had a host of colorful relatives: *traiteurs* (healers), house painting uncles that painted everything from oil rigs and water towers to sides of barns. His father ran a hardware store, a catalyst for his later interest in things electrical, mechanical, and video. Pluralism continually asserts itself throughout his work. Sonnier has always been fascinated by how nature and technology exist together in the modern world.

Sonnier went to college in the 1960s at Rutgers University where Fluxus was happening; Robert Watts, Robert Morris, and Yvonne Rainer were teaching; and George Segal and Roy Lichtenstein were neighbors. An early Rauschenberg piece, *Oracle* (1962-65), with movable parts of throwaway junk and a sound element, prodded him to pursue object making. Sonnier's early works combined a host of disparate materials—light bulbs, neon, fluorescent light, strobe light, black light, latex, satin, bamboo, cheesecloth, string, wire—that questioned not only their usage but also the architectural context in



EXPANDED WILLOW BLATT

2000, neon, transformer, 88 x 58 x 24 inches

► LOUNGE

1968, (Cloth and Light Set), neon, incandescent light, cloth, 72 x 72 x 120 inches

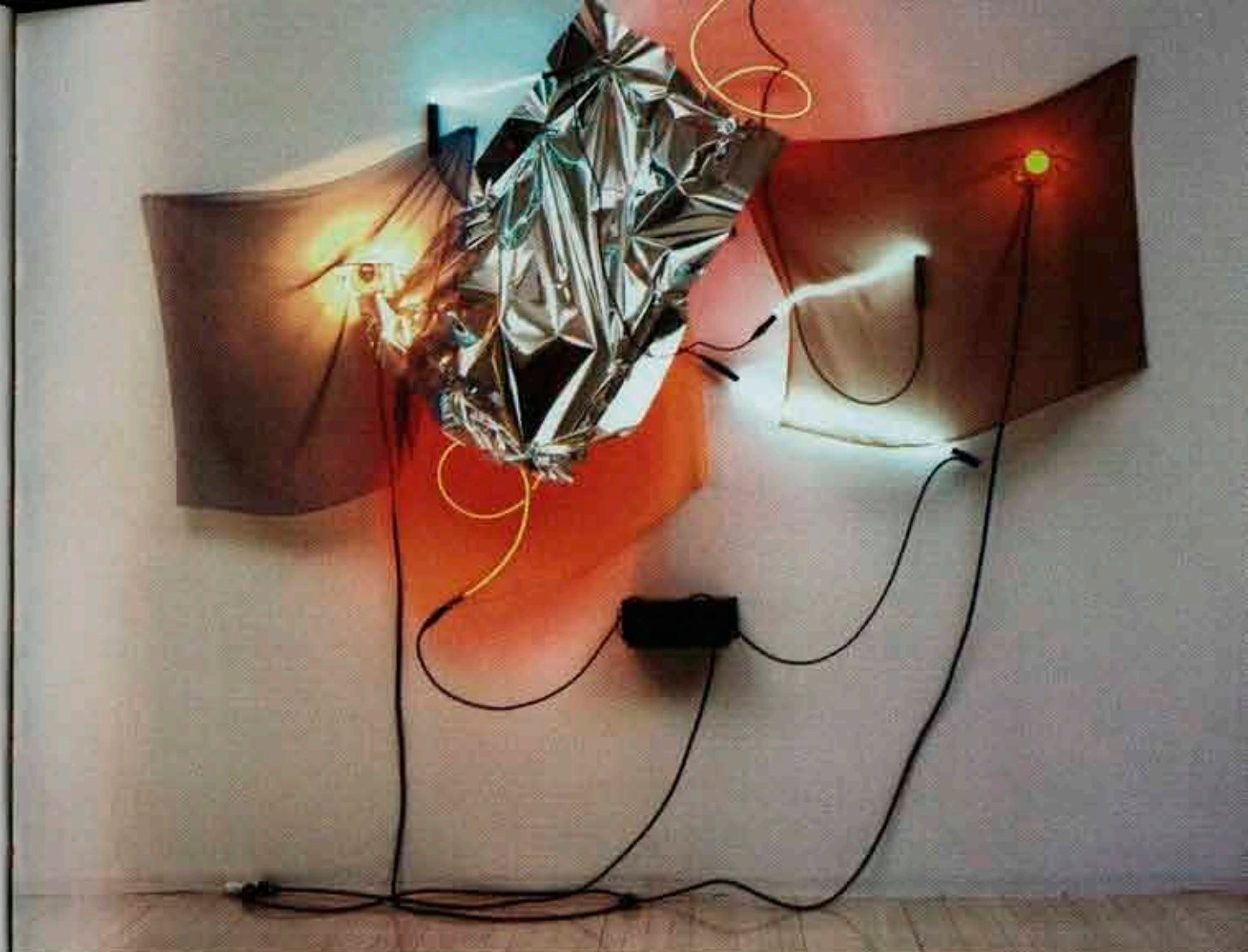
which they were presented. Work was on and off the wall, or even an entire room of fluorescent pigments on foam rubber with neon and black light.

Sonnier was the first to bring video projection into an art context with his works from the 1970s, which began with an interest in narrative, progressing to object manipulation, experimenting with the material itself, and the transmission of television. His later investigations with the Tesla (Serbian physicist who discovered the principles of alternating current in 1881) pieces in the mid 1990s used raw electricity and sculptural fences of "hot" wires.

Sonnier made many trips abroad during the 1970s and 1980s to India, Japan, Bali, and Brazil producing hybrid pieces melding indigenous cultures with both primitive and high-tech materials.

He returned to Grand Mamou in 1990 and produced the eccentric *Tidewater* series composed of fluid neon and found objects. These were followed by the exuberant, (almost figurative), *Cat Doucet* series (1996), named after the notorious debauched Louisiana sheriff. The *Depose* (1996) pieces of inflated material and constricting neon mime the exhausted physical and psychological corporal body after a protracted divorce. *Tailgate* (2000) explores Sonnier's other light and glass interests by incorporating windshields and automobile lights. The recent series of the architectural *Baumgate* pieces (2000), the lush fauna *Blatt* series (German word for leaf, 2000) and the stoic, emblematic *Rex* (2003) all reflect his varied and continued range of pursuits.

Sonnier has completed many large architectural and public installations all over the world: Joseph E. Seagram & Sons Inc., NY (1981); New Jersey Department of Transportation,



Trenton (1990); Munich International Airport (1989-92); Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center, Washington DC (1998); and St. Franciscus Church, Steyr, Austria (2001).

I would like to thank Keith Sonnier for this wonderful exhibition. It was a delight to work with him and to have the opportunity to explore his varied and exciting oeuvre. Poet Max Blagg's catalogue text resonates, turning Sonnier's visual vocabulary verbal. Thank you to Antonio Homen at Sonnabend Gallery, New York; Douglas Baxter at Pace Wildenstein, New York; and Galerie Proarta, Zurich for generously lending to the exhibition.

— Kathy Cottong, Director



# Transformer

*"The curtain rises on a forest fire" — Marcel Jean*

Some art has the sugar cube inside the glass and you have to lick the glass to get the ghost of a taste. There is nothing so demure in these lush voluptuous works.

The honey is poured directly onto the tongue, light penetrates the delicate orb of the eye, spreads into the mucous membrane of the soul and the endorphins run riot as the viewer is immediately engaged, seduced, carried off in spirals of luminescence, fire and flame.

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## The color of neon

The red color is neon gas, not a true red, more like a flame, like the flame that burns on the vast network of natural gas vents criss-crossing the Atchafalaya Swamp.

The other color, argon, is a pale blue, verging on green.

The argon tube gets a few drops of mercury.

