

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
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Otto Piene, **The Proliferation of the Sun**, 1966/1967, re-staged for the Neue Nationalgalerie in 2014, multimedia performance, installation view, Fitchburg Art Museum, 2019. Photo credit: ©2019 Charles Sternaimolo

# Fire and Light

## Otto Piene in Groton, 1983–2014

February 9, 2019–June 2, 2019

Otto Piene is renowned for his groundbreaking work as a founder and member of Group ZERO in the 1950s and 1960s. (Group ZERO was founded by Piene and Heinz Mack in Düsseldorf in 1957; Günther Uecker joined in 1961.) This postwar avant-garde group, affiliated with a larger international network, is known for challenging the bounds of painting and exploring visual perception through new media. Piene has also been widely recognized for his long-time affiliation with the Center for Advanced Visual Studies (CAVS) at MIT (starting as a fellow in 1968 and eventually serving as director from 1974–1994), where he advanced areas of his practice initiated and ideas generated with ZERO, including his “Sky Art Events”—large-scale outdoor events in which an inflatable sculpture, and sometimes even a person, is flown.

In the mid-1980s, Piene purchased a home in Groton, Massachusetts where he lived and worked until his death in 2014. The “art farm”—as his residence affectionately came to be called—became another important site for his production. While Piene continued to work in his native Germany and at MIT, he transformed the existing structures on his property into art studios to produce artworks such as fire paintings and site-specific installations like the Light Silo (one of his “Light Ballets” built into a preexisting grain silo). Piene’s practice was influenced by his surroundings, most clearly documented in his sketchbooks, as he continued to explore sensory experience and perception through light, movement, and sound, and the elements of fire and air.

FAM's exhibition **Fire and Light** will showcase Piene's major threads of production since the mid-1980s, including fire painting, Light Ballets, and tempera gouaches. The exhibition will center on both fire and light as key components of his artworks, showcasing major works such as Proliferation of the Sun and his rarely exhibited **Light Robots** begun in 2013. **Proliferation of the Sun**, which has not been on view in the United States since 1968, is an immersive installation of digitized hand-painted slides that are projected onto a large inflatable sphere and screens. Piene considered "Light [as the] the primary condition for visibility. Light is the sphere of color..." Light projected through the colored slides of **Proliferation of the Sun** and the perforated metal in his **Light Robots** create differing effects that alter our perception of space and create a theatrical experience defined by repetitive sound and the movement of light.

Since the 1960s, Piene used fire's reaction to paint and solvent to create fire paintings. These artworks retain the residue of fire, harnessing its heat for creative means, and giving us pause to meditate on the force of such elements. These artworks record the movement of fire, controlled by the artist's manual shifting of the canvas and chance.

Piene came to his interest in light through painting and his artistic production with Group ZERO. Piene's vision of light and its purity were connected to color and his associations with it were shaped by his experience in World War II and its aftermath, which enforced a connection between light and darkness. His tenure at MIT's CAVS was defined by his development of international Sky Events, advancement of his kinetic Light Ballets, and his influence as a teacher. The "art farm" in Groton became yet another site to invite collaboration and experimentation. The Fitchburg Art Museum's organization of **Fire and Light** fulfills Piene's hope for an exhibition that would share his work with his surrounding communities. Piene optimistically believed in the value of art as an antidote to destructive societal forces and hoped to reach a broad public. In his words, "My utopia has a solid foundation: light, smoke and twelve searchlights!"

Extensive archival materials will be showcased in FAM's Learning Lounge, showing visitors a glimpse of his process of fire painting, past Sky Events, and more. In honor of Piene's vision of participation and contemplation, the Fitchburg Art Museum invites you to join us for the following events:

**LIGHT ROBOTS** Sunday, March 24, 1:30pm  
Light Robot performance and conversation

**THE LEGACY OF OTTO PIENE** Saturday, April 6, 1:30pm  
Light Robot performance and panel discussion

**FIRE, LIGHT, AND PROTEST** Sunday, June 2, 1:30pm  
A conversation with exhibiting artist Joe Landry on his photographs of the Summer of 1969 in Boston and Curator Lisa Crossman on the work of Otto Piene

**SKY ART EVENT** Sunday, June 2, 2:30–4:30pm  
An Otto Piene inflatable sculpture will be flown in an outdoor event at Lowe Playground (located across the street from the Museum on Elm Street)

**Fire and Light** is made possible thanks to the generous support of Elizabeth Goldring and the Otto Piene estate. The exhibition is sponsored in part by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, Carol and Carl Canner, Patricia La Valley and Geoff Hargadon, and the Simonds Lecture Fund. Technical Support provided by Emerson College, Urban Arts Media Art Gallery. This exhibition is organized by Curator Lisa Crossman and Terrana Curatorial Fellow Candice Bancheri.



Otto Piene, **Sketchbook: Groton**, 2012, mixed media, 11" x 14", Courtesy of Harvard Art Museum/Busch-Reisinger Museum, Anonymous Gift

### About FAM

The Fitchburg Art Museum serves the cities of Fitchburg and Leominster and the surrounding communities in North Central Massachusetts and Southern New Hampshire. FAM was founded in 1925, and its five-building complex, with over 20,000 square feet of exhibition space, features exhibitions from its art historical collections as well as special exhibitions focused on New England contemporary art. FAM plays a vital role in the cultural life of the region and the Museum maintains active educational partnerships with the local school systems, as well as Fitchburg State University. FAM is an engine for creativity, education, community building and fun!

Emerson College



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