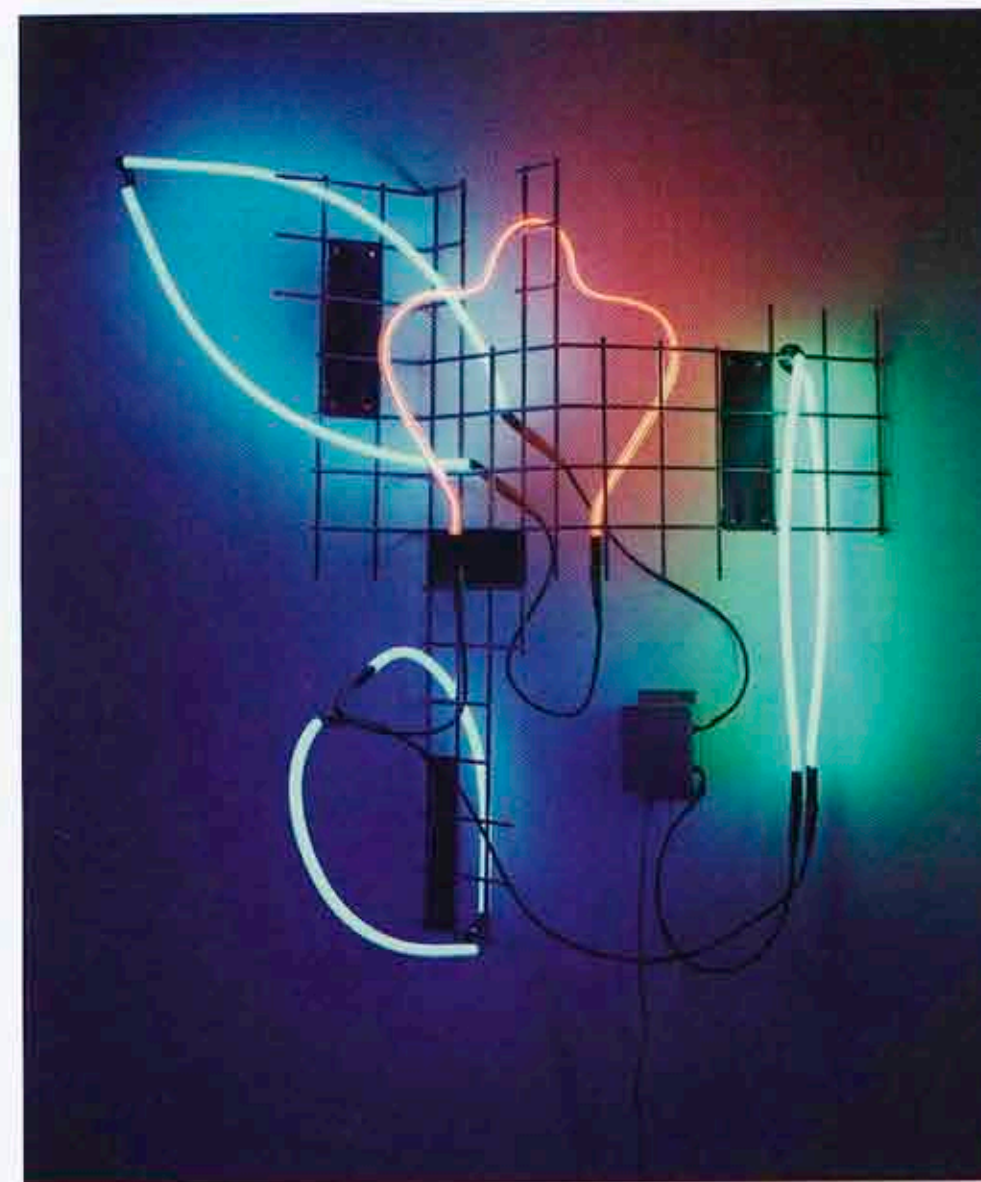
The red draws more electricity, in order to burn bright.

Neon was made for the night, a touch of mercury and the moon brings insanity and darkness up close and personal.

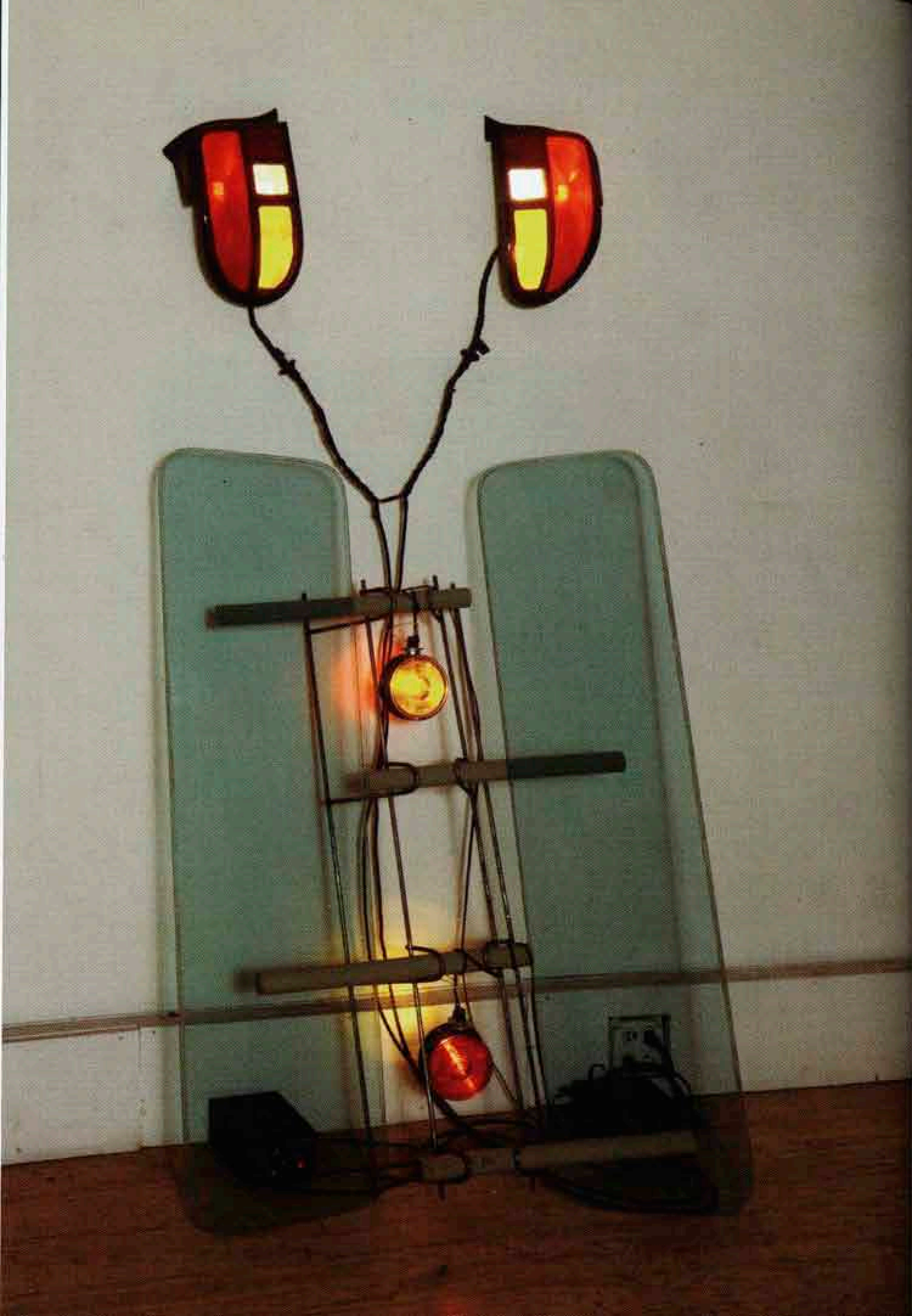
Copper wire, 2 neon transformers, electrical apparatus, cable

## BAUMGATE STUDY I

2000, neon, rubber, steel mesh, transformer, 48 x 44 x 19 inches







## TAILGATE

2000, automobile lights, windshield glass, steel rebar, transformers, 72 x 36 x 17 inches

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The weightless volume of these floating worlds, Light fills the room as a real presence, it takes up space, can't calculate the actual dimensions, but it's ample.

Neon, rubber, steel mesh, transformer

## Trigger

The singular places that inspiration strikes a restless, fertile mind; an advertising sign in the best chili joint in Fort Worth triggered the "Longhorn" series, horizontal, curvilinear, an illuminated echo of a trophy bull's horns. From this came antlers, tusks, mammoth relics, which continue to morph into new animals, illuminated versions of African masks, medieval warriors' helmets, fetishes for the 21st century.

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KS is a poet of curves and arcs and color  
these slim tubes of colored gas  
beginning to form organic shapes on the studio wall.  
What distant night will they illuminate?  
Whose face bathed in their soft glow?  
The colors wash through the room like a chameleon under fire.

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Automobile lights, windshield glass, steel rebar,  
transformers

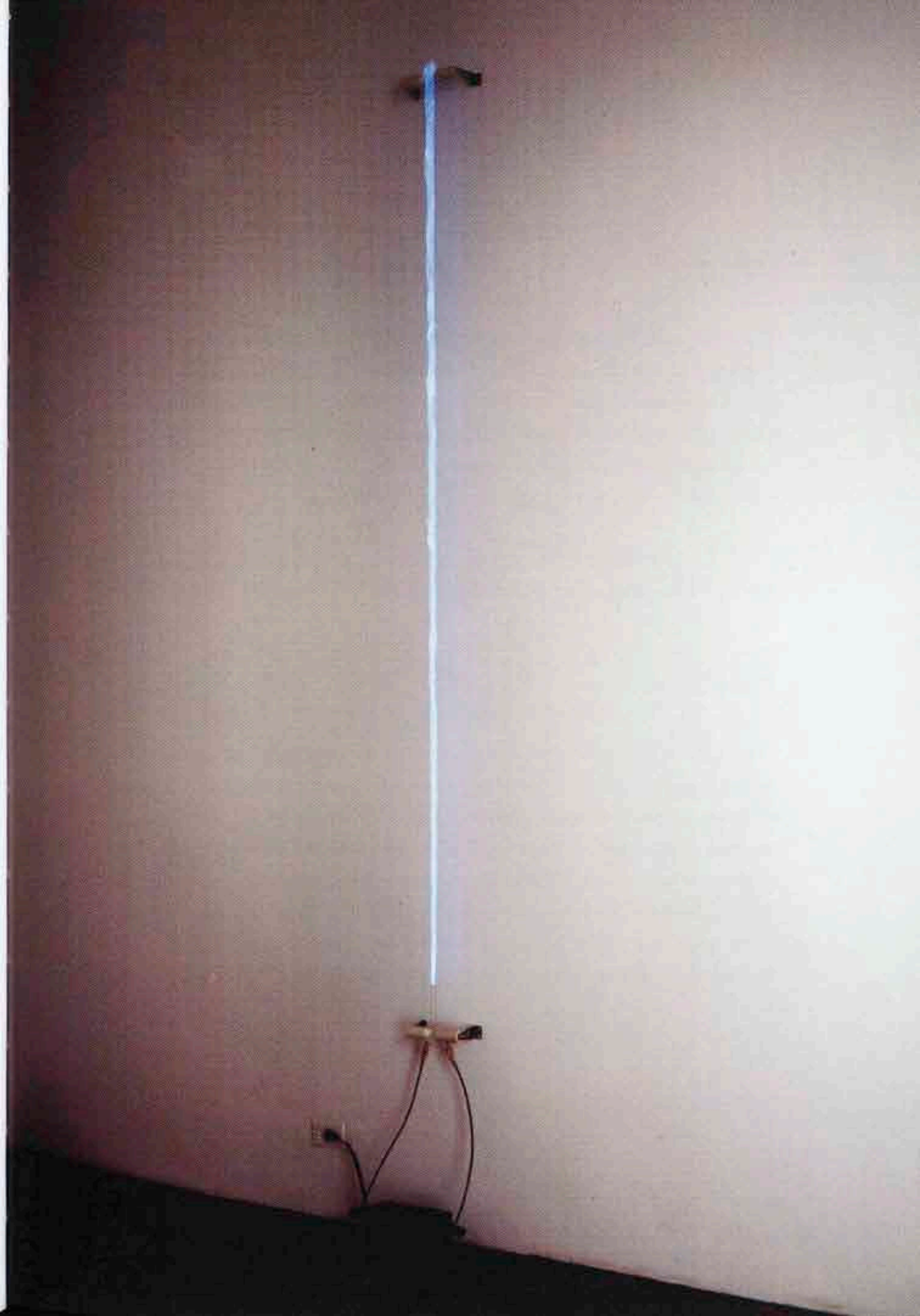
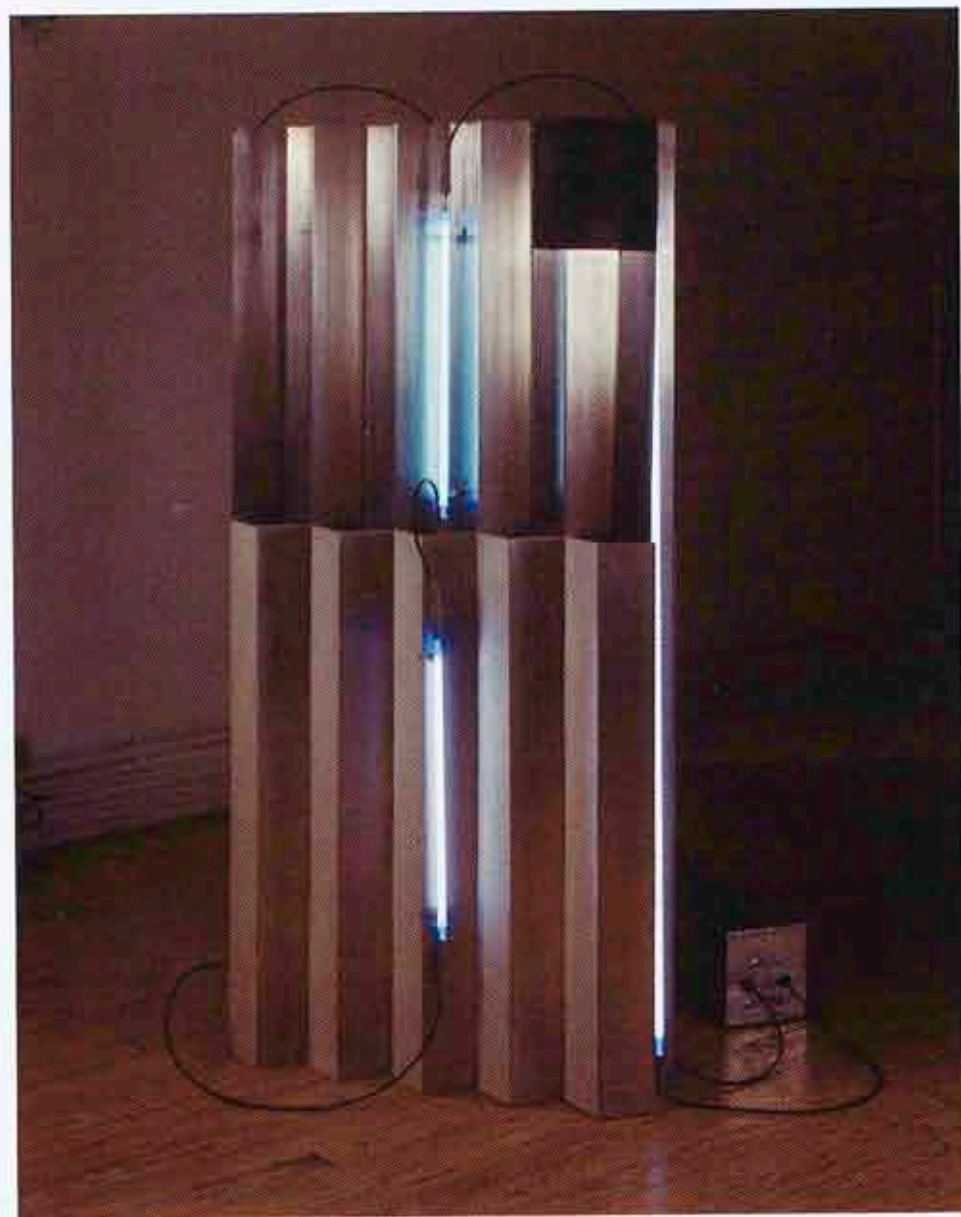


# ELECTRICAL TRANSMITTING APPARATUS

1996, neon transformer, copper wire, electrical apparatus, 72 x 24 inches

## ▼ COLUMN II

1981, corrugated aluminum, neon (white), 72 x 32 x 10 inches





## Night

Evangeline Parish, Louisiana. The poetry of the names enchants a boy with a poet's heart. Lafayette, Eunice, Opelousas, Ville Platte, Mamou, down Route 13 to Lake Charles, across the wide prairie to the lounge at the end of the world, smell of sex on silk, a rich fermented perfume, curtain waving slightly at the window, the black velvet darkness punctuated by points of feral light....

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Neon, incandescent light and cloth

## Film

How light appeared in the cinema, smoke rising through the projected images on the screen. Aunt Evangeline ran the Joy Cinema on Main Street for thirty years... mysterious interior for a boy to explore, seated figures engrossed in another world, faces glowing in the screen's reflected silver light.

Later the play of moonlight on skin in the backs of cars on lonely roads under the violet southern sky, distant flame of the gas drills and oil rigs working off the coast, in the gulf of Texas, in the gulf of music.

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Neon, argon, sail cloth, steel, flock.

## Wet

The sudden bath of light kicks random glimpses, puts you on the verge of revelation, lifting the veil, the way memory clicks sometimes, driving through a foreign city in the night rain, streetlights trigger recall of that "metropolitan nearness/the footstep in the flat above."

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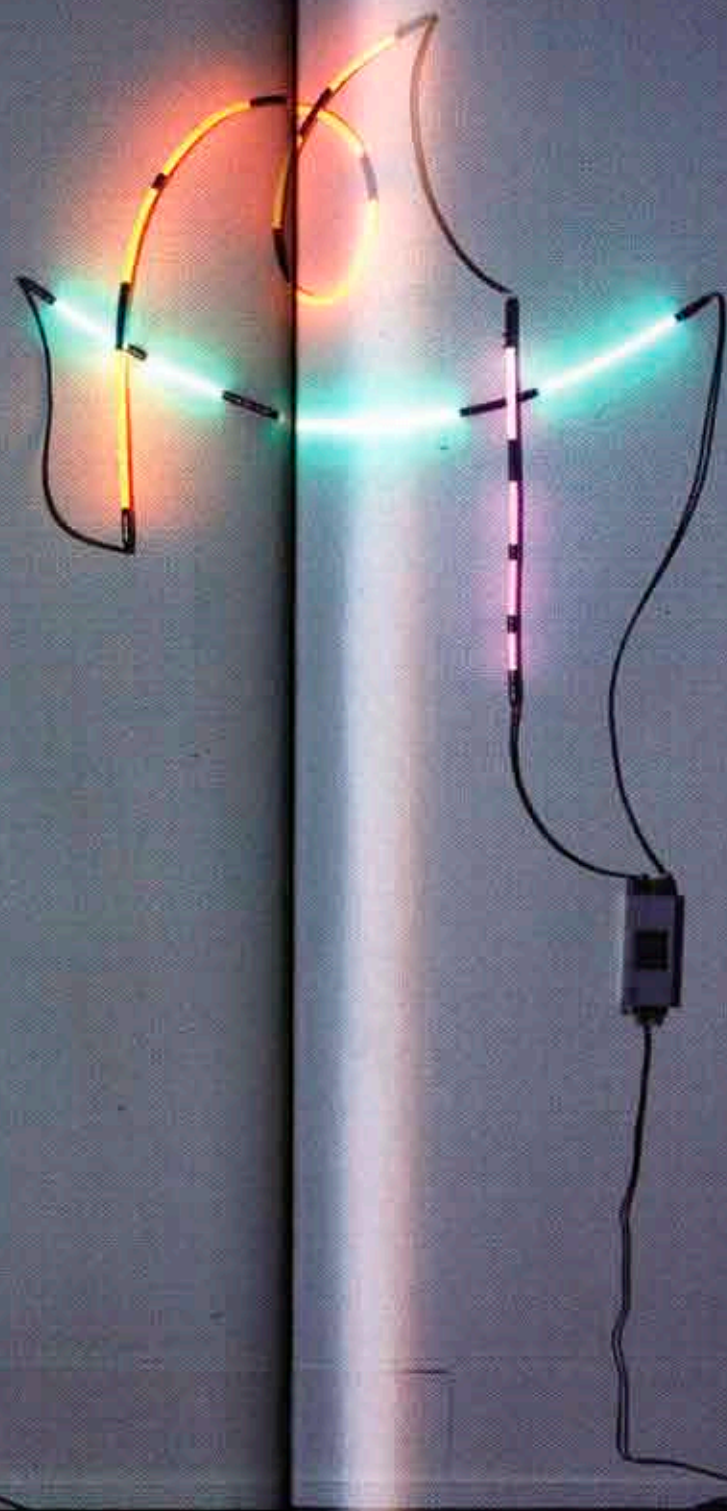
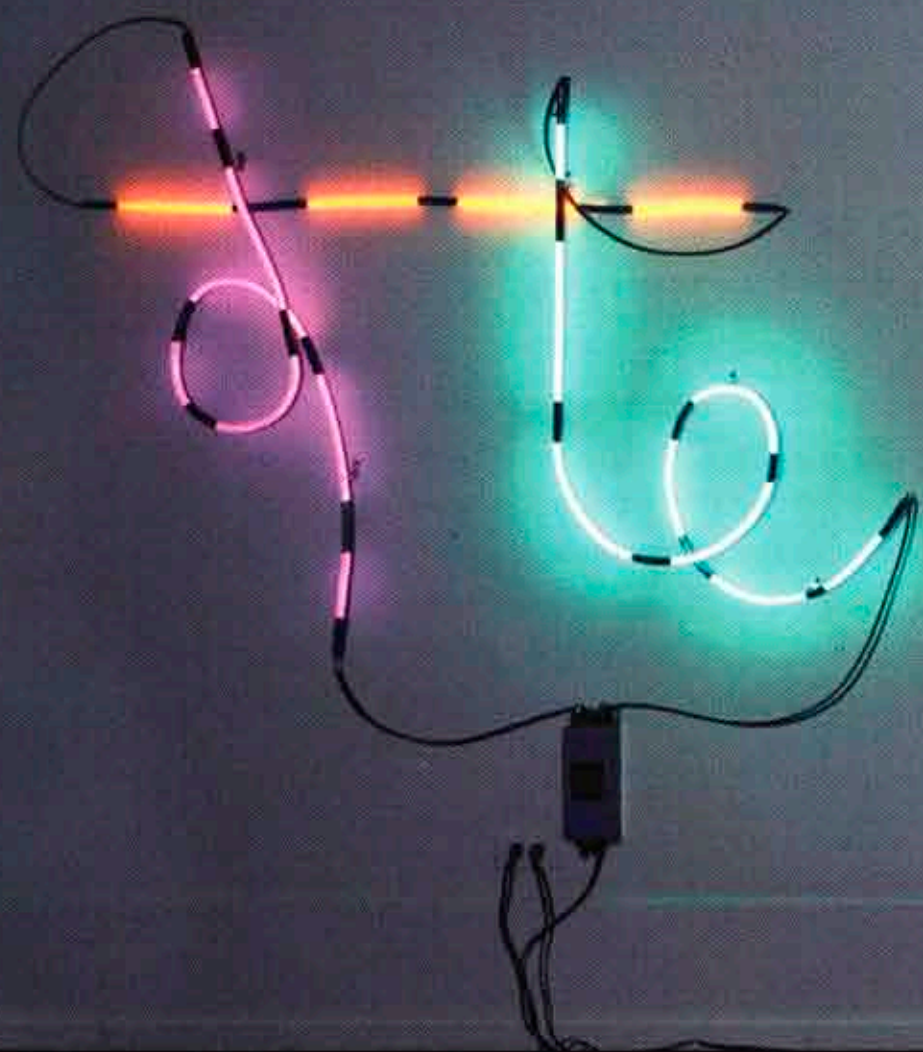
Automobile lights, windshield glass, steel rebar, transformers

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## This is not a Church

Sonnier sensualist shaman, he touches objects and they come alive under his hands. At the Ace Gallery last year the quasi-religious qualities of his art were not lost on the least godfearing of visitors, even atheists were seen to tremble in the divine shadows that gathered around the works. Smoke and mirrors and simple phosphorescent powder transforming the space into a dogma-free zone, cathedral to a purely natural religion.







1988, neon (pink, orange, green), paint, 108 x 192 x 4 inches (tryptich)

► DEUX PATTES

1981, extruded aluminum, neon, paint, 120 x 84 x 48 inches

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## Deux pattes

KS conceived the idea that the sculptures could stand by themselves, on their own elegant legs, and he made them with such fluidity and conviction that they are just a step away from walking off the set under their own power.

A variation on the ability of the artist to produce a golem, the way Picasso believed that an artist could create a man from wet clay...

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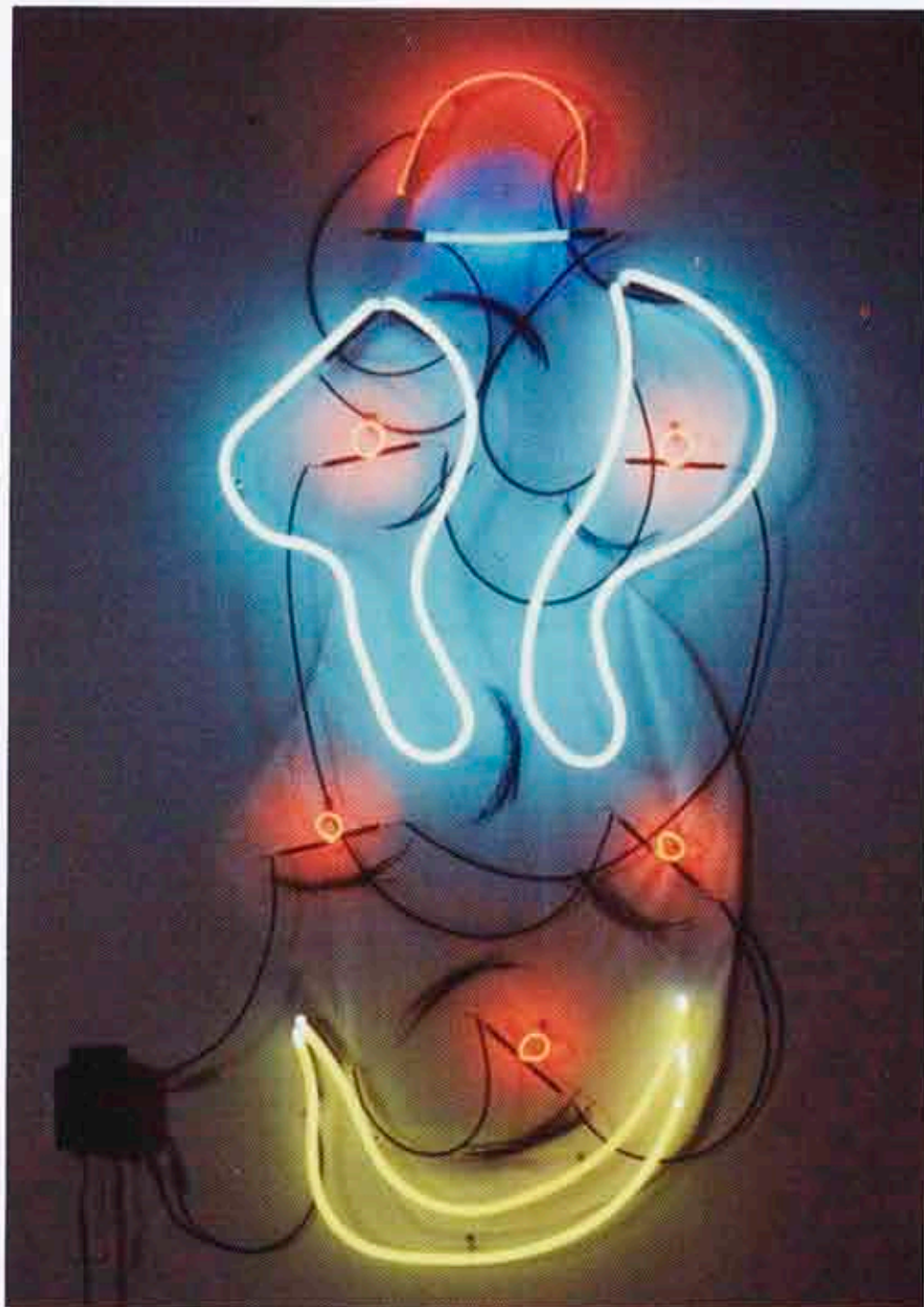
## Blatt

The leaf-like shape, palm frond or elephant's ear, mythic or real, it owes something to Gauguin's island and something to Gilligan's, archaic forms of leaves and plants, what garden is this? Edenic and controlled or running wild like the bayou in flood season?

Always the dark sex at the heart of things pulsates with a visceral intensity.







## Depose

The air taken clean out of you by a gutter punch,  
 You have been deposed, disposed of, cast aside,  
 Deflated, heart stomped and ego stepped on,  
 Pierced by a Blahnik that you paid for.  
 So you conjure it back with new voodoo  
 Soothing the injury with fresh breath  
 Kingly air breathed in to a dying lung  
 Bringing yourself back to life  
 With a complete absence of malice.  
 There is no spite in you.

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## The Biography of Cat Doucet

Cat stands like a shadow, illuminated at the edges  
 He can see in the dark, he moves in the dark.  
 Nothing between you and his elemental self, his essence.  
 Give me a drink and pour one for the Cat ...  
 Sheriff Cat Doucet riding through the bayou.  
 Just about a moonlight mile, down the road...  
 Cat smokes cigars. A wiry guy. Cool, capable.  
 Picking up a prisoner in Chongaloo.  
 Dangerous eyes, cold as ice, a swordsman,  
 a lawman, a friend to the poor.  
 Driving through the steam heat in a caddy with the top down, not  
 even breaking a sweat.  
 The last time he was elected, Cat said, 'I've won by a landscape!'



## Color theory

Doctor Dudley J. LeBlanc, snake oil artiste, came to town with his traveling roadshow, part carny, part sales event, appearing for one night only at the Joy Cinema.

Light and shadow flickering across the walls, and outside, the hot southern night. Doc Dudley was selling that bile colored drink he had invented, Hadacol. The bright yellow billboards were everywhere in the parish, yet it was an elixir forbidden to the citizens of Mamou, which had its own voodoo based cure-all, a sweet syrup made from the native red bean. Primary colors of a child's fever dream, yellow versus red, sickness and health.

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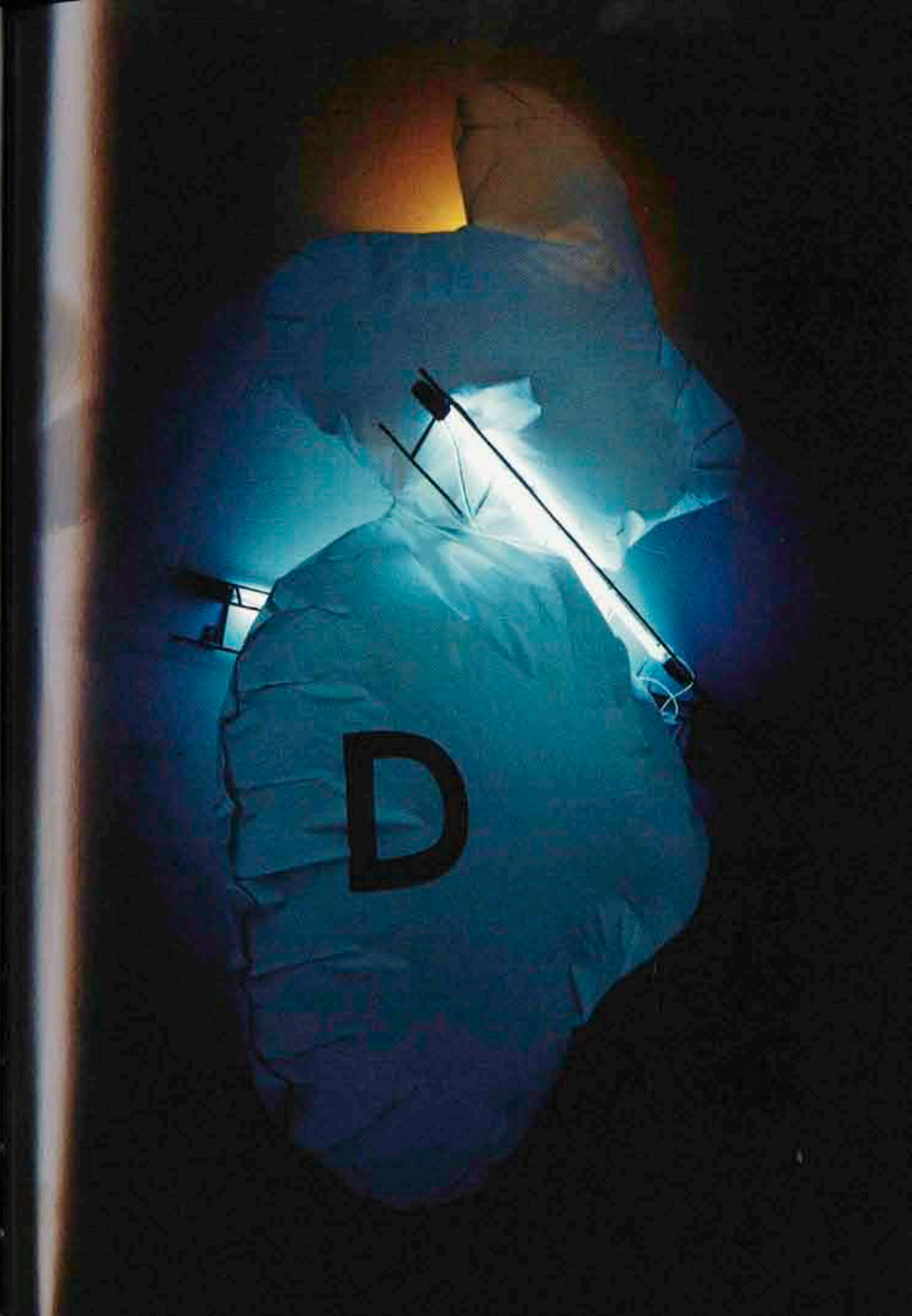
## Luminous Realm

*"There is nothing more profound, more mysterious, more pregnant, more insidious, more dazzling than a window lighted by a single candle"*

- C. Baudelaire

Passing by Sonnier's night window on the ocean road. The old farmhouse glows as profoundly as Baudelaire's window through the thickets of bamboo that surround the property, light from a single sculpture transforming the place from Long Island 2004 to Mamou 1956. Step onto the porch. Smell of gumbo, okra and red beans. Illumination comes in lightning flashes that dazzle the retina.

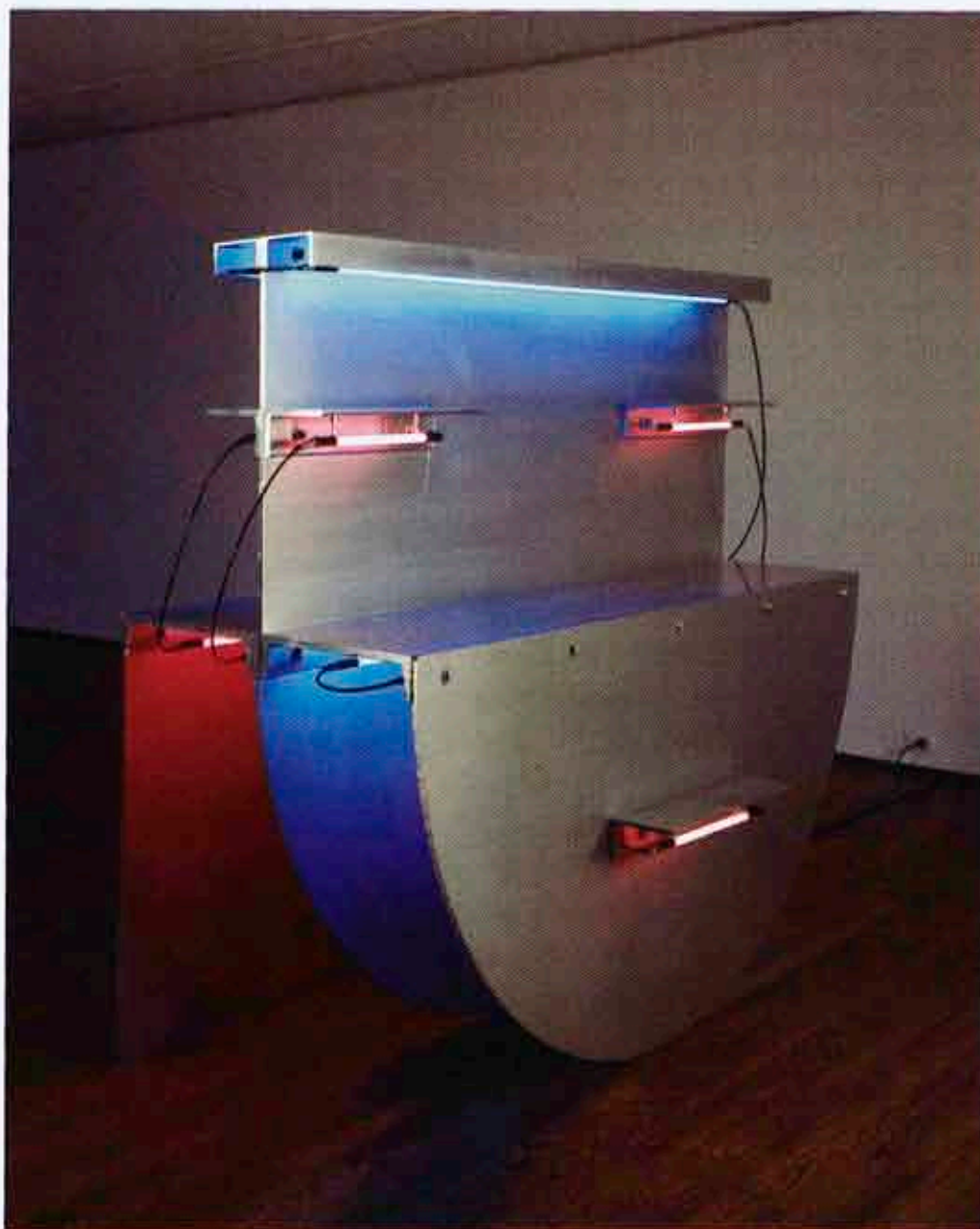
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## CYCLADIC EXTRUSION II

1988, neon, aluminum, 75 x 84 1/2 x 32 1/4 inches



## Tidewater

The alchemist's maxim, that the best treasure is found in dirt. KS transformed and transmogrified the detritus that the river gave him. Old plastic containers assumed new forms, the plumage of giant birds, a long-necked heron undreamed of by Audubon. He understood at an early age the power of the river, cast libations on the waters to its small brown gods.

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## View from Space

KS has set buildings on fire with light, train stations, airports, great metropolitan hubs, seen from the sky they glow like diamond tracings on the dark earth...

Copper wire, 2 neon transformers, electrical apparatus, cable

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## Road Music

(Play this set while driving through Atchafalaya at night:)  
Junior Kimbrough, "Lonely Days and Lonely Nights"  
Lucinda Williams, "Essence"  
Clifton Chenier, "Bon Temps Rouler"  
Anything by Dickie Landry



DOC DUDLEY J. LEBLANC

1994, Tidewater Series, mixed media, found objects, neon, 36 x 30 x 14 inches

## Leo

Constantly transmitting and receiving, like a slightly battered satellite passing through space. In his garden even the fireflies in the summer night become tiny Sonniers, darting among the maple leaves in tight formation.

Neon, rubber, steel mesh, transformer

## Rex

hangs sinuous as an ampersand, radiating the liquid agility, the feckless curves of a dancer. Jane Comfort, Trisha Brown and other modern sylphs, jongleurs, mountebanks and ecdysiasts have all connected their work to his singular light.

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## Lounge

Portal to that dance hall at the end of the long night road, or a massive manta ray gliding across the ocean floor, a winged creature from mythology, pterodactyl with wings of silk floating into your headlights on the highway.

First glimpsed, unfinished in the half light of a night studio, its power was already immense, its reality undeniable, this concoction, conjured by some fragments of silk and glue and string and lights, was transformed into a creature belonging to this world, up from the swamp.



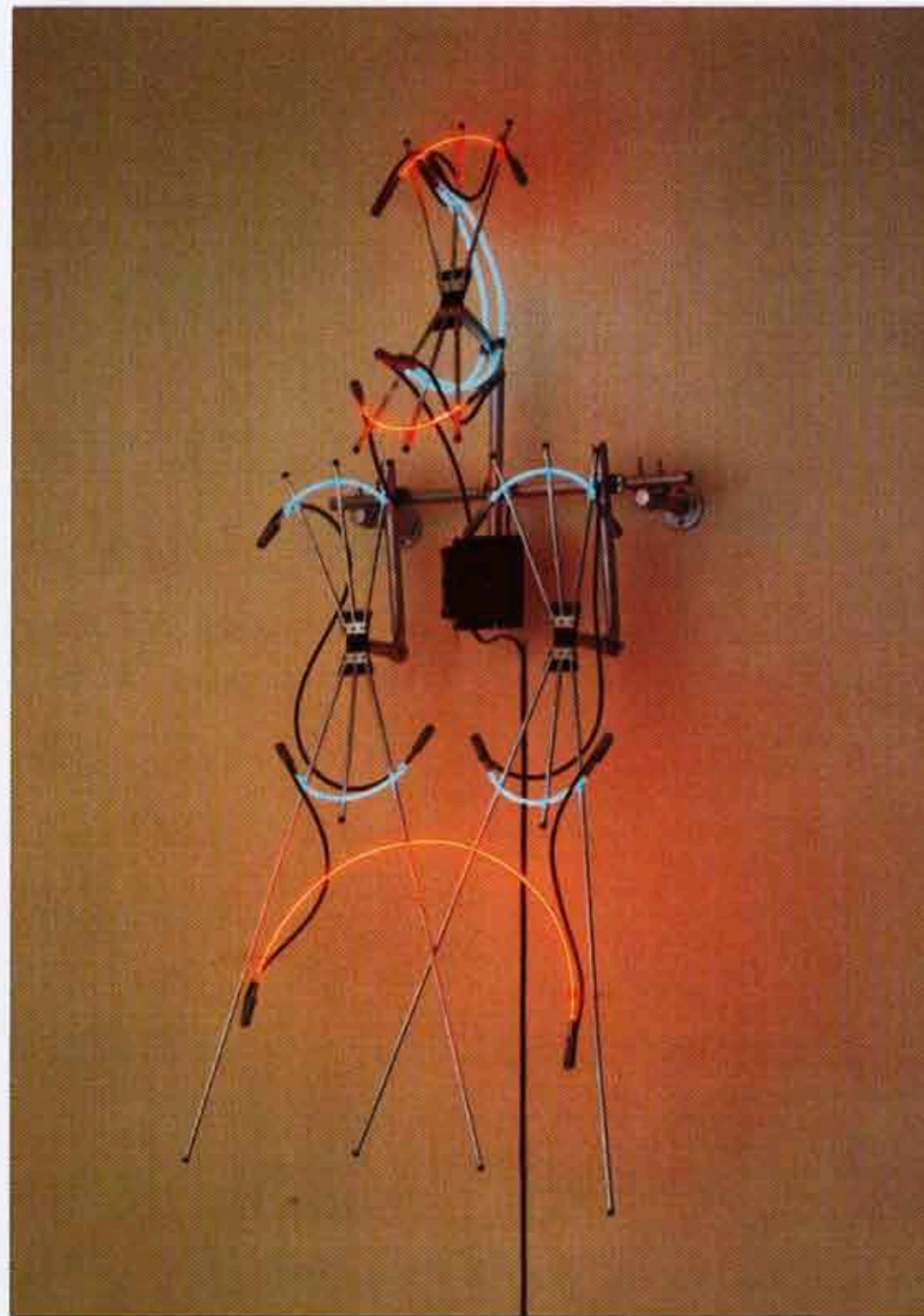
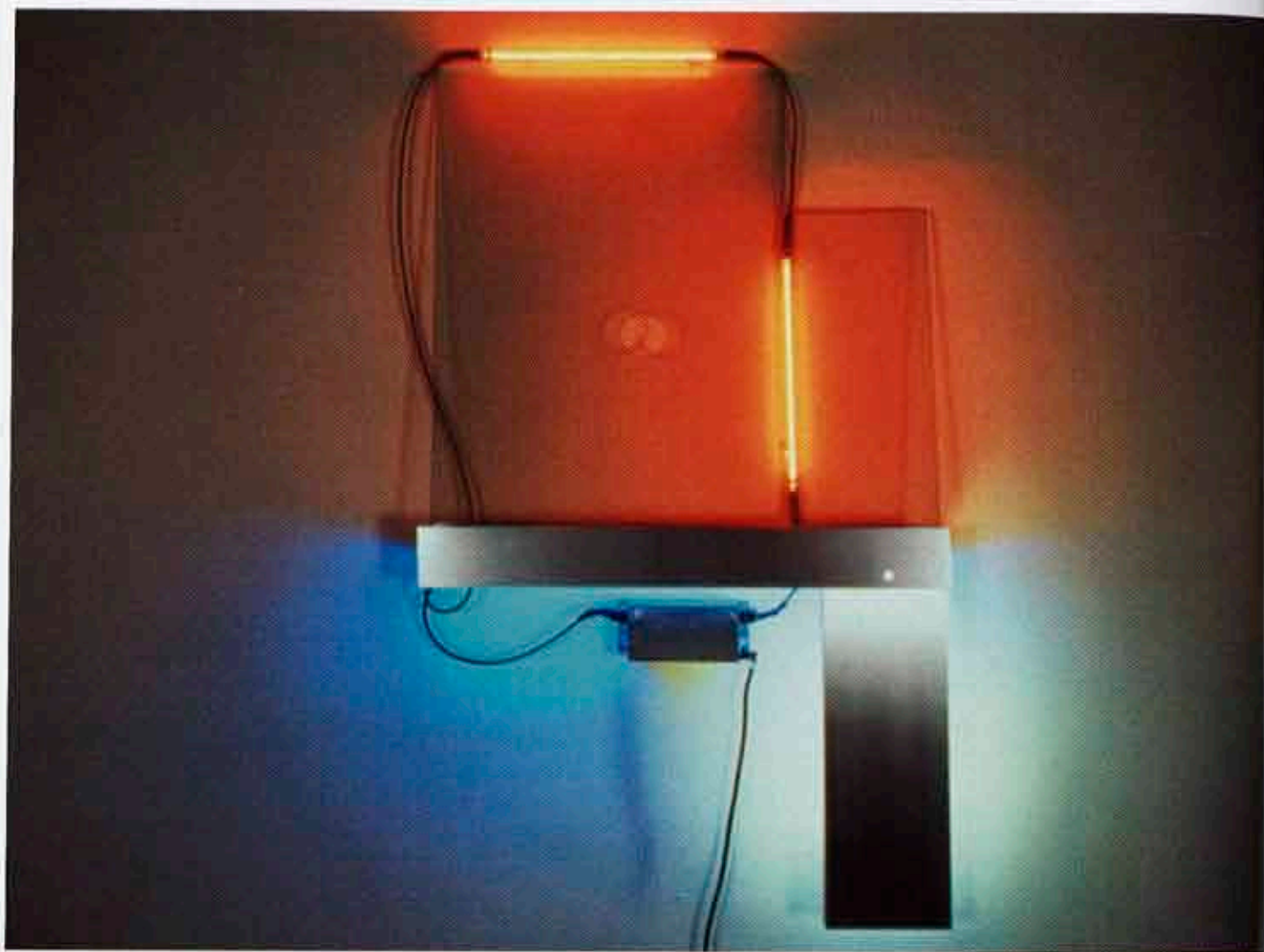


SELECTOR DIPOLE

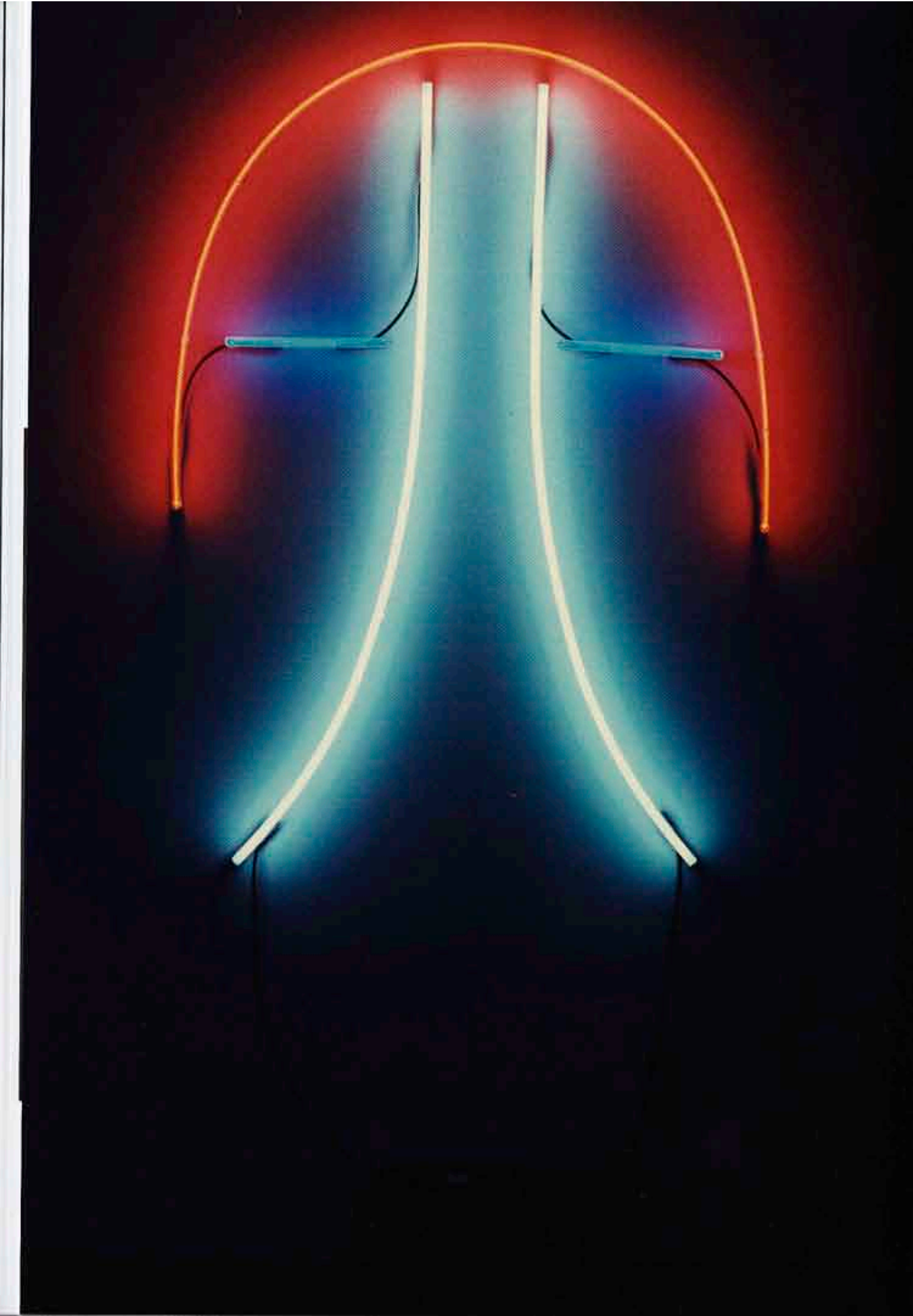
1990, aluminum, neon, 74 x 39 x 20 inches

▼ WASHER

1989, neon, glass, aluminum, 60 x 34 x 8 inches







REX

2003, neon, argon, electrical transmitter, 86 x 43 x 7 inches

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## Swamp Blues Persist

In all these works a promise like the promise in that distant neon light glowing far down the road, the sweaty juke joint or the motel with clean sheets at the end of this long ride through the darkness.

"Gonna take you to the muddy river and push you in..."

Sonnier's heart is in his hands and his hands are in the river and the red Louisiana mud.

The spring breeze never stops moving the silk curtains, the file will never wear out, nails continue to grow long after you are dead.

– Max Blagg, NYC, March 2005

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Max Blagg is a writer living in New York City. His most recent collection of poems is *Pink Instrument* (Lumen Editions/Boston